

Sweet *Serenity*

CATHERINE STANG

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by Catherine Stang

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Crossing the Line

Police Detective Connor Galbraith only believed in things he could see, touch, and send out to be analyzed. So he's more than a little skeptical when a mysterious psychic appears in his life and tells him exactly where to find the District Attorney's kidnapped daughter.

Simone Spencer knows specific details about the case, and more about Connor than he would like, especially since she is a suspect. Connor is a loner, both on and off the job, but as they spend time together and the trouble surrounding them escalates, their connection turns personal, throwing him off-balance and in danger of losing his heart.

Simone's psychic powers accidentally open a destiny circle and involve her in Connor's life in unexpected ways. She can see into his past secrets that he isn't even aware of. Can she make him trust her enough to believe in her visions?

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Dedication

~~To Marsha, Elda, Charlene and Joann for teaching me
that second chances are possible.~~

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Chapter 1

Kansas

Spring, 1880s

Rudgewick was going to kill her this time. A sense of dread chilled her and Serenity Springfield gasped for air as she leaned against a cold brick wall. She could hear Rudgewick's heavy measured footsteps gaining on her. Oh, why wouldn't her feet cooperate? She needed to run, but couldn't move. Her body froze, paralyzed with fear. The alley was too dark. She felt so frightened that even the ground shook. Just then, a bony hand gripped her shoulder.

"No!" Serenity tried to scream, but not a sound emerged. Her heart pounded furiously.

Serenity's eyes flew open. A waft of lavender-scented perfume tickled her nose. For a brief moment, she was disoriented. Then, the jarring rhythm of the train brought her back to reality.

Serenity rubbed her tired face. She was safe. Thank heavens, it had only been a dream. Instead of running down the streets of New York, she was sitting on a train headed for Dry Gulch, Kansas. Her hand gripped the soft seat cushion in relief, while four wide-eyed children and an older woman hovered over her. She blinked, staring into the concerned faces of the MacClarron girls. They were her new charges, along with their great-grandmother, Rose MacClarron.

Rose let out a sigh of relief. "Blessed saints, child, you frightened the life out of me. I couldna waken you. You just

kept screamin' and screamin'." Rose patted Serenity's leg, her Scottish burr deepening with concern.

"Miss Springfield has bad dreams all the time," twelve-year-old Alisha said with a toss of her red curls. "I have often heard her crying out during the night, since her room is next to mine."

Eight-year-old Emily put in, "So?" She frowned. "Everyone has bad dreams. Cherise has them all the time."

"You weren't supposed to tell *that*," ten-year-old Cherise replied in a harsh whisper.

Serenity straightened up in her seat, acutely aware that an odd silence had descended over the other passengers. Merciful heavens, they were listening.

The public car was filled to capacity with a varied assortment of travelers. Everyone from the stodgy, old, bald gentleman in a gray suit to a harried young mother was casting speculative glances at her. What a sight she must make in her travel-stained mourning clothes! Her skin crawled with apprehension. Serenity wished she could vanish. The only possibility left now was to turn the conversation into a less titillating one. She had years of experience changing the flow of a conversation, especially when it had concerned her father's failing health.

"Emily is right," Serenity said calmly. "Having bad dreams is nothing to be ashamed of. I'm just sorry my outburst embarrassed you." She held her head high, trying to ignore the curious stares. "You have been so kind, Mrs. MacClarron, taking me on as a companion and governess to your great-

granddaughters. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along when you did."

Rose covered Serenity's mouth with a hand, resting her forehead against hers. "I'll not hear another word of thanks. You were the answer to my prayers."

"Sides," replied little Greta, her springy blonde curls bobbing, "we needed a new nanny."

Emily flipped an ebony braid over her shoulder. "Miss Ironheart—oops!" She slapped a hand over her mouth. "I mean Miss Heartwell didn't like us. She thought we were hooligans. Imagine that? How was I supposed to know she didn't like frogs?" Emily shrugged in an attempt to appear innocent. "You don't get mad at us all the time. We like you."

Serenity chuckled, imagining the very proper Miss Heartwell handling these four lively ladies.

"I dinna ... uh ... do not need a governess. Only babies do." The fact Alisha was perturbed about slipping into her hated Scottish burr was evident by the scowl marring her pretty face.

"Dinna worry," Greta chirped, climbing onto Serenity's lap. "I'm only dis many." She held up three pudgy fingers. "I need you." Her small arms went around Serenity's neck. "I wuv you."

A lumped formed in Serenity's throat as she stroked the back of Greta's frilly yellow dress. In two short weeks, these four mischievous imps had found a place in her heart.

"Doesna matter," Cherise piped up with her usual air of authority.

"Does not matter," Alisha corrected petulantly.

Cherise shot her sister a withering glower as she slammed shut her dime novel. With a grown-up air, she brushed out her pink dress.

"Papa willna let her stay." Cherise pointed at Serenity, shaking her head.

"Will not," Alisha muttered under her breath.

"Hush!" Cherise elbowed Alisha. "We arena at school. I can talk any way I like."

"Be an unrefined..."

"That 'tis enough, lassies," Rose chimed firmly, cutting Alisha off with a pointed look. "Let Cherise speak, Alisha. There is nothing refined about being rude. I've told you over and over that it's impolite to correct someone while they're talkin'."

Alisha's jaw tightened, but she made no reply.

"Papa will not let us stay either," Cherise continued, glaring at her sister. "He says the West is no place for ladies. It's too dangerous. From what I've read in my favorite books, I'm thinkin' he might be right. It has changed in the last two years. Now dangerous outlaws roam free."

Alisha rolled her eyes heavenward. "Honestly, Cherry," she snapped. "You can't believe everything you read in those dime novels. I've never even seen an outlaw."

"Me, either." Emily's round face brightened with excitement at the thought. Her expression then quickly scrunched into a frown. "But Papa did get shot while riding with a posse. Now that he's recovering, he needs our care."

"I agree." Rose leaned over to stroke Emily's head. Her brows furrowed. "The thought of my grandson all alone and

hurting makes me sad. I know he thinks the lasses are better off with me, but I dinna agree. Collin needs them."

She sighed dramatically, sniffled, and then continued. "I let him push me into takin' them after his wife, Katrina, and five-year-old daughter, Felicity—God rest their souls—died of lung fever."

Cherise tugged on Serenity's arm. Her eyes widened with fear. "Our sister, Felicity, is in heaven, too. She was the one in between me and Emily." She spoke in a low, trembling voice. Her face paled. "We were sick, but got better. Poor Papa had to care for us all by himself."

"That's when he sent for Grandma Rose," Alisha said soberly. "Papa could not handle the farm and us, too, so he sent us away."

"It's my fault," Emily whispered in a trembling voice, lifting up her yellow skirt to display a crippled leg. "Papa was mad 'cuz I fell out of the hayloft. Doc Hogan couldna get my leg put back right. It makes Papa sad that I limp. He says he canna be everywhere at once, so we have to stay with Grandma Rose."

Serenity's eyes misted as she reached across the space between the seats to take Emily's tiny hand. The little girl's small body trembled with suppressed tears.

"It's okay, sweetie. You can show your father how well you get around, and he'll change his mind. You girls are older now."

Emily sat back, studying Serenity. "You really think so? I miss my horse and swing and swimming in the pond. I want to go home."

"Not me," Alisha muttered. "I like living in New York."

Serenity brushed back a wisp of Emily's hair. She looked straight at a scowling Alisha when she spoke. "Give your father a chance. He will see that you're ready to be his little helpers. It is hard to not overprotect someone you love. My father was ill for a long time. I tended to do things for him, when I should have let him try on his own. Your father is only doing what he thinks is best because he loves you."

The girls exchanged glances. Silence reigned over the group as they considered what Serenity had said. It only took a few moments for them to fall back into their usual pattern. Emily and Greta played with the rag dolls Serenity had made for them. Cherise went back to her book, while Alisha brooded.

At least they had each other. Now, she had no one. *Uncle Oliver is out of the country and Myles ...* She wouldn't think about her brother. They used to be so close. Serenity closed her eyes. The past was behind her. There was no sense reliving what couldn't be changed. She had to move forward with her life.

* * * *

As Rose began knitting, her muscles tensed. Would all those she loved so dearly forgive her meddling? Serenity needed a family, since her father had died and her twin brother had turned against her. Collin, despite his reservations, deserved a new chance at life. His girls were growing up without him. Rose couldn't stand for him to miss so much of the little moments of their lives.

As her knitting needles flew, Rose tried to shove aside her fears about her selfish reasons for bringing Serenity with them. If she could fall in love again at her age, so could Collin. In one easy stroke she could protect her dear friend's niece from Myles Springfield's greedy clutches, while at the same time bring joy and happiness back into Collin's colorless life.

Not a bad day's work for an old lady.

She only wished she could tell Serenity the whole truth about her relationship with her uncle, Oliver Springfield, but it wasn't her secret to share. It hurt that his niece knew nothing about them. What stung even more was that Oliver's staff had no idea he planned to marry her. When she showed up at Lord Stratten's town house, they acted like she was an overstepping mistress.

It made her wonder if she had been wrong about Oliver's intentions. The tender man she had fallen in love with wouldn't have treated her this way. What if the rumors about him were true? Could he be the eccentric bounder the gossips relished discussing? Did he make a habit of making false promises before traipsing off to ports unknown?

Rose watched Serenity cuddling Greta. The woman was a natural mother, so kind and caring. How could Oliver turn his back on his family? After his stuffy butler turned her away, Rose decided to act alone until she could speak face-to-face with Oliver. She prayed, for all their sakes, that she had made the right choices.

Rose leaned forward, squeezing Serenity's hand. "Dinna worry, lassie. I have a plan to solve all your problems." At

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

least, I hope it will. The last thing you need is to be drawn into the uncertain quicksand of my life.

"What is it?" chorused the girls.

"Now, never you mind, lassies." Rose touched the tip of a giggling Greta's nose. "Grandma Rose is entitled to her secrets. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve."

* * * *

Serenity's eyes met Rose's as the train pulled into the station with a jerk. The older woman winked at her. She had the unnerving feeling that Rose could read her thoughts. The lady wasn't nearly as bad off as she sometimes pretended. Could Rose know how dire her situation was? Would she let the girls near her if she did?

Serenity pressed her face against the warm glass. Dry Gulch—the name suited this area perfectly. Flat, barren land stretched out in every direction. Never had she seen so much open space. Just looking at it made her feel overwhelmed. At least out here, no one could find her—or could they?

* * * *

New York City

"My sister can't just have vanished," Myles Springfield muttered, slamming his cup down, splashing coffee on the large polished mahogany desk. On it lay a letter from the last one of Serenity's friends he had contacted, Belinda Martin. In it, Miss Martin claimed she hadn't heard from his sister since their father's funeral, four months ago.

His eyes burned as he glanced around the stifling, dark paneled office that had once belonged to his father. His throat tightened. He missed the stuffy old man. More than that, he missed his twin sister. She was the other half of himself. They resembled each other in many ways, both having blond hair and dark blue eyes. He smiled, thinking of how, with his curly hair, children used to tease him about being a girl, too. That was until he blackened some bloke's eye, ending those taunts permanently.

The wooden desk chair creaked as Myles rose to stalk across the room. After shoving back the heavy maroon velvet curtains, he opened the window and leaned out to get a better view of the bustling movements below. Carriages lined the brick streets. He heard a clatter of hooves. How this neighborhood had grown while he was away at school in England! New shops had sprung up. Gaslights were everywhere. A few bicyclists pedaled by the brownstone town houses. The morning milkman hollered his greetings to a lady dodging carriages to cross the street. Fragments of other conversations drifted up to him. A baby cried. Somewhere in their midst, he sensed that his sister, Rennie, was wandering, afraid and alone. Myles gripped the polished windowsill until his knuckles turned white.

He had to do something, but what? He couldn't understand why she ran away. The pieces of that evening didn't quite fit together.

Myles dropped his head in defeat. How had his life spun so far out of control? He'd come home to tell his father that he planned to take Uncle Oliver's offer to be his man of affairs.

But that conversation never took place. The news of his father's death did not reach him until he walked through their front door. The days that followed were a haze of funeral arrangements, will-reading and the overwhelming expectations of his father's business associates. His sister constantly correcting his decisions clawed at his insides. Their father had left him in control. Why couldn't she accept that?

He'd thought Rudgewick was the answer to his problems. He could honor his old man's request to find a suitable mate for Serenity and cease the constant friction between them in one easy step. He sighed, palming his tired eyes.

A picture of the brooding Rudgewick Tarrington came to mind. He thought them a good match, his proper British friend and his bluestocking sister. Tarrington had an unquestionable lineage. Heir to an English title, no less. Myles had watched Tarrington court Serenity respectfully. So why hadn't Rudgewick contacted him since his sister's disappearance? Didn't Rudgewick care what had happened to Serenity? Rudgewick had claimed he wanted to marry her. It didn't make any sense.

He remembered how Serenity had begged him not to let Rudgewick escort her to the Billings' Ball. Since three months earlier, she had willingly attended the Maxwells' soirée on Rudgewick's arm, Myles merely assumed she was playing coy games. With his patience at an end, he'd snapped at her. Images of their bitter argument taunted him. Oh, the unkind comments he had yelled that night. Myles cringed. Being her twin, he knew just what sensitive areas to expose. His jabs

hit her directly where she was most vulnerable. God, if he could only take back those heated words.

In a fit of anger, he had lashed out at his sister, dismissed her protests, and disregarded her pleas for him to escort her and Rudgewick to the Billings' Ball. Instead, he went gambling. Drowning his sorrows in drink and a willing woman so he could forget all the responsibilities thrust on him. His penance came when he returned to find his house in an uproar. Serenity had vanished. In one night, he had undone all of the promises he had made to himself. God, if he could only turn back the clock.

The door creaked open and Charles, his butler, peered in.

"Can I get you something, sir? Clara said you didn't eat breakfast or lunch," Charles inquired, concern evident on the older man's face.

"No, Charles. I'm going out soon." Myles picked up his walking stick. Somewhere there had to be a clue to his sister's whereabouts. He would turn over every rock until he found her. The only thing his father ever asked him to do was look after her. Be damned if he would be a failure at that, like he was at handling the business.

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

The late afternoon sun beat down unmercifully on Collin MacClarron as he stood with the crowd at the train platform. A blast of hot, dry wind sent dust flying all around him. He pulled off his black Stetson, wiping the gritty sweat from his forehead. His shoulder throbbed with the movement. It had a

long ways to go before it was totally healed. His body was still weak from the fever following the bullet the doctor had pulled out of him a little over a week ago. He should have sent someone else to pick them up, but he couldn't risk his daughters' safety to just anybody. Besides, he missed his bairns so much he couldn't bear the thought of not greeting them at the station.

"Expecting someone, MacClarron?" Sheriff Wallis's deep voice rumbled beside him.

Collin looked over at his old friend. He thought himself tall at six-two, but Wallis towered over him by a good three or four inches. It was murmured around town that if Wallis's sharp shooting skills didn't scare outlaws away, his sheer size would.

His tall, bulky friend pulled out a cheroot from his vest pocket. "Can't imagine what else would bring you to town on a perfectly good work day."

Collin chuckled at how well Wallis knew him. "My girls and Rose are comin'. You?" He motioned his head towards the train.

"Nope," Wallis replied in a cloud of smoke. "Just checking things out. Been ... what?" He scratched his brown beard. "Almost two years since your girls were here?"

"Somethin' like that," Collin mumbled, hating the censure he knew was unintentionally in Wallis's tone. They had argued the night Collin decided to send his girls home with Rose. It had been a difficult decision, but the only one he could make under the circumstances. If it hadn't been for Wallis's

friendship, though, he never would have made it through the lonely years.

The train's mournful whistle sent the crowd into a frenzy. Black smoke billowed up as the engine rumbled towards them. Collin could feel the ground tremble. Anticipation gnawed at his gut. All around him, people pushed to get closer to the arriving passengers.

As the door slid open, he held an eager breath. The conductor got off, snapping shut his pocket watch. A tall redhead descended, followed by a bald, older gentleman. At last Collin saw his Greta's familiar golden curls. How she had grown! She was no longer the wobbly toddler he so fondly remembered. That knowledge made his throat tighten with sadness. God, what precious time he had missed.

His body protested as he knelt, holding his arms open for Greta and Cherise as they came bounding down the wooden platform, their petticoats flying, to greet him.

Pain ripped through his shoulder as Cherise flung herself into his waiting arms. But that was nothing compared to the pain in his closely guarded heart. Greta watched them with rounded eyes and a thumb in her mouth. She didn't recognize him, Collin realized with a jolt. As he savored holding Cherise, he wished Greta would allow him to hug her, too.

Over the top of Cherise's head, he saw Alisha helping a limping Emily. It stunned him to see Alisha was fast becoming a young woman. While she still had parts of the impish child, she had blossomed.

He smiled at how well Emily had recovered. Despite her uneven gait, she had made a great deal of progress with the

help of those doctors back east. He almost burst with pride watching them hurry toward him. He had missed out on so much of their lives. How could he ever let them leave again?

"Oh, Papa, it's so good to see you!" Emily shouted. "Hi, Sheriff Wallis." She turned, beaming up at Wallis.

"Hello, Emily." Collin's voice was hoarse with emotion. She graced him with a warm smile, too.

"Hi, tidbit." Wallis patted her head. "I'm gonna have to stay alert now that the MacClarron minxes are back."

Collin chortled, thinking of all the trouble his girls had found to get into during the days following his wife's and daughter's funeral. Thanks to Wallis's quick actions, a horse hadn't trampled Emily when she fell from the hayloft. The memory still chilled him.

Greta pointed at him and said, "Ouch." She shivered and her cute, round face wrinkled up with concern.

"She wants to know where you hurt," Cherise interpreted.

Collin stared, unable to speak for a moment. His daughters had almost completely lost their accents. They sounded like strangers. What stunned him was that Gran had discussed his injury with them. How had she known about that unless Wallis, despite his protests, had wired her? Wallis shrugged under his questioning look.

It warmed him that they still cared enough to worry. *Of course they would. You're their father.* But sometimes he wondered how much the two years of separation had affected their feelings toward him.

"Why canna she ask me—" Collin started, but Emily interrupted.

"What happened to Papa, Sheriff Wallis? Grandma Rose said that we didn't need to know all the lurid details."

Sheriff Wallis laughed at Emily's perfect imitation of her grandmother's burr.

"He was helping me chase bank robbers." Wallis leaned down to talk to Emily. He tugged teasingly on a dark braid. "Remind me, and I'll tell you the whole lurid story at dinner. That is, if I'm invited."

Collin groaned as Cherise's and Emily's eyes sparkled with excitement. They always did love Wallis's highly exaggerated stories.

"Really ... you caught bank robbers?" Cherise asked.

"I sure did." Wallis's chest puffed out and he hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. "Got those rascals locked up in my jail, waiting for a deputy marshal to come and retrieve them."

"I got a sore finger from the sleeping car," Greta said, after pulling her thumb out of her mouth. She timidly held up her swollen pinkie.

Emily rolled her eyes, tossing back her braids. "It happened two days ago, goose. Papa doesn't want to hear about that."

"I do, too." Collin bent to take Greta's small hand in his. His gaze held her surprised one when he kissed her injured pinkie. He wished he could have been there to wipe away her tears. "I wanna hear everything." He ruffled Greta's bouncy curls, relieved when she returned his smile.

They all began talking at once, making it impossible to follow any of the fragmented conversations. Their familiar pattern of interrupting each other amused Collin.

"I play the pianoforte now," Cherise announced with pride.

Emily pulled on his hand. "I can walk without my cane."

She whirled around slowly. "See, Papa?"

"So?" Alisha snapped, frowning.

Above their heads, he saw Rose coming toward them, her arm wrapped around a petite blonde.

Wallis whistled tonelessly beside him. "Hoppin' horny toads! Who's that with Mrs. MacClarron?"

"Our new governess," Emily said.

"Think you can adopt me?" Wallis replied before Collin could put an elbow in his ribs.

Rose and her companion moved slowly through the crowd. His heart constricted. Gran looked older this time. He hadn't ever thought of her that way before. She had raised him after his parents died. The woman was his rock.

His eyes met the lady whose arm Gran held. She stood slightly taller than Rose. A heavy black mourning dress swallowed up her gentle curves. A matching bonnet covered most of her golden ringlets, but he could still see her animated oval face, with its pert nose and full pink lips. Sparkling sapphire eyes framed by soft, thick lashes blinked back at him from under golden brows. Her face radiated warmth as she hung on Rose's every word.

"Well, Collin, I've come all this way. Are you gonna greet me?" Rose spread her arms open wide. Her snapping green eyes defied him to say he hadn't invited them. She knew damn well how he felt, and her expression told him so. Now she challenged him to make the next move. The words froze in his throat.

When he didn't respond right away, she turned her attention to Sheriff Wallis. "Hello, Sheriff." Rose gifted Wallis with a smile. "Still keepin' the town safe, I see. My, how it has bloomed. I was surprised that the train stops here now. It didn't the last time I came. I dinna miss that bumpy stagecoach ride, mind you."

"Yes, ma'am." Wallis tipped his white Stetson. "We're right proud that Dry Gulch was selected for a stopping point. We aim to keep it that way, so all our beautiful ladies can arrive in comfort. It's good to have you back, Mrs. MacClarron."

Rose tweaked Wallis's cheek. "Rascal. You always could make me blush."

"Wallis has a way with women, all right. Has them lined up along the street. In fact, I see one now." Collin pointed off in the distance. "Isn't that the Widow Darcy? Thought you promised to help load lumber in her wagon."

"Yoo-hoo, Sheriff!" A bubbly, red-haired lady waved at Wallis from the other end of the platform.

Wallis's tanned cheeks colored. "Gotta go. Duty calls."

Collin laughed as Wallis strolled off toward the sawmill with Darcy's arm linked in his. He pulled Rose into a fierce embrace. She felt so small and fragile nestled against his broad chest.

Stepping back, he swallowed hard, trying to regain his composure. "I'm glad to see you, Gran," Collin said, his voice rough with emotion. "I'm just amazed you came. The telegram dinna give me much time to change your mind."

She patted his stubbly cheek. "That was the point, Collin, my boy." Her voice faltered as she pushed a wayward strand of silver hair behind her ear.

"This is my companion, Serenity Springfield." Rose motioned at the slender woman dressed in somber clothes. He immediately wondered for whom she grieved. His heart went out to her. Losing a loved one was never easy.

He extended his hand, taking her black-leather-gloved one in his large, calloused one. It felt delicate in his firm grip. Her cheeks turned a light pink. The effect was endearing. Serenity reminded him of fresh air and sunshine.

"This is my stubborn grandson and the wee lasses' father, Collin MacClarron."

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. MacClarron. Your grandmother has told me so much about you," Serenity replied in a soft, cultured voice that held a slight British accent. Her fingers gently squeezed his. In her gaze, Collin read the sincerity of her words.

For the life of him, Collin couldn't make himself release her hand. It felt so right in his. She had such dainty wrists and arms. The knowledge Rose would be watching over this gentle beauty seemed oddly comforting.

Rose cleared her throat loudly, stepping between the two of them, breaking the spell. "I'm glad to see I havena lost all my wits." She rubbed her hands together. His girls giggled. "I can see the lass appeals to you."

Collin forced his gaze away from Serenity, wondering what his grandmother was up to. *Appeals to me? What the hell did*

that mean? The self-assured look on Gran's face made him nervous. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach.

"Aye, the lass isna hard on the eyes," Collin teased half-heartedly, trying to lighten the mood. He winked at Serenity, who blushed an even deeper shade of red.

"Good, then my request willna be too difficult," Rose went on, her voice growing stronger. "You owe me a favor, Collin." She wagged the famous finger. "I kept your secret and helped you out all those years ago. Now I'm calling in my debt."

Collin shifted uneasily. His girls were staring at him with an expectation of something—he wasn't sure of what—sparkling in their eyes. What ever it was, Gran was behind it. He had no doubt of that.

Saying no to Gran was next to impossible for him. She had comforted him the night he'd brought news that his brother had been lost at sea. Gramps had railed at him, but not Gran. It had been his fault, but Gran never accused him. She had just listened as he poured his heart out.

In the years that followed, Gran had never mentioned the money she gave him to start his farm, or how her moral support had swayed his grandfather into letting him leave the family shipping business. He owed her more than he could ever repay.

His girls all stared expectantly at him.

"You know I'd do anythin' for you, Gran. What is it you want?"

"I want you to marry Serenity," Rose said in a tone that brooked no arguments.

Chapter 2

"Will you be my mama?" Greta tugged on Serenity's arm. She bounced up and down, chanting, "We're gonna stay. We're gonna stay."

What had she gotten herself into? Serenity's temples throbbed to the rhythm of Greta's jerky chant. Her throat tightened with panic as she stared at Collin MacClarron. *Another virtual stranger who appeared kind, but...*

The man stood a full head or more taller than her. He had stern facial features, despite dimples that came with his smile. Collin's rich sable hair hung down over his collar. Even in the charcoal gray coat, there was no mistaking his broad shoulders. The shadowed beard on his face didn't hide the jagged scar that ran from his left ear along his jawbone. The effect made him look almost sinister.

What struck her most, though, were his expressive green eyes, framed with thick, dark lashes. They had an intense sadness in their depths. Staring into them touched a chord in her, one she refused to acknowledge. She had fled from one man who had tried to coerce and dominate her; now she was getting forced on another. She could hardly think with Greta pulling on her arm. How could Rose have betrayed her so?
No!

"Greta, honey, please stop. I need to talk to your father."

Greta's lower lip quivered and her eyes filled with tears before she buried her face in handfuls of Serenity's skirt. Instinctively, she slid a consoling arm around the little one.

Swallowing back her own tears, Serenity tilted her chin in defiance. She couldn't let the girls prevent her from telling Collin the bitter truth.

"I'm sorry, Mr. MacClarron. There seems to be a misunderstanding. I have plans for my life that don't include marriage."

She spun around, almost tripping over Greta to glare at Rose. "How could you do this to me?" she whispered as she bent to soothe Greta by gently stroking her hair. "I trusted you."

"Aye." Rose's eyes hardened with determination. She wiggled a finger at Serenity. "I told you I'd solve your problems, and that I will." Rose's tone lowered to a husky whisper. "You forget, lass. I bathed you that night."

Serenity's eyes widened in mortification as the meaning of Rose's words assaulted her. Rose knew that Rudgewick had beaten her. Humiliation rolled over her. *Thank goodness, Rose didn't know what had happened that awful night four months earlier.* She blinked, battling tears.

Without belaboring the point, Rose put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "You need a strong husband to protect you, and Collin needs a wife and a mother for his bairns." Her free arm expanded, painting a picture. "Fate, lass. You canna argue with that."

"I know all about fate," Cherise piped up. "Fate is something that is destined to happen."

Collin chortled behind them as he ruffled Cherise's unruly red curls.

"Blarney, Gran," he said over the top of Cherise's head. Holding up a restraining hand, he continued, "Dinna be quoting some old dead legend on me now."

"This is stuff and nonsense." Serenity's body snapped up, hands flying to her hips. "If I'd known what your intentions were when we boarded the train, I never would have come."

Rose puffed up. "Now wait a minute. I didna lie. Just stretched the truth a wee bit," she continued, rubbing together her thumb and index finger. "You knew the girls needed you."

"We do," Emily spoke up, throwing her arms around Serenity's waist.

With Greta and Emily both clinging to her, Serenity felt like she was sinking fast. The betrayal stung. Her throat tightened and her eyes burned with unshed tears. How could sweet, dear Rose put her in this position of hurting these girls? They would never understand her reasons for not marrying their father, because she couldn't explain them. *Bloody hell. Lies piled upon more lies. Where would it all end?*

She shot a glance at Collin, who stood stroking his chin. The Stetson had slipped down low over his face, shielding his expression. *Why didn't he speak up and defend her? Surely, he couldn't possibly be contemplating Rose's request.* She wasn't even out of mourning for her father yet.

Bending down, she untwisted Emily's arms from her waist. Tilting the little girl's head up, Serenity met Emily's worried gaze. The poor child's lower lip trembled, while Greta buried her face even deeper in Serenity's skirt and began crying.

"Dinna wev us," Greta sobbed, gulping for air.

How Serenity longed for the innocent ability to lose herself in tears, but instead she did her best to gain back some control of the situation.

"Emily, I can't marry your father," Serenity said in a tone laced with regret. "I don't even know him."

"You know us." Emily's voice broke.

"Bein' your governess is verra different from bein' a stepmother," Collin interjected, emphasizing each word.

"I do not need either one," broke in Alisha.

"Hush," Emily scolded, stomping her foot. "I want Miss Springfield to stay."

Greta began wiping her wet face on Serenity's skirt. Unable to resist any longer, she swooped the child up in her arms. Greta felt hot. The poor baby's face was red and puffy. Serenity snuggled her close, patting her back as the sobs slowed and finally ceased.

Guilt weighed down Serenity. Mr. MacClarron made it sound like she didn't care. Nothing could be further from the truth. Looking at those confused faces wrenched her heart apart.

Collin reached for Greta, but she clung to Serenity's neck. The flash of pain that crossed his face cut like a knife through her insides. He looked almost as helpless to handle Greta's tears as the older girls did. She had the sudden urge to comfort him, too, for she instinctively knew he was hurting no less than Greta was.

Rose spoke up, breaking the heavy silence. "I canna in good conscience leave Miss Springfield here without protecting her."

"From what?" Collin demanded with a quirk of his dark brow.

"From you." Rose poked a finger at his chest.

Collin choked back his indignation. "Me? I hardly think I'm a threat to her." He jerked his head at Serenity.

"You're a man and not dead," Rose retorted, giving him a rude once-over. "What will people say about you having a beautiful, unattached woman under your roof?"

Collin's jaw dropped, but no reply came out.

"I will tell you what they'll say—Collin MacClarron has been alone too long. I was married almost fifty years." Rose waved her finger. "I ken the powerful attraction between a man and a woman. I'll not leave her here for that purpose."

Color spread over Collin's tanned cheeks. He squared his shoulders. "I wasna aware that you were leavin' anyone. We agreed my lassies would stay in New York." His voice rumbled with apparent suppressed anger. A vein pulsed at the side of his neck.

Serenity sensed Mrs. MacClarron had pushed him too far.

"See, I told everyone," Cherise interjected, "we arena staying."

"Are not," Alisha muttered, glowering at Cherise.

"Smarty!"

"Dunce!"

"Now, lassies," Rose chided, fanning herself with her straw hat.

"Now you've done it," snapped Cherise.

"Did not."

"Did too!"

"Ladies," Serenity scolded, "that is no way to conduct yourselves."

Emily elbowed Cherise, who shoved Alisha, making her almost stumble.

"Cherry," Alisha groaned.

"Enough!" Collin's voice cracked like a whip, sending the quarreling girls into stunned silence.

From the looks on their faces, Serenity feared the girls would burst into tears. She shifted uneasily, all too aware of the stares they were attracting from the people who were still milling around the train platform. She wanted to die from embarrassment at the fact they were causing such a scene. Greta, now sleepy from her tears, was beginning to feel heavy in her arms.

Plopping her hat back on, Rose put her hand on Cherise's back. "We need to get these bairns out of the heat. The poor things will wilt."

Collin glowered at Rose, not moving.

Stepping right in front of him, Rose glowered back, hands on her small hips. "This is too public a place to air our family problems."

Serenity watched Collin force his tense body to relax. "You're right," he replied grudgingly. He expelled a tired sigh. "Let's have dinner. We can settle this later."

Across the street, Serenity noticed the familiar, wiry figure of Rudgewick's valet, Simon Layne, leaning against the hitching post in front of the livery. Her body went cold with fear. How had Rudgewick found her so fast? Heaven help her,

she had been caught. They must have followed her. Had she put Rose and the girls in danger during their trip?

Icy pangs of dread rippled up her spine. What should she do now? Could she actually go through with Mrs. MacClarron's plan to marry a stranger? Collin was, after all, Rose's grandson. Then again, her brother liked Rudgewick. But that didn't make him a suitable husband.

Beside her, Collin placed a tentative hand on Greta's back. His gaze met hers over the top of the sleeping child's head.

"I can take her now," Collin whispered.

Serenity's heart went out to him. The longing in his eyes was obvious. But she knew Greta would cry if he tried to move her. Even when she handed her off to Rose, Greta cried if awakened. No, she would spare him that if she could.

"Greta is just overtired from the trip. Once things settle down, she will be more receptive to your overtures."

He didn't respond, just stared at her with sad eyes.

Collin surprised Serenity when he placed a hand on the small of her back as they started toward the hotel. The possessive gesture sent a pulse of awareness through her. His touch on her was as light and gentle as it had been on Greta. For the first time since her father's death, she felt safe.

Very softly, so only she could hear, he whispered, "After we eat, we'll talk, Miss Springfield. I plan to find out how you conned yourself into my grandmother's good graces. Before the evening is over, I'll know all your secrets."

His words chilled her. Serenity pulled back, adjusting Greta's position so she could better read his expression. "Don't threaten me, Mr. MacClarron."

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

Collin chuckled in a low, throaty tone that sent a tingle through Serenity. He shook his head. "I dinna make threats, lass. 'Tis a promise. Those I dinna break. Ever."

Serenity shivered from the intensity of his veiled threat. The girls and Rose disappeared from sight. On the other side of the dirt road, Simon Layne touched his gray derby, letting her know he had seen her watching him. *Merciful heaven!* The only thing saving her from being hauled back to New York now was this brooding Scotsman. Could she dare hope he was everything Rose promised? As Simon straightened up, she realized she had little choice.

With her head held high, Serenity nodded an acknowledgement to Simon. He wouldn't intimidate her. The hot wind ruffled her skirt and tugged on her unsecured bonnet as they crossed the street to the hotel.

This town, if one could call it that, didn't have much in the way of businesses. A livery and blacksmith, general store, a big, pink building, a saloon and a hotel dotted one side of the street. Behind her loomed endless prairie. *Merciful heaven*, she could see forever. There weren't many trees, just flat, open space. Her knees buckled. The view made her feel incredibly small. It hit her just how far from home she really was.

Without a word, she let Collin lead her towards the hotel. All she could do now was pray that Rose knew what she was doing, because she sure didn't.

* * * *

New York City

Inside the dark pantry belonging to Oliver Springfield, Earl Stratten, a tall, dour butler, scowled at his wife. Nellie waved a wooden serving spoon at him. Although short in stature, his lady outweighed him. Henry rolled his eyes when she blocked the doorway.

"I'm thinking you should tell Master Myles the truth. He has a right to know that his Uncle Oliver has not been heard from in over a month," Nellie said.

Henry frowned, folding his arms across his thin chest. Once before he had gone to Lord Stratten's solicitor when he had heard rumors the earl had been beheaded in Turkey. That had turned out to be a false rumor spread by a jealous rival. No, this time he would check out his facts before confirming any gossip.

"I can't imagine the earl would like us spreading his business around. Even to his heir." He scratched his chin. "We don't have any proof those attempts on his life weren't accidents. We could be speaking out of turn. No, I'm convinced we should keep quiet a while longer."

"But..." Nellie protested.

"Enough!" Henry roared, pushing her aside. "Outta my way, wife. I must talk to Master Myles. Go look for Fiona. If she finds Master Myles first, we'll all have a whole lot of explaining to do."

* * * *

In the cluttered foyer of Oliver Springfield's town house, Myles paced back and forth among the painted death masks, spears, and other various art objects. Usually this collection of

strange mementos from his uncle's exotic trips made him smile, but not today. It had been too frustrating.

He had checked out every lead he could on Serenity's whereabouts and had come up empty-handed. No one had seen her since the night of the Billings' ball. It seemed she had gone into the music room with Rudgewick and vanished. Myles thrust a hand through his hair. He paused, staring at his rumpled reflection in a suit of armor that stood guarding the stairs.

Bloody hell. Now Rudgewick, too, had disappeared without even bothering to pay his hotel bill. Myles hoped there wasn't a connection.

"Really, sir, this is no hour for a call," Henry, Uncle Oliver's arrogant butler, blustered, snapping Myles from his morose thoughts, making him trip, knocking the suit of armor over with a loud crash.

The older man's glare reminded Myles of the days when Henry used to scare the pants off him. *Not anymore.* He bent to pick up the valiant knight.

"I realize it is almost supper time, but I need to find Uncle Oliver." Myles tried to look stern while straightening the fallen knight's helmet. "Serenity has been missing for some time."

Henry shrugged, casting a warning look at his wife. "Lord Stratten hasn't sent any word. We think he is still in Africa."

Myles sighed. *Another dead-end.* His shoulders slumped. Fumbling with his derby, Myles turned, hesitating in the doorway. "When you hear something, will you let me know?"

"I'm sorry I couldn't help you. I'll tell your uncle that you called."

That wasn't going to do much good if the man was in bleeding Africa, now was it? Blast it all. He thought for sure she'd be here.

He shielded his eyes from the bright setting sun as he walked toward his carriage. He didn't want to involve the law in his search for Serenity, but feared he would have no other choice. His hopes of avoiding a scandal were dimming. Worry weighed down on him. Where was his sister?

Deep in thought, Myles was startled when Fiona, one of Oliver's maids, appeared out of nowhere, catching him by the arm. She pulled him around the side of a huge oak tree, then glanced nervously behind her, before pushing him out of view of his waiting carriage.

"I say! What are you doing, Miss Fiona?" Myles was intrigued by her curious actions.

"Keepin' me job," Fiona whispered in a thick Scottish burr. "If Henry caught me gossipin'—I'll be sent off for sure."

Myles tried to hide his stunned reaction. The minx only stood as tall as his shoulder. Her curly black hair was twisted back in a knot, but stubborn ringlets framed her heart-shaped face. With a pert nose and sassy red lips, this girl was a fresh change from the jaded ladies he had grown so wearily accustomed to. He wondered why he had never noticed her before.

"Do you—ahem—gossip often?" He quirked a golden brow.

She shrugged. "Only when people need talkin' about. I know my place."

"I see. And who needs talking about?" His lips twitched as he tried to hide his amusement.

"I know a secret. I wasna sure I should tell you, but a gentleman making threats a while back changed me mind. Anyway, his lordship's lady friend came by a few weeks ago all upset. Seems she found his niece, hurt."

So, the sly old fox had a mistress stashed away. The knowledge didn't surprise Myles. Uncle Oliver's wife had been dead for as long as he could remember. He tensed when the full import of what she was saying sunk in.

"Serenity was hurt?" he asked in a strained tone as his muscles tightened.

She nodded. Just then, a loud bass voice made her jump.

"Fiona..."

"I have to go or they'll be looking for me. Meet me at the park first thing in the morning."

"But..." Myles started to question her further, but she ran off, leaving him bemused. *Bloody hell.* He stalked towards the waiting carriage. With a frustrated jerk, he ripped the door open. Why would his sister run to Uncle Oliver's mistress? A better question was—how had she known he had one?

Myles slumped down on the carriage's black leather seat, wishing the pieces of Serenity's disappearance would fit together.

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

Rudgewick Tarrington stretched out his travel-weary body in the large bathtub. This hotel left much to be desired. *Imagine having to bathe in a public tub.* The thought revolted him. He took a drag of the cigar he held clenched in his teeth.

Dry Gulch was certainly living up to its name—hot, and uncomfortable as hell.

The healing scar on his cheek throbbed. Damn Springfield's sister for marking him! He had bungled things by letting Serenity leave that night after he'd had her in Maxwells' garden. He never thought the silly chit would consider rejecting him since he had given her a first taste of passion. Just thinking about it even now made him grow hard. She had fought like a wildcat, but in the end, he knew she'd loved it. Why did she act like his marriage proposal was something to avoid? The brat ought to feel damn lucky he asked. But did she? No, she ran, making him look like a fool.

It took days to track her down at the MacClarron's. Then she left with the old woman. Only a brilliant stroke of luck and a delayed train in Missouri had made it possible for him to catch up with Serenity. Once aboard their train, he had been careful to stay a few cars back so as not to alert her to his presence. She would find out soon enough what he wanted. This time there would be no mistaking his intentions. She would be his.

The bathroom door squeaked open and Simon, his valet, stepped into the room.

"Did you find Serenity?" Rudgewick growled.

Simon leaned back against the door.

His relaxed stance irritated Rudgewick.

"Well, spit it out," Rudgewick roared, jumping out of the bathtub. Water splashed, soaking the rug and floor.

"M-miss Springfield has found a male protector," Simon sputtered.

Fury coursed through Rudgewick as he dried himself off with brisk movements. The chit had escaped him again.

"Who?" He shoved his arms into the sleeves of his blue velvet robe that Simon timidly handed him.

"I'm not sure." Simon's gaze dropped.

It was a sign, Rudgewick knew, that the valet was leaving out an important detail.

In a flash of temper, Rudgewick slammed the smaller man hard against the heavy wooden door, sending a whoosh of breath from Simon's lungs. The crash echoed off the walls.

"You're lying." Rudgewick slammed Simon once more against the door. "I suggest you try the truth this time."

"Mac-MacClarron," Simon rasped. "Collin MacClarron, the old lady's grandson. The man is dangerous."

Rudgewick's fists tightened on the lapels of Simon's black coat. The thought of another man enjoying his Serenity made his blood boil. He gave him another hard shove. "More dangerous than me?"

"N-no."

Rudgewick took a slow, controlled breath, grinding his teeth. "I want her."

Reaching behind Simon, he unlatched the door and tossed Simon outside, where he lay sprawled in the red carpeted hallway.

"Fix it, or by God, it will be the last thing you do!"

* * * *

Despite the fact the hotel's restaurant was surprisingly crowded for a Tuesday evening, Collin couldn't take his eyes

off Serenity. Rose's demands churned around in his mind. *Marry her.* Gran wanted him to marry her.

He could feel Rose's gaze burning into him. She was unusually quiet beside him. That fact alone unnerved him. When Gran wanted to convince you of something, she could spin a yarn. Why, if you stood in the yard at midnight, Rose could convince you it was broad daylight. It was a gift she had—one Collin couldn't believe she wasn't using.

"The lassies seem to like her," Rose whispered.

He groaned inwardly. She hadn't spared him after all. There wasn't a need for Rose to point it out because Collin could see his daughters adored Serenity. That is, all except Alisha, who scowled at her.

Cherise, who sat on the other side of him, shifted on the hard wooden chair. "Papa, are we going home tonight?"

Her voice was soft, and Collin could swear he heard an element of fear there.

"No, Cherry. We're goin' to stay at the hotel," he replied, winking at her.

"Will Miss Springfield be going home with us tomorrow?" Cherise's gaze drifted down to the end of the long table, where Serenity held a sleepy Greta on her lap.

He was uncomfortably aware people were staring at them, but he decided to ignore them. His gaze met Serenity's over the top of his youngest daughter's blonde curls. A lump formed in his throat. Greta was closer to this strange woman than she was to him.

He was intensely aware of Cherise's probing look. The lass was expecting him to answer, but he had none to offer.

"I dinna know, Cherry," Collin replied honestly.

"But, Papa..."

His glare sent Cherise slumping down in her chair. He cursed Gran for putting him in this awkward position. This was twice now that he found himself growling at women. First, he'd tried to intimidate Serenity into confessing her part in Rose's plan. Now he was frightening his own daughter into silence. *Damn Rose's meddling.*

"Miss Springfield, you never did tell me how you came to be with my lassies."

"We ran over her—or should I say she ran in front of us," Emily spoke up, eager to tell her version of the story.

Collin scowled at Rose Emily's back.

"'Twas quite an adventure," Rose added with a flourish. "We were getting back to town verra late, when my carriage nearly hit the poor lass."

"What were you doin' runnin' across a street alone at that hour?" Collin demanded. The father in him couldn't help but be horrified at the image of all the things that could befall a young lady alone at night.

He could see the panic in Serenity's wide blue eyes. Her face tightened. She squeezed Greta. At that moment, she reminded him of a frightened rabbit—small and vulnerable.

He could swear Rose mouthed that Serenity had been attacked. Before he could absorb this new wrinkle in the story, the waitress placed a heaping platter of fried chicken on the table, along with a large helping of mashed potatoes and gravy. The warm aroma of food distracted them as his girls passed the steaming bowls.

"I love mashed potatoes," Cherise commented, dropping a large spoonful on her plate, tapping it loudly with the spoon to get every bit off. Beside her, Alisha groaned impatiently.

"Hurry and pass the biscuits," Emily urged, wiggling with anticipation.

"My tummy is rumbling," Greta moaned, rubbing her eyes and sliding onto the chair next to Serenity's.

The conversations halted as they all began eating.

"Have I missed anything?" Wallis teased as he plunked his large frame down on the empty seat between Collin and Alisha. He leaned over and said something that sent Alisha into peals of laughter.

Collin shook his head. Wallis had a way with women of all ages.

"Miss Springfield was just going to tell us how she came to be living with Gran."

Serenity blushed, sending him an I-wish-you-had-forgotten-about-that look. "I lost my father a few months ago. His estate was left in chaos. I needed work. End of story."

Collin could hardly choke down his food. Although her tone was stiff, the pain was obvious. As a father of daughters, the mere thought of leaving them unprotected tugged at his heart.

Wallis spoke before Collin could. "Sorry to hear about your father. I lost my Pa in the War Between the States. I don't remember him very well. I wished I did, though."

Serenity wiped her mouth with a red cloth napkin. "Thanks for expressing your sympathy. My father and I were very

close. Some days it's easier to accept his passing than others."

Collin felt a spark of empathy. How well he knew that day-to-day pain. There were many times after Katrina and Felicity died that he wished he could join them. He watched Gran flash Serenity an understanding look. He sensed Miss Springfield and his grandmother shared a kindred spirit. Both would survive whatever challenges came her way. The question that still nagged at him was why Rose felt this woman should be his wife? *Did Rose sense that Serenity wouldn't accept charity? But why marriage? Did the lass really have nowhere to go?*

"If you dinna stay here, Miss Springfield, what will you do?" Collin prodded. He didn't understand this possessive need to assure himself that she would be all right.

"I'm not sure. I suppose I could continue on as Mrs. MacClarron's companion." She glanced nervously down the table at Rose. "I'm not helpless, if that's what you're asking. I have skills. I'm a good seamstress."

"She makes great dolls," Emily said, showing a mouth full of food. She held up a battered rag doll by its arm.

Alisha crinkled up her nose in disgust at Emily's lack of manners, while Serenity flushed at the compliment.

"I hope you're not thinking that I expect you to marry me. Rose ... uh ... Mrs. MacClarron is dreaming," Serenity sputtered.

Wallis coughed, pounding himself on the chest.

Collin felt a small rush of relief to hear her say she wasn't in on Rose's scheme. But that didn't make him any less

responsible for her. He'd meant what he had said earlier about discovering her secrets. Why this obviously well-bred lady would choose to be a governess puzzled him.

"Marry her?" Wallis echoed after he caught his breath. He whistled tonelessly.

"Gran thinks she can be verra persuasive," Collin muttered dryly, glowering at Wallis.

Serenity didn't respond. Greta held out her sticky fingers. Collin swallowed the lump growing in his throat as he watched Serenity rub Greta's hands and face with her cloth napkin and then pull the child into her lap. She leaned across the table and wiped Emily's chin. How he missed those little moments with his daughters. He longed to hear their soft giggles when they were supposed to be sleeping and to answer the constant barrage of questions they asked. Most of all, he missed the feeling of being needed and loved.

Did he deserve a second chance to be a husband and father? Collin had never let himself dwell on this idea before. But, yet, he had never been tempted, either. Serenity sure did tempt him. Like a ray of sunshine after months of cold, she promised warmth and hope. Did he dare reach out? Did he have the right?

Rose moved closer. Her tone was low and intimate. "Collin, she came to me all beaten up. Regardless of her brave front, the lass needs your protection. She comes from a good family. Now that her father is gone, she has no one. You canna turn her away."

The image Rose's words painted infuriated him. *Who could want to hurt Miss Springfield? There had to be more to this story.*

He squirmed under the intensity of Rose's gaze, as he had so many times over the years. Gran had always been there for him. She had held him during the long, tear-filled nights after his parents died at sea. Even knowing the truth about his parentage, she treated him like family. How could he deny her request? Yet, how could he marry again?

Before he could complete those thoughts, disaster struck at Serenity's end of the table. Cherise knocked over her glass, sending water running like a river into a screaming Emily's lap. Emily bolted from her chair, dumping her plate on Alisha's chest.

"Em..." Alisha groaned. "This is my favorite dress." She slapped clumps of mashed potatoes onto the table, shaking the gravy from her fingertips. Tears glistened in Alisha's eyes and threatened to spill down her flushed cheeks.

Serenity was at Alisha's side before Collin could even get his chair pulled out. She had her arms around Alisha, using soft words to soothe away the humiliation.

"I'm so-so s-sorry," Cherise sputtered, bursting into tears.

"Honey, don't worry about it," Serenity said.

He could hear gasps and chuckles going all around the room. There they were, smack in the center of this fancy room, entertaining the diners. Why someone would put a large family square in the middle of the room was beyond him. But there they sat under the glittering chandelier that had been imported from France. Its light twinkled down on

them like a spotlight, making all their problems glaringly obvious. Old, deep-seated fears resurfaced. Could he provide what they need?

Rose caught Collin's arm as he moved to help Serenity.

"You willna find a lady who handles them better. She loves your lassies already."

"What more could a man want?" Wallis drawled, dropping a finished chicken leg with a clunk onto the platter. "She is good with the girls and a beauty. Hoppin' horny toads, I'd marry her..."

Collin rested a heavy hand on his friend's shoulder. "She's mine," he growled, surprised by the determination in his voice. He didn't deserve another wife.

Wallis raised his hands in mock defeat, flashing Rose a crooked grin.

He had been alone too damn long, if he was considering Rose's outrageous suggestion. What the hell was the matter with him? Being wounded must have made him grow soft. Before that, he hadn't realized how much he missed a woman's soothing touch.

Collin stalked, amid the stares and whispers, down to the end of the table, where the frowning waitress was handing his daughters towels. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the biggest gossip in town, Bertha Richards. Collin groaned—soon the whole world would know about Rose's abrupt appearance, his daughters' unruly behavior and, of course, about the lovely Serenity.

He stood beside Serenity, breathing in her sweet scent. It had been so long since he'd had any tenderness in his life.

Katrina's and Felicity's deaths still weighed heavily on his soul. He often dreamed about them, wishing he could relive that day. There were so many things he would have done differently.

The weeks after his recent shooting, he'd suffered alone, with only Wallis's attempts at comfort. Now nights of endless cold dinners and silence were his future after his daughters returned to New York. Could this sweet lass be the answer to his unspoken prayers? He needed a mother for his girls and a helpmate. He didn't love Serenity, so maybe she was safe.

He wondered what Serenity would do if he decided to go along with Rose's matching-making scheme. Before he could stop the words, Collin heard himself say, "I reserved rooms. Why dinna you lassies get settled while I tend to business? I have to go back to the farm tomorrow. I figure, if we get around early, we can be married and get home by mid-afternoon."

The girls, except for Alisha, let out whoops of delight. Serenity paled. Her stunned expression told him more than any heated protest. She was as thunderstruck by Rose's meddling as he was.

"You can't be serious."

"Aye, lass, verra serious."

Her mouth dropped open, but no words came out. He felt the urge to pull Serenity close and reassure her that everything would be fine. He couldn't understand the power this woman had over him. Collin wasn't sure he liked it one damn bit.

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

His gaze met Gran's satisfied one. *Damn her for being too perceptive for her own good.* How could she offer him something he didn't even know he needed? He would have to be very careful not to let Serenity get too close. His battered heart could not stand another loss. He almost did not survive the last time.

Chapter 3

"Damn," Collin swore softly at the disappointing sight he beheld before closing the bedroom door. His girls had all fallen asleep before he got back.

His quick errand had run longer than he had anticipated. It took him well over an hour to track down Reverend Henderson and almost that long to convince the reverend to even consider marrying him and Serenity. He made more assurances to the man than he made the first time around with Katrina.

With Katrina, it had all been so simple because he loved her. As he tried to explain to Jeff, he wasn't looking for love this time around. To be truthful, he wasn't looking at all. But somehow, once Gran placed the idea of marrying again in his head, it had made him want that part of his life back.

Was Jeff right, though? Could he really be a good husband to Serenity when he had buried his heart with Katrina? Was it enough that he offer her a home and the protection of his name?

Reverend Jeff Henderson, in his usual blunt fashion, had warned him about taking advantage of a young lady in need. Collin assured him that they both needed and wanted this marriage, but did they?

Serenity was a young, vibrant woman. Did she deserve to be saddled with a worn-out soul like him?

Collin sighed. Lord, he was tired. Of course, the walk back to the hotel couldn't be uneventful. Wallis had needed help with a couple of hotheaded gamblers at the Silver Spur. Now

he'd missed putting his lassies to bed. His throat tightened, and he felt a burn of tears at the thought of all the days and nights he had lost.

Shaking his head, Collin stalked into his room. Just thinking about his wee lassies growing up without him was painful enough, but missing them was unbearable. That was the main reason he'd agreed to Rose's outrageous proposal. He wanted his family back. Marrying Serenity would be a small price to pay for not having to face his empty house night after night. At least this way he could watch his girls grow up.

Collin fumbled with his shirt buttons as he strolled into his dark bedroom. Just that small movement hurt. The smell of a recently blown-out candle lingered in the air. He was too tired, though, to bother with lighting it, so he undressed in the dark. All he wanted to do was stretch out on the bed and put this rotten day behind him.

"No ... Myles ... help ... believe me!" came a shrill cry from the moaning form thrashing around on the bed.

The shirt tumbled out of Collin's stiff fingers. Serenity was sleeping on top of his made-up bed. Why didn't he notice that she wasn't sleeping with Rose and his girls?

"No ... you can't make me..."

Collin stared at her. The way Serenity's skirt tangled around her thighs gave him a hint of the soft curves of her legs. Moonlight streaming in the window beside the bed gave her an ethereal glow. Her golden hair was confined in one long braid, with soft wisps stuck to her flushed face.

A sense of protectiveness surged through him. He knelt across the bed, pulling her trembling body against his bare chest. She let loose a sob that nearly tore his heart apart. He wanted to go on holding her soft body in his arms forever.

"'Tis okay, Serenity. No one will hurt you, lass," he cooed, pressing his cheek against the top of her head.

For a brief moment, she relaxed. Then, all of a sudden, her body tensed. She began struggling against his soothing embrace. Hitting him. Kicking him. Collin was perplexed. His first thought was to hold her tighter so she wouldn't hurt herself. But those efforts only made her struggle harder. He winced when she hit his tender shoulder and let her drop down onto the pillow.

He brushed a hand against her wet cheek. "Serenity ... please..."

She stiffened and her eyes slowly opened. A tense silence hung between them as Collin awkwardly removed his hand. Shoving her hair out of her face, Serenity began to sit up.

"I don't like the dark." Her voice shook.

"I'll light the lamp." Collin rose, fumbling with the matches.

When he returned to the bed, she was propped up against the headboard, with her arms wrapped around her knees like a lost child. Her eyes were wide with fear. Never had he seen such stark terror on a woman's face. On outlaws he hunted, yes, but never a woman. Collin hoped to never see that look again.

She shifted to a more ladylike position and nervously straightened her skirt. "I tried to wait up for you, but I must

have fallen asleep. Did I cry out?" Her voice was too calm, almost detached.

"Yes. You were having a nightmare." He ran a hand over his face.

"What did I say?" She eyed him warily.

"A mixed jumble. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No," she whispered.

* * * *

Serenity couldn't meet his eyes because she was afraid of what she might find in his probing gaze. Her heart pounded like a runaway train. A mixed jumble could mean anything. What had she revealed? Did she dare ask?

He didn't respond. Just continued staring at her. She sensed he knew how vulnerable she felt.

The bed groaned as Collin sat across from her. His chest was bare. The lamplight illuminated its muscular planes buried in dark, curly hair. He was a powerfully built man, much stronger than Rudgewick. She swallowed back the bitter taste of fear.

When he turned, she could see a puckered, neatly stitched scar on his right shoulder. A few inches over ... She shivered at the implications of that thought.

"After my wife and daughter died, I had vivid dreams, too."

Her head snapped up at his softly spoken confession.

"I relived those last few moments almost nightly," he said quietly.

The sincerity in his words touched her deeply. This was a man she could pin her hopes and dreams on, but yet, he deserved better than her. She lowered her head, unable to take those probing green eyes any longer.

"I can't marry you, Mr. MacClarron."

He didn't say anything for a long, heavy moment. "I see."

Squeezing her hands together, Serenity finally lifted her gaze once again to meet his. "I doubt that you do. Mrs. MacClarron has told you next to nothing about me, I'm sure."

"That's not entirely true." He stretched his long body out, laying his head and uninjured shoulder on the pillow beside hers. "I know you ran in front of her carriage, and that she took you home. The rest is rather sketchy."

"I, on the other hand, know a great deal about you. Your grandmother painted quite a vivid picture."

"Hum." Collin rolled his eyes. "Let me guess ... I am a cross between William Wallace and Rob Roy."

Serenity chuckled. "That's putting it mildly."

"Then what's the problem? Are you disappointed now that you've seen me in the flesh? I should've known a young pretty lady like you wouldna want to be saddled with an old, worn-out widower like me. How old are you—twenty?"

"Twenty-three. How about you?"

Collin shrugged. "I'm thirty-five."

Serenity flopped her head back. "Your age has nothing to do with this. You are everything Mrs. MacClarron said you were—a caring father, a loving grandson, and handsome."

She mumbled the last part, hoping Collin wouldn't hear that she found him attractive. He wasn't handsome in the

classic sense; not polished like Myles. The scar underneath his beard stubble made him look dangerous. But it was those eyes—ah, those emerald eyes—so haunting, so expressive, so sad. They melted her heart and tugged at her resistance. She had to fight the urge to give in for his sake. "You are too good for me. I still can't marry you."

Collin reached over and took her hand in his large one. "Let me get this straight. You dinna dislike me, so for that reason you are na willin' to marry me."

Drat the man for making her sound like a sputtering schoolgirl. Only her father made her more flustered.

She was uncomfortably aware of him watching her. He seemed big and gruff, and yet, he held her hand with such gentleness. How could she cast her troubles on this man? Why did Rose's grandson have to be so charming? If only he were obnoxious, then this would be so much easier. But she liked him and loved his daughters.

"Were you looking for a wife? Is that why Rose brought me out here?"

"Nay."

"Then why?"

Collin laughed. "You have to understand Gran fully to appreciate my answer. She thinks that fate brought us together."

"Fate?"

"Aye. Finding you and then my lassies takin' to you meant that you were destined to be mine."

Serenity sat up abruptly. "Stuff and nonsense. Mrs. MacClarron merely helped me out of a bad situation. That's

all. I had no part, at least no knowledgeable part, of her plan."

"I know. I doubt I would consider marrying you if you did. But the hard fact still remains that I need a wife. Rose is getting on in years and she canna care for my bairns forever. The lassies need a mother. It seems you are the person she has chosen. Watching you and them together, I have to admit she is right. The affection between you and the lassies is obvious."

Drat him for hitting her weakest spot. "I do love them. I'd be lying if I said otherwise."

Collin rubbed his cheek. "And you like me a little?" He held her gaze. "The question still remains—what would you get out of this marriage?"

"A safe haven," Serenity replied in a small voice.

"That I can provide. I canna promise you love. A big part of my heart died with Katrina. I will try, though, to be a kind and caring husband."

His blunt statement was comforting, while at the same time disconcerting. She wanted to trust this man. Without all the secrets in the way, they might have been happy. His offer was tempting. Did she dare take a chance?

"You really will marry me, even knowing that Mrs. MacClarron found me wandering the streets?" Her tone held all the shock she felt over his continued insistence that they marry.

"Aye."

Collin stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. The tingling sensation the movement created was unnerving. How

could she marry this wonderful man and possibly ruin his life? How could she not? Collin was the answer to all her problems.

With a bang, the door crashed open, causing them both to jump. But instead of ending up apart, Collin landed on top of her. His unforgiving weight pinned her to the bed. Over his shoulder she could see Rose, looking like an avenging angel, clad in her white lace robe and gown, brandishing a fireplace poker.

The panic began welling up in Serenity's throat. She couldn't breathe or move. With all her strength, Serenity shoved at Collin's broad shoulders. Heaven help her, she was trapped. Images of the other terrifying time she found herself trapped under a man came unbidden to her mind.

"Shame on you, laddie, anticipating the wedding night," Rose said, pointing the poker at Collin. "That's just why I wouldna leave the lass here unmarried. I know stallions goin' for too long get randy."

Serenity tried to relax, knowing Rose would save her, but her tense body refused to respond.

On top of her, she could feel Collin take a slow, deep, calming breath. He was battling with his temper, she realized, as his shoulder muscles flexed under her struggling hands. This was not a man to be rushed. He would move when he pleased. Whether that was good or not remained to be seen. He winced as he dragged himself off her rigid body.

Serenity sat on the edge of the bed, watching Rose and Collin prepare for battle. Collin looked quite formidable with his arms folded across his bare chest. Rose held her head high. She gave Collin no quarter.

"Well, Gran, am I playing the role of ravishing pirate or maybe I should carry Serenity off over my shoulder the way a few of my ancestors did their unwilling brides?" His tone was light, yet it was laced with dark, sarcastic humor. His eyes were cold.

Rose's eyes sparked as she lowered the poker with a loud thud that made Serenity jump. "Collin, this is no laughing matter. You've ruined the poor lass."

"Not alone, I didna." He began putting his shirt back on with brisk, angry movements. His face tightened with pain. "In fact, before you barged in here I was proposing to the lass, but now that she is ruined..." He looked directly at Serenity. From the way Collin cut off his tirade, Serenity knew her face must have gone pale.

Rose smacked the poker against her open palm. "Collin—uh—I'm too furious to speak." She stalked toward the door, turned, opened her mouth, then closed it. She pointed the poker at him. "No, I willna say things I'll later regret. I'm verra disappointed in you."

"Wait, Gran..." he hollered as she stomped out of the room. He looked helplessly heavenward. "I didna mean it. Gran just pushes me to the limit sometimes."

Serenity's heart sank. Collin being half-dressed, lying on the bed with her looked bad. Her reputation didn't need one more stain.

"You have to marry me now, lass. You know that." His tone was teasing, but there was steel determination in his gaze.

"I know," Serenity replied flatly. Icy fear flowed through her veins. Would this man truly be different from Rudgewick? Heaven help her if he was not.

A piercing scream broke the awkward silence hovering between them. "Poor Cherise," Serenity cried out.

Before Collin could react, Serenity flew off the bed and fled down the hallway, leaving Collin alone with his guilty thoughts.

* * * *

The sight that befell Collin when he reached his girls' room gave him pause. Serenity was sitting on the bed holding Cherise, who was sobbing into her chest. Greta had tucked herself under Serenity's other arm, sucking her thumb. Emily sat beside them. Alisha stood, eyes filled with longing, beside the bed.

He couldn't hear what Serenity was saying, but her tone was soft and reassuring. There was no doubt, watching them, that this woman cared for his children. The deep concern showed in her eyes. He felt Rose's hand on the small of his back.

"Do you see now why I knew she would be perfect for you?" Rose asked softly.

Collin's throat tightened. Here he stood like an outsider, watching his lassies bask in Serenity's love. He wanted that, Collin realized with jolt. He needed to be a part of that inner circle of love again.

"It's all right, Cherise. Your father is here." Serenity's gaze met his watery one as she motioned for him to join them on the bed.

Emily moved over, allowing him to sit beside them. The bed groaned under his weight as he lowered himself next to his daughters. Cherise came quietly into his aching arms. He felt Serenity's soft hand on his tense back, soothing him as she had his girls. He sensed that she understood the tumultuous emotions rolling inside him.

Thank you, he mouthed over Cherise's red curls. There were not words that could adequately express his feelings, so he settled for a simple declaration of his gratitude for her offering him a hand back into his daughters' lives.

Rose took Greta in her arms, swaying her back and forth to sleep.

Collin closed his eyes. For the first time in two years, he was at peace. He owed it all to a woman who had a troubled past, and that scared the hell out of him. Could he take what Serenity and Rose so graciously offered, or was this happiness merely like the castles in the sand he had built in his youth? Those could be easily be washed away with the rising tide.

* * * *

In the still of the night, Rose lay cushioned between Greta and Emily in the small bed by the window. She could barely make out Serenity sleeping in the other bed with Cherise and Alisha.

Rose stroked Greta's back when the little one rolled onto her tummy. She should have been satisfied when she saw Serenity in Collin's arms. But it was a hollow victory. Collin and Serenity were attracted to each other. There was no doubt in her mind of that. But could they ever have more? Serenity deserved to be loved. Collin was capable of it, but could he give it?

Rose touched the locket Oliver had given her, wishing she could talk to him. Did he still love her or had he merely been toying with her? There were rumors that Lord Stratten was quite a playboy. He had never given her any reasons to doubt him until he left. It had been almost a year ago. At first, the long, romantic letters came regularly, then dwindled. It had been four months since the last vague one.

What did she know about being an earl's wife anyway? She was a poor country lass who had fled Scotland with her late husband when they were both young. Now, she was an old widow, for heaven's sake. Maybe Oliver had come to his senses. If so, why hadn't he just been honest with her?

But then again, did she know the man as well as she thought she did?

She kept replaying the conversation between herself and that stuffy butler. Could the man she loved really have washed his hands of his family responsibilities?

Rose cuddled a whimpering Greta close. She had charted this course. Now she must see it through to the end. Once Collin and Serenity were happily married, then she would worry about her wayward earl.

* * * *

Simon held his breath as he watched Lord Tarrington survey the blonde whore he had procured for him at Lilly's Lovenest. He had been pleased with this find. With her hair down, the girl looked quite a bit like Serenity. He just hoped Lord Tarrington would approve or his plan was doomed to fail.

Knowing how angry Lord Tarrington was that he had been unable to locate Serenity, Simon felt a twinge of guilt for bringing Desiree to him. He had paid her well, twice her usual price. Besides, he must distract Lord Tarrington from his immediate pursuit of Serenity, if she was going to be able to leave town with the MacClarrons. While his boss was taking out his frustrations on the soiled dove, Serenity could escape.

He had found Serenity a surprisingly worthy adversary from the moment she fled Tarrington. Seeing her with the MacClarron children over the course of their trip out here, Simon knew deep in his gut that he could only make one choice. Tonight, seeing them as a family, clinched it. Sending a whore to the lion's den seemed a small price to pay for Serenity's freedom.

"Will that be all, sir?" Simon asked, backing out of the small hotel room.

"Yes," Lord Tarrington replied firmly. He did not spare the girl a look as he slammed the door on Simon.

Simon winced at the sound of the belt snapping, but kept walking. He was in too deep to turn back now.

* * * *

The next morning, Myles's driver steered his carriage through the iron gates and down the long driveway that led to a massive, gothic style brick house. Beside him, Fiona shifted on the black leather seat. She was wearing a gray, serviceable dress. Its simple line emphasized her nicely curved body. The paper she clasped tightly in her hands made a crinkling sound as a breeze whistled beneath the cover.

"This is it?" Utter disbelief edged Myles's tone. "My uncle's mistress lives here?" He gaped at the finely manicured lawn and rose gardens.

"Aye," Fiona replied. "This is the address Mrs. MacClarron gave me that awful night."

"Mrs. MacClarron," Myles sputtered as his mind whirled with the implications. "Widow of the famous shipbuilder, Duncan MacClarron?"

She nodded. "A refined lady, she is."

Myles couldn't control his amazement. This was no lady to be trifling with. What was his uncle thinking? Maybe he wasn't thinking at all.

"Do you want me to wait, sir?" his driver asked, while the horses snorted impatiently.

"Yes." Myles lifted Fiona down from the carriage. She was light as a bird. "I don't know how long this will take."

He mounted the huge stone steps with Fiona behind him. The porch, with its massive stone columns, was oppressive. A heavy, richly decorated wooden door loomed uninvitingly before them. Its brass gargoyle knocker glared back at him, daring Myles to knock.

Good God, my lack of sleep is making my imagination run wild. Before he could retreat, he lifted the knocker with a gloved hand. The sound resonated through the house.

Had his sister been here all this time? Why hadn't she come to him for help? Could he have been more threatening than this place?

A cheerful, curly, redheaded maid answered the door.

"Excuse me. Is Mrs. MacClarron in?" Myles asked.

"No, sir. Mrs. MacClarron is out of town."

Disappointment burned in his chest. "I see. When she returns, can you tell her Myles Springfield called?" He reached into his coat. "I'll leave my calling card."

The girl's round face lost all color. "You devil," she spat. Her springy curls bounced with indignation as she blocked him from entering. "How could you come here? Mrs. MacClarron most definitely doesn't want to talk to you." She tried slamming the door, but Myles thrust his foot out, keeping her from doing it. He glared at the irate maid.

"Now see here!" Myles thundered. "How dare you turn me away. I'm not finished speaking with you."

The girl puffed up. "How dare *I*? How dare you have the gall to come here after what you did?"

"Maude," scolded an elderly housekeeper, who pulled the door open, "that is quite enough. Despite your feelings for this—this man, there is no excuse to be rude."

"B-but..." the young maid stammered, her face turning bright red.

"Go." She dismissed the dour woman with a wave of her hand.

Myles felt like a ghost. These people were talking about him like he wasn't even there.

"Would someone please explain just what you think I have done?"

Both Fiona and the dour woman turned to stare at him aghast. Then the silence grew heavy.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave," the older lady said in an impervious tone. "Mrs. MacClarron wouldn't like you to be here."

"Why ever not?" Myles demanded.

"She has taken Miss Springfield under her wing like she was her own. Heaven help those who have hurt the poor girl."

"I never—" Myles sputtered as the old lady slammed the heavy door in their faces with a resounding thud.

"They think you beat the poor lass," Fiona said softly in answer to his inquiring gaze.

"Beat my sister? Why the hell would they think that?" Myles practically shouted. "Bloody hell. I wouldn't." He thrust a hand through his thick blond hair.

"I thought the same thing meself before I got to know you better. When Mrs. MacClarron told me her new ward had been beaten and refused to contact her guardian, I naturally assumed you had hurt her." She frowned thoughtfully. "I must admit it bothered me to think you were capable of such a thing. It seemed out of character for you. But then, we didna know each other verra well."

"I didn't do it. Honestly. I've haven't laid a hand on my sister since we were four years old. My father gave me a spanking for hitting her then. He told me that you must never

strike a lady, no matter how much they might deserve it. Restraint is the mark of true gentleman."

"If you didna hurt her, then who did? Why didna she come to you for help?"

Those are very good questions. Ones I don't know the answers to, but I damn well plan to find out. Good God, Rennie!

Myles shoved his hands in his pockets, staring at a round-eyed Fiona. Her expression bothered him. Could the small bit of power his father gave him have made him seem like a bully? He was only doing what he thought was right—or was he? Why couldn't Serenity have trusted him to have her best interests at heart? Father had trusted his judgment—or had he? He left him everything, including control over Serenity. Had his father set him up for failure?

In Fiona's gaze, he read censure. It stung. What hurt even worse was that a few years ago it wouldn't have mattered to him because then his reputation meant nothing. But now he was seeing the error of his ways.

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

His bride looked beyond flustered, Collin thought as she entered the part-time church, part-time school. Greta held on tightly to Serenity while his other daughters, all dressed in their rumpled Sunday best, trailed along behind. Alisha, her face sullen, dragged her feet.

What did Serenity think about being married here amid the desks, while the town's children played outside? Their voices drifted in the through the open window.

"This is the last week of school," he offered, wondering why he bothered stating the obvious.

Serenity smiled. He noticed right away that she had changed out of her mourning clothes. The dress she had chosen was pink and white. He sensed it was Rose's by its ill fit. The bodice was too tight and the hem only came down to her ankles, giving him a view of her tiny feet encased in one pink and one white slipper.

Alisha blushed when she caught him looking at Serenity. He opened his mouth to ask, but Serenity shot him a pleading look. So he kept silent. He felt a rush of guilt for hurrying her like this. *What woman wants to be married in an ill-fitting gown?*

"Miss Springfield, I presume." Preacher Jeff Henderson interrupted his thoughts, as he walked into the building with his wife. The tall, thin man with brown curly hair and too many freckles grinned at a blushing Serenity.

"We are pleased Collin has finally decided to bring his family home. Aren't we, Martha?" He turned to his pretty young wife. Over the top of his wife's head, the reverend shot Collin a look reminding him that he hadn't forgotten their discussion last night. Not that Collin had either. He was still squelching the doubts and wondering if he was doing the right thing.

"Very." Martha twittered. "I teach school and I've miss these little ladies." She gave the girls a warm smile. "I must

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

say it will be nice having another young woman around. I'll introduce you at church on Sunday."

Collin cleared his throat. Martha could ramble on for hours if he let her.

"I'm sorry to rush you, Jeff, but we need to get moving. My lassies are tired..."

Jeff patted him on the back. "Say no more."

* * * *

Panic set in Serenity's stomach as the minister flipped opened his Bible. She could hardly hear over her pounding blood. What had she gotten herself into? Had she escaped one set of problems for another?

Serenity still couldn't get over hearing Rudgewick's voice in the hotel hallway. Just thinking about it sent ripples of fear up her spine. Could she get out of town without Rudgewick seeing her? Would he give up and go back to New York?

Her gaze lowered to the mismatched shoes and tight dress. Alisha had ruined her good ones and then spilled juice on her dress. How could she become a mother to these girls if she couldn't control them? Maybe losing her only non-mourning dress was an omen. She hoped not.

The words being spoken around her were hazy. If Collin hadn't given her a gentle nudge, she wouldn't have even thought to respond.

Collin surprised her by pulling out a gold band he had obviously just bought. He slid it, warm from his holding, on her trembling finger. It was too big, but some thread wrapped around the back would make it snug.

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

Before she could think, they had been pronounced man and wife. Collin put a large hand on each of her shoulders and turned her toward him. His mouth slanted over hers. What started out as a gentle brushing of lips caught fire. She could hear gasps around her as Collin's persuasive mouth began controlling hers.

She stiffened, as did he, when the girls began giggling. His thumb brushed across her lips. "I ... ah ... need to load the wagon," he said huskily. Uncertainty flickered in his eyes.

For the life of her, she couldn't reply. She just watched him stalk off. Merciful heaven, what had she done?

Chapter 4

Serenity shifted uncomfortably on a hard wooden chair in George Brown's makeshift law office in the back of the general store. She wrapped her trembling legs around the chair's legs to hide her mismatched shoes. Somehow, though, she doubted the nervous Mr. Brown would notice. He was far too busy fumbling around this room that resembled a storage closet more than an office. Books were stacked among the extra pickle barrels and jars of canned fruit. Dried meat and vegetables hung in one corner, giving off an odd aroma. The other corner was filled with furs. It was a far cry from the fancy office her father's solicitor used, but none the less intimidating.

After they'd finished packing, Serenity politely asked if Mrs. MacClarron could recommend a lawyer to help her finish off her father's affairs. She was pleasantly surprised when Mrs. MacClarron informed her that she had time to meet with Mr. Brown while Collin was loading up on supplies. Rose let her go, though, only after regaling her with stories of the mess she found herself in when her husband died five years ago.

Now Serenity regretted the decision to seek this man out. She had been married less than an hour and already she was conspiring behind her new husband's back. Would Collin be angry with her for slipping away while he was off buying fence posts? She was now married to a stranger. The thought put a knot in her stomach.

"I'm not sure what I can do for you, Mrs. MacClarron," Mr. Brown said stiffly, shoving a pile of papers to one side of his cluttered desk. He spoke the name MacClarron as though he didn't believe her long-winded story. He held a copy of her father's will, examining it carefully.

"According to this, your twin brother, Myles, inherited all of Edward Springfield's business and personal properties."

Serenity let out a frustrated sigh. "I understand that. What I want to know is if there is any way to break the will. I would like to gain control of my father's companies. Myles has a tendency to gamble and lose heavily. I feel it is my duty to protect the both of us from his impulsive behavior."

The balding, gray-haired gentleman pulled off his round spectacles. His bushy eyebrows shot up, while he twisted nervously on the frames of his glasses. "The rest of this goes on to say that you get a portion of your inheritance and the house, when you marry someone of your brother's choosing, and the rest of the money is in a trust for whatever you need. Am I to assume your brother doesn't approve of your marriage?" he asked. His gaze narrowed.

"My brother doesn't know. But that isn't an issue now. I'm not concerned about my money. It's safe. At least, I hope it is. What worries me is that Myles will ruin Father's business. Father's employees were loyal to me during his long illness. I can't pay them back by letting Myles put them out of work with his unrestrained spending."

Mr. Brown put back on his spectacles and looked Serenity over. "Yes, well—what does your husband think of all this

fuss? MacClarron isn't one to court scandal. And that is exactly what will occur if this matter goes to court."

Serenity leaned forward in the stiff leather chair. She cringed at the low squeak it gave off. *No, my husband doesn't know*, she thought glumly. *And he probably wouldn't understand*. But it was something she had to do.

Mr. Brown's brows almost reached his hairline. "It'll mean humiliating your brother by bringing all of his past up for scrutiny. Even then, I'd be hard pressed to find a judge willing to consider a woman better qualified than a man."

No one knew or cared that she used to be in charge. She would go back to having a manager. Those were decisions she would make once she was back in control. What counted now was not letting Myles lose everything.

"I don't care what it takes," she replied in a controlled voice. Her fists were clenched in her lap. "Do whatever is necessary to undo my father's will."

"How will you pay for my services?" he asked, as he rummaged around for something to write on. Papers flew everywhere while he looked for a pen.

"Don't worry. I have money," she lied. It didn't matter because somehow she would come up with the funds.

Exiting the office, Serenity looked apprehensively around the general store. To her relief, Rudgewick was nowhere in sight. Her heart still continued its unsteady rhythm, despite the fact the rest of her acknowledged it was safe.

A couple of roughly dressed people and a lady with a huge hat were milling around the store. It was the haughty lady

Serenity remembered who had glared at her last night in the restaurant.

A girl who appeared slightly older than Alisha was peering at her from behind the bolts of fabric.

To calm her tingling nerves, Serenity scanned the store. Cracker and pickle barrels sat on either side of the wooden counter. Shelves behind it contained jars of candy and nuts, along with thread, buttons, pots, and pans. A polished silver cast iron stove stood in one corner. Beside it was a sewing machine that she eyed longingly. How she wished she had one. Furs piled around a large rocker decorated another corner. In the middle were a few bolts of fabric and lace, but no dolls or toys. That gave Serenity an idea.

She needed money. The few dollars she had left from the money Mrs. MacClarron insisted on paying her was almost gone. Now that she had married Collin, she wouldn't be getting more. She needed a new way to earn money. She was an excellent seamstress. Maybe she could make a deal with Hannah, who ran the store with her husband, Walter. She wondered briefly what Collin would think of her taking in sewing to make money, but she pushed those thoughts aside. Collin would just have to accept her independence. She never promised to be a meek bride.

* * * *

Ignoring the pain in this shoulder, Collin methodically loaded the wagon. His thoughts continued to drift to his new wife. The kiss he'd shared with Serenity still stunned him. Her lips were petal-soft and so giving. She was everything he

could ever hope for. So why didn't he feel excited about taking her home?

Wallis came up behind him and began helping him load stone fence posts without asking if he needed assistance.

The action caught him off guard, and a surprised Collin dropped one on his foot.

"Yeoooh!" Collin yelled, picking up the heavy post.

"A little distracted, are we?" Wallis teased. "You shouldn't be doing that until Doc Hogan takes your stitches out."

Collin glared at him. "Humph." The last topics he wanted to discuss were his tender shoulder and his new wife. Kissing Serenity had left him too unnerved—too raw.

His cold silence didn't stop Wallis from pressing.

"I think I know how you're feeling."

"No—I dinna think you do," Collin snapped.

Wallis moved between him and the wagon, effectively blocking him in mid-stride.

"I was there, Collin. I helped you build coffins for Katrina and little Felicity. A year later, I picked you up the night you got stone drunk over that ... ahem ... incident at Lilly's Lovenest."

Collin stiffened. "I dinna want to talk to you about that humiliating night. Not now—not ever."

"I just thought you might need..." Wallis raised his hands in mock defeat. "Ah, hell. I should've stood up with you, but I was breaking up a fight over at the Silver Spur."

Wallis stepped back out of Collin's way.

Collin could see the girls coming out of the hotel with Rose. He coughed. "Do you think I made a mistake marryin' her, Wallis?"

"Nope. Just because one of the soiled doves at Lilly's didn't light your fire doesn't mean it has gone out." Wallis put a hand on Collin's shoulder. "You weren't ready then."

"I'm not ready now."

Wallis patted him on the back. "A wee lass," he mimicked Collin's burr. "Scaring the hell out of you. She is your wife."

The enormity of what he had done hit Collin like a gut punch. His wife. The delicate lass was his mate. Tonight they would share a bed. That thought did nothing to ease his frayed nerves.

Then it struck him. In a few hours, they would be at his house. The one in which he had shared laughter and life with Katrina. The one he could hardly face each night. His house was a mess inside. He had hoped to overwhelm Gran with its unkempt state, to make her see how ill prepared he was to take back his girls.

Now his new bride would see just how low he had sunk. She would see the pile of clothes, unwashed dishes and the thick layer of dust coating everything. He cringed at the thought. Sweet Serenity had no idea what she was getting herself into.

His girls followed Rose across the dusty road. His stomach tightened. Where was his wife? Had she deserted him already?

Wallis tipped his hat to the girls as they rounded the wagon and gave each a peppermint candy from his coat pocket.

"Where's my wife, Gran?"

"Had some business to tend to," Rose replied, taking the candy away from an already sticky Greta. "Says you can meet her at the store."

Collin hefted the carpetbags into the wagon and then willed himself courage as he headed off to find his new bride.

* * * *

Relief surged through Simon when he overheard the conversation between MacClarron and the sheriff. As much as he wanted to hear more, he forced himself to walk on by. Otherwise, they would notice him standing there behind them in the road.

His plan had worked. Serenity was now safely out of Lord Tarrington's clutches. Now, he wondered if he was prepared to face the consequences of his actions. Lord Tarrington would be in a black temper when he heard about Serenity's sudden marriage.

Passing the Silver Spur, Simon could hear the tinny piano calling him. A stiff drink would ease the blow Lord Tarrington would surely deliver. His shoulders still ached from yesterday afternoon's encounter. If all went as planned, Lord Tarrington should be recovering from his night with Desiree. A few hours more or less wouldn't make any difference. The girl was married now. But he doubted his lordship would accept defeat

gracefully. He just hoped MacClarron was up to the task of protecting her.

Maybe he should find Desiree and warn her. Simon shoved through the swinging doors at the Silver Spur, wishing he had never agreed to work for Lord Tarrington to pay off his gambling markers. His soul was a high price to pay for a few hundred dollars.

* * * *

New York City

Lightning crackled, illuminating Myles's lavishly decorated parlor in its eerie light. A clap of thunder rocked his enormous house to its foundation. Then, as if soothing the noise that preceded it, rain tinkled lightly. The beat grew steadily harder until it pounded the roof. *The gloomy atmosphere outside matches my mood*, he thought.

Myles leaned back on the settee, putting his polished black boots on the mahogany tea table. In his lap were spread his father's accounting books. He had been paging through endless ledgers, trying to understand his old man's vast holdings.

What struck him hardest about the accounts was that Serenity's flowery handwriting was everywhere. He recognized it from all the letters she had written during his years away at school. She had carefully made entries, not to mention notes and lists of things to do with dates of completion beside them. What amazed him most was how far back her entries went. So far, in fact, he had yet to find one his father had actually made.

How very curious. Had Father been sick all this time and he failed to notice? Why had Rennie never mentioned this in any of their correspondence? This was very puzzling indeed.

One note in particular jumped out at him. It was a reminder to have dolls delivered to Sabrina's Dress Shop. The date on it was tomorrow. He folded it up and put it in his pocket. Serenity wouldn't miss an appointment, would she? His sister was too well organized for that. Tomorrow he would visit Sabrina's.

Myles palmed his tired eyes, thinking how his father would have had apoplexy at the mere thought of him working out here instead of in his stuffy office. "Everything in its proper place" had been the old man's motto. He doubted if any of the glass knickknacks had ever been moved, except for dusting.

He sighed, picking up a crystal brandy snifter off the table beside the settee. During his years growing up in this mausoleum, he never would have dared to do anything so sinful as putting his feet up on the tea table. But now, there was no one around to tell him he could not. He sipped the expensive brandy. It burned going down his raw throat.

All his delicious thoughts fled as the aching loneliness took over. He missed his father's booming voice ringing out an order, and their heated debates after dinner. None of the passing months had deadened the pain of losing him. Despite their differences, he loved his old man. Myles was sorry that it took his father's death to realize just how much. And now Serenity was gone, too.

He closed his eyes, letting his head flop against the scalloped wooden back. He had failed again. Failed to help his sister when she needed him, and now she had disappeared. Tears clogged his throat, threatening to trickle down his cheeks, but Myles fought them. At least Father would have approved of that.

Loud yelling from the foyer broke this quiet moment. Myles grinned. That familiar Scottish burr could only belong to one person—Fiona.

"I didna care if he is buck naked. I have to see him now."

"But, miss..." Charles sputtered.

Myles smiled, picturing Charles, his portly butler and father's staunchest ally, standing firm against the persistent Fiona.

"It isn't appropriate," Charles insisted.

Myles chuckled, listening to the conversation through the door. Charles was one of the army of people who had no use for him. They behaved as though he was the pretender to the crown. It had become even worse since Serenity's disappearance. Well, now things would change. It was his house, damn it. He would see whomever he bloody well pleased.

"I didna have time for appropriate," Fiona replied. "I know 'tis late, but I've nowhere else to go."

Her voice held an edge of desperation that tugged at Myles's heart. Had his taking her along to the MacClarrons' jeopardized her position?

Throwing open the French doors, Myles strolled into the foyer. "It's fine, Charles. I can talk to Miss Fiona."

As his gaze raked over her, he felt a twinge of guilt for doing so. The poor thing looked bedraggled. It had been raining off and on since he got home. From her appearance, he could see she had been wandering around in the elements. A long, dark blue cape was plastered to her shoulders. Water dripped from the sable curls surrounding her face. The bottom of her gray dress was soaked. She clutched a frayed carpetbag in her left hand.

"I'm sorry to just show up like this. I've been walking around ever since we got back. Henry let me go because I missed serving lunch."

Her shoulders sagged. Myles admired the sheer willpower that must have been keeping her upright, when she looked past the point of exhaustion.

"I shouldna have come here," she blurted out, turning to leave.

Myles caught her arm. Her dress was cold and soggy. He might not always be a gentleman, but he'd be damned if he would let her go back out into the pouring rain.

"I really dinna know what I was thinkin'." She jerked her arm loose. The handle of her carpetbag broke and it plummeted to the marble floor, breaking the strap holding it together. Her rain-soaked clothes spilled out.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "This hasna been my day."

"Quit apologizing!" Myles snapped, bending down to pick up her sodden belongings. They smelled of fresh rainwater.

As he shoved them back in the bag, it occurred to him that this was all she had in the world. He paused over a set of pantaloons. His gaze held hers. She blushed a deep red.

Here he was, a known rake, his linen shirt unbuttoned, sleeves rolled up, kneeling on the floor with a vulnerable woman. In the past, he would have thought of seducing her, but now ... The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him.

Fiona's shoes squeaked as she moved quickly to collect her things.

"Look, I can hear the rain pelting down. Didn't you just tell Charles that you had nowhere to go?" Myles pressed.

When she nodded, his stomach tightened. He, who had never taken responsibility for anything more than a gambling debt in his life, felt responsible for this girl.

"Why don't you change into some dry clothes? I'm sure my sister has something upstairs that will fit you."

"Oh, I couldna do that." Her blue eyes widened at the improper suggestion.

Myles put a finger over her cold lips. "After some hot chocolate and food, we'll decide what to do. Until then, no arguments."

"Charles," Myles said, turning and practically tripping over the older man, who stood solemnly behind him. "Miss Fiona needs some dry clothes and a hot bath. Have one of the girls fix her up. Tell Cook she'll be staying for dinner."

"Very good, sir. Come this way, miss."

Was that a slight approving grin on old stone-faced Charles? Maybe I can be a gentleman after all, Myles thought as he bounded, whistling, up the stairs to change for dinner. Having a companion to share his meal with lightened his mood.

Dry Gulch, Kansas

Inside the general store, Collin found Serenity in her too-small dress and mismatched shoes, bartering with Hannah, the owner's wife. In one hand, she held a doll similar to the one he had seen Greta and Emily cuddling last night.

"What are you doin'?" Collin asked. He touched the brim of his Stetson in greeting to Hannah before taking the doll.

"Making a deal," Serenity replied.

"Can you believe she made that? In all my born days, I've never seen such craftsmanship." Hannah shook her head. The tall, willowy woman in a calico dress turned the rag doll over in Collin's hand. "Look at that face—an angel."

"Oh, Mama, let me see." Bridget's eyes lit up, making her look younger than her eleven years.

Collin stared at the doll with its black braided yarn hair. It looked quite a bit like his daughter Emily. The face had been painstakingly embroidered with blue eyes, brows, and red, bowed mouth.

He handed Bridget the doll, which she clasped to her chest.

"Can I have one, please?"

Hannah brushed a hand over her daughter's brown hair. "I can see that Madame Monique will be all the thing come Christmas. I will take one for Bridget."

"Madame Monique?" Collin arched a dark brow.

Serenity blushed. "Back home, I had a deal with several of the local dressmakers to sew dolls for their clients' children."

She turned it over, displaying a row of tiny buttons. "The clothes come off. Then, with scraps left over from the dresses, I'd make matching gowns."

Serenity smiled at Bridget, who was still staring at the doll. "I'll make yours first. Would you like her to look like you? I have brown yarn in my bag. If your mother has leftover samples, I can make her dresses that match yours."

"Really?" Bridget gasped. "I'll go get my box."

"You sell these?" Collin was amazed she would work out a deal like this on her own. If Bridget and his daughters were any indication, then Serenity understood what little girls wanted.

"Yes. They have become quite popular. In fact, I had too much work to do myself, so I passed on the Madame Monique name to a friend of mine. She and a group of ladies get together and make the dresses."

Serenity turned to Hannah. "I don't have any samples with me, but I can have one made up by the end of the week."

Hannah rubbed her hands together. "Are you interested in making ladies' dresses, too? My seamstress died last fall."

"If you give me the patterns and materials, I can sew anything you like. We can split the money on a sale."

Collin couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. His wife was planning to take on a job without even consulting him. Katrina would never have done that. The thought alone would have appalled her. His shock turned to irritation. His pride prickled. *Why would Serenity do this?* Didn't she think he could take care of her? All she had to do was ask, and he

would provide anything Serenity needed. Her stubborn pride wouldn't let her, he knew.

What must Hannah think? Sweet Saint Margaret, what must the town think? Rumors of his financial situation would run rampant, what with the predictions of a drought and all.

Once he got her alone, he would make her understand how illogical this arrangement was.

"I'm so relieved," Hannah said with a hand over heart. "Since Mamie died, I've been without a seamstress. It really cut into my business. My sewing skills leave a bit to be desired. Tell me, do you do mending, too? There are some men at the fort..."

Collin's mouth dropped open. This was too much. Without giving Serenity a chance to reply, he began ushering her out the door.

"Hannah, the lass is goin' to have her hands full with chores and my bairns. Why dinna you let her settle in before workin' her to death?"

"I have a new sewing machine—"

As the door closed on Hannah's reply, Serenity ripped her arm free from his hold, hands flying to her hips. For the second time since he'd met her, she reminded him of a scalded cat. Marriage to Serenity was going to be more of an adjustment than he ever imagined. Collin took a calming breath.

"I'm very capable of speaking for myself."

"I know you're upset, lass, but you're not thinkin' clearly. You have no idea what life on the farm will be like. Maybe in

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

your plush New York house, you had time for extra things, but out here..."

He watched her chest rise and fall. Her mouth thinned and then her chin jutted up. "I helped my father during the day and made dolls at night. My sewing didn't interfere. Believe me, I know my limitations."

From her rigid stance, Collin had no doubt she believed every word. The lass was stubborn. Though what possessed her, he still couldn't say. She was a puzzle, this wife of his—one he had no idea how to solve.

Chapter 5

It was late afternoon when the wagon bumped over the grassy knoll overlooking Collin's farmhouse. Serenity smoothed the hair off a sleeping Greta's face as the little girl snuggled closer.

Serenity met Collin's gaze over the top of Greta's head. That entire long ride he had been strangely quiet. They all had. The view of the rolling prairie, with its vast assortment of wild flowers, awed her. From the moving train, the landscape had appeared bleak and barren, but up close, it was anything but. She had seen animals she never knew existed—like deer and groundhogs, not to mention an array of birds. Ducks and geese swam in the river as the wagon rolled by. Sometime during their ride, Collin had casually mentioned that they were on his land. The thought all this was his overwhelmed her.

Serenity shifted on the hard wooden seat, trying to reposition Greta, without waking the sleeping child, off of her numb legs. It seemed like hours since they had stopped for the cold lunch once they entered Collin's land. She glanced over her shoulder at the girls huddled in the back of the wagon with Rose.

Emily was asleep, slumped next to Alisha, with her head on her shoulder.

Rose reclined between Alisha and Cherise with her eyes closed. Cherise sat with her knees up and chin resting on them, her face tight. Serenity was surprised Cherise had yet

to open the new dime novel she had bought for her. The girl seemed preoccupied.

Collin pulled back on the reins, stopping the horses in front the house.

"You're home, Mrs. MacClarron," he said. His gaze searched hers for a reaction. "Is it what you expected?"

"I don't know what I expected. This is a real house and not a soddy."

"I built one of those the first year I lived here. Then I built this house before I married Katrina. I ... ah..." His voice choked up.

"Wanted the perfect home for your new bride," Serenity finished for him. "I understand. You got it."

Collin didn't reply, just climbed down. She sighed, shifting Greta once again as she stared at the white farmhouse standing so tall and proud against the clear blue sky. Large oak trees shaded the yard. It was a far cry from the manicured lawns of her father's estate. Instead, it was more like a home. Could it ever be her home? That question sent a surge of regret coursing through her. How she would have loved to come here like Katrina, all clean and untarnished by secrets. Then maybe she could have stayed in this warm, loving environment forever.

Serenity took a deep, cleansing breath. She could see for miles in every direction. It was an odd feeling, overwhelming and yet, at the same time, oddly freeing.

"See the horses." Emily tapped on her shoulder, pointing off at a fenced area by the red barn where a black and brown horse grazed. "Those were born here and I named 'em. The

black one is Stormy, 'cuz it stormed the night he was born. The other one is Rainbow."

"Dumb names," Alisha muttered.

"Are not. I didna see you naming them."

"Lassies." Collin let out an exasperated sigh. "Let's not rehash that."

He leaned over and whispered to Serenity, "Those horses are four years old. Give you any idea how often I've heard this fight?"

"A million times."

"A day," Collin grumbled. "I'm not sure why I missed that."

"Papa," protested Emily, wiggling her finger like Rose at him while she perched precariously on the edge of the wagon, "you told us not to talk about the horses."

Rose covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a laugh.

"Yes, ladybug, I did," he said, swinging her down.

Collin carefully lifted Cherise, Alisha, and Emily, while Serenity took in the rest of her surroundings. She marveled at the stream burbling beside a grove of trees. It seemed that everywhere she looked she saw something different. This land was wild and beautiful.

"My swing!" Emily chirped, half-limping and half-running towards a rope and board swing hanging from a big oak tree in the middle of the yard.

Greta stiffened, awakening with a start, and whimpered when Collin reached for her. Serenity snuggled the crying child close, rubbing her back.

"Shush, honey. Your papa is going to hand you down to Alisha. Both you and I together are too hard to lift."

Serenity flashed Collin a sympathetic look. It must hurt to have his own daughter not trust him.

Finally, after studying her father with a thumb in her mouth, Greta pulled it out and reached her pudgy arms toward Collin.

Collin's Adam's apple bobbed, as he appeared to struggle to control his feelings. His eyes closed when he took Greta in his arms for the first time. As they flickered open, Serenity read powerful emotions in their watery depths. When he brushed a kiss across Greta's forehead, Serenity had to fight her own tears. Her nose burned from the battle.

Once he handed Greta to Alisha, he turned, raising his arms to Serenity. As he lifted her down, the feel of his strong hands on her waist burned through her corset. Her body glided down his as he lowered her to the ground. She covered his large hands with her own. Her strength was no match for his. *He could hold onto me for as long as he wanted*, she thought.

Serenity was flustered by the intense awareness flowing between them. She could feel the heat radiating from him. His scent, an earthy mix of leather and his own special aroma, intoxicated her. With a jolt, she realized in a matter of hours they would be in bed—together. The idea sent a tingle of trepidation up her spine.

As if sensing her unease, Collin's hands dropped to his side.

A large, white-haired man with a full beard and a battered brown hat rode into the yard on a milk-colored horse. Collin stiffened beside her.

"Just what I needed ... Holt," Collin muttered under his breath. "I'm not ready for this."

"I can see you finally brought my granddaughters back home," the gruff man said without preamble as he reined in his powerful horse. "'Bout damn time."

Collin gave an exasperated grunt. "Greet your Grandda, lassies," he commanded the quiet girls with a sweep of his hand.

Serenity watched the older man dismount with the regal air of an ancient lord. Although not nearly as tall as Collin, he had a dominating presence. The girls, all except Greta, who hung on Serenity's skirt, each dutifully hugged their grandfather. She wondered how comfortable their relationship had been before.

When the older man released Cherise, he held out a large, calloused hand to Serenity. "I'm Joseph Holt," he said in rusty bass voice.

Serenity sensed the tension in the air. His brusque attitude reminded Serenity of her father. Mr. Holt would run over her if she allowed it. Something told her she needed to stake a claim here.

She took his work-roughened hand, meeting his gaze without flinching. "Serenity MacClarron," she answered, secretly thrilled by his gasp of surprise.

Collin slid a supportive arm around her shoulders. At least he wasn't put off by her boldness.

"Gran brought the lass out here from New York. I'd told her I needed a wife, and she knew Serenity would be perfect."

She was stunned by Collin's defense of her. He hadn't even hinted at being trapped into marriage. In fact, he made it sound like he'd wanted to marry her. She longed to hug Collin. At least he didn't resent her. He cared a little for her feelings. That gave her a small measure of hope.

Mr. Holt's gaze shot to Rose, who met it with her own defiant stare. Tension rippled between them.

"Afternoon, Mr. Holt," Rose replied haughtily.

"Afternoon, Mrs. MacClarron," Holt drawled, nodding toward Rose.

Both looked as if they wanted to say more, but wisely kept their silence.

Brushing a kiss on top of Serenity's forehead, Collin murmured, "Why dinna you and Gran take the lassies inside and get settled? There's smoked meat and potatoes in the pantry. I need to tend the livestock. I'll be in later for supper."

Serenity stood in stunned silence. It took all her effort to keep from rubbing the warm spot Collin's lips had touched.

Rose broke the spell when she tugged on Serenity's arm. "Come on, lass," Rose whispered. "Let's round up the lassies. Those two are goin' to growl at each other like angry bears."

"Why?" Serenity asked, as Rose pulled her toward the front porch. She couldn't help glancing over her shoulder at them as she picked up Greta, who was tugging on her skirt. Emily was patting the horse, while her grandfather held the reins. Alisha had stalked off toward the house. Cherise stood somberly rooted to her spot.

"Joseph Holt is Katrina's father. He canna forgive Collin for her death any more than Collin can forgive himself." Rose clucked her tongue. "Lassies," Rose hollered, "we need to get unpacked. Everyone grab your carpetbag. Collin, will you take the trunk inside?"

Collin nodded, wincing slightly as he hefted the heavy trunk on his shoulder and carried it to the room Rose always used.

He winked at Serenity and tugged on Emily's braid as he strolled off to tend the horses.

Katrina's father. Rose's words echoed over and over in Serenity's head. The girls' other grandfather would naturally be their mother's father. Oh mercy, she had just coolly announced to a grieving father that she had replaced his daughter. What else could she do wrong?

She hesitated, staring at the whitewashed wooden house with its large porch, complete with a swing. She felt so out of place in Rose's dress and the ugly shoes she had bought from Hannah. Shifting Greta in her arms, she took Emily's hand before mounting the wooden steps.

The front door was inviting with its glass window and intricately crocheted lace curtains.

She didn't realize how long she'd stood staring at the closed door until Cherise spoke. "That window was Mama's prized possession. Papa surprised her with it on their first anniversary."

Serenity smiled down at Cherise. "It's beautiful. What a special gift."

Greta snuggled closer, sending a wave of sadness over Serenity when she thought of the woman who must have loved this place. Now Katrina's precious glass badly needed cleaning. It reminded Serenity of the mourning wreaths hanging on their door in New York. Would Myles abandon those wreaths also? Would he, like Collin, retreat from the world? She ached for Collin and the girls. How well she knew the numbness that came with such a great loss.

Rose placed a comforting hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "As a new bride, I left Scotland and sailed away to America with Duncan. I had to leave behind all those I held dear. I'll give you the same advice my mother gave me at the dock that cold March day. When one chapter of your life ends, a new one begins, and it's up to you to see that this one is better than the first."

Serenity sighed, picturing Rose as a frightened, young bride. Just looking into those wise blue eyes, she knew Rose understood her misgivings.

"Thank you for sharing that, Mrs. MacClarron. It means more than you'll ever know."

For the first time since her father's death, Serenity felt needed. She hoped she could live up to the task assigned her. Governing a house without staff would be a whole new adventure. What would Collin think when he realized his wife had never even cooked a meal or actually cleaned a house? Would he regret this marriage before it even began?

* * * *

Collin started unhitching the horses, uncomfortably aware of Joseph standing behind him.

"That city girl won't last a week," Holt said. "Damn it, Collin, what were you thinkin'? I thought you were sweet on my Anna."

Collin jerked the straps harder than he intended. Guilt swept over him when Thunder whinnied. *Damn Joseph, Rose and everyone for thinking they can run my life. Sweet on Anna.* The lass had been little more than a child when he married Katrina fourteen years ago. He loved her as an indulgent big brother. But now, ever since Anna's husband, Jamie, had died from a rattlesnake bite, everyone thought his helping her meant something. He cared and understood the fear and loneliness of losing someone you love without warning. He felt for her raising her two-year-old son, Jimmy, by herself. He admired the strength that allowed her to carry on when he could not. But he could never marry her.

Collin took a deep, calming breath, vowing not to lose his temper with the crusty, old man. He reminded himself that Joseph had lost a daughter and granddaughter, too.

"My little lassies were quite taken with Miss Springfield. I felt that since they already liked her, she was an obvious choice for their stepmother."

"Humph. I may be old, but I'm not blind." Joseph dropped his horse's reins and began unharnessing Lightning. "The girl turned your head, did she? Well, I hope she can handle life here. How will your daughters feel if you bury—"

Collin's temper exploded. "I told Ethan I'd be back tonight, so why did you come over?" he interrupted. "To antagonize

me? Well, you're doin' a damn good job." Pointing towards the house, Collin snapped, "Your granddaughters have been through hell, Holt. They dinna need a reminder of how easy it is to lose a loved one." *And neither do I.* "Because we're family, I'm willin' to forget this conversation," Collin said quietly.

Joseph's proud shoulders sagged. His lips thinned.

"Damn it man, I loved Katrina. I never thought to marry another. You're daft if you think this is easy for me." Collin swallowed the lump in his throat. "All things considered, I think you ought leave now before we both say things we might regret. When we get settled, I'll invite the family over. I promise."

"See that you do." Joseph nodded curtly.

He slapped his former father-in-law on the back. "I'm not cutting you out, Holt. You'll always be the bairns' grandda. Just give them time to reestablish their roots."

Joseph mounted his horse without a backward glance. As he watched the older man ride off, Collin mulled over their fight. He hadn't realized how many lives his decision to marry Serenity would affect. He wondered how Anna would react to the news. There was nothing but a familiar affection between them, but still, if Joseph thought there was more, then maybe Anna did too. What a mess he had made of things.

Suddenly, the curtains were pulled back in the parlor window and Serenity appeared. He couldn't help being curious about what she'd thought when she saw the unkempt state of his house. He pondered bringing her home in the dark.

Somehow, lamplight hid many things that the stark light of day did not.

Would Serenity have regrets? Katrina had always prided herself on keeping everything neat. Since her death, he simply hadn't cared. There was too much work to be done outside.

Even from this distance, Serenity's determined stance was evident. Did she even know where to begin? Gran was accustomed to a house full of servants to meet her needs. He doubted Serenity made do with any less. Could the two of them get dinner going? The thought brought a smile to his lips. Neither of them would admit they couldn't do something. It ought to be interesting.

"Papa!" Emily shouted, as she came bounding out of the house in her uneven gait. "I wanna help with chores."

Collin tensed as Emily patted Thunder's soft nose. The horse snorted, making her giggle. She genuinely loved animals. Seeing her dwarfed beside the large gelding gave him pause. She had come so close to getting kicked that night she fell from the hayloft, trying to help him.

She frowned, and he knew he had been silent far too long.

"You can help, Em, but be careful, and only do what I tell you," he ordered solemnly.

She broke out in a big grin. "Thanks, Papa. Can I walk Thunder while you take Lightning to the barn?"

He hesitated. The image of the huge horse getting spooked and dragging his small daughter by the lead rope flashed before his eyes. It sent a chill through Collin. "How about you

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

let me lead the horse, and you brush Thunder after we get to the barn?"

"Okay."

They walked side by side, him leading the bay, and her struggling to keep up.

"I'm glad to be home, Papa. I missed our farm and you."

Collin swallowed hard. "I missed you too, Em."

They exchanged understanding smiles.

Life *had* been bleak without his lassies adding their own brand of sunshine. For the first time in two years, he eagerly anticipated coming in for supper.

* * * *

New York City

The night seemed magical. But then, nothing had seemed real from the moment Fiona had pulled Myles Springfield under the tree at his uncle's house the day he'd gone to look for Serenity. Even the darkness was artificially created by the looming storm clouds.

Everything glitters, Fiona thought, as she gingerly sat down at the candle-lit table. Everything glistened, from the sparkling crystal glasses to the finely etched china. Even the gold silverware twinkled up at her under the gaslight chandelier.

She could hardly believe she was here, having dinner in Myles's elegant dining room. Imagine her, Fiona Cameron, all decked out in a satin lavender evening dress, her hair done up by someone else. God's teeth, she felt like Cinderella.

She quelled those thoughts in an instant. She was no fair maiden, and Myles Springfield would never be her prince charming. He was a known rake. The best she could hope for was a torrid affair. Being a product of her mother's great love affair, Fiona knew she would never let herself get involved in one. The price was just too high.

Still, that scandalous idea sent a ripple of sinful delight up her spine.

Myles looked so devilishly handsome in his black evening attire, Fiona wanted to pinch herself. As he raised the water glass to his lips, taking a deep sip, she tried not to stare, but all she could think about was what that sensually chiseled mouth would feel like pressed against hers. When their eyes met, Fiona dropped her gaze, embarrassed to be caught watching him. She traced the pattern of the lace tablecloth in her mind's eye in an effort to not appear eager for his company, while she choked down a piece of tender roast beef.

"Is the food to your liking?" Myles asked in a rich, velvet voice. He held the fork poised over his potatoes. "I can't help but notice that you seem to be having trouble eating, Miss Fiona."

Fiona's face burned. *Drat, he can tell how nervous I am.*

"Everything is d-delicious," she stammered, wiping her mouth with the linen napkin. "I just feel out of place here."

He quirked a golden brow. "Why? I invited you."

* * * *

Myles watched her blush, while she struggled for a reply. Fiona's shyness now was a departure from her earlier spunkiness. It was disappointing to see this change in her. He had been looking forward to witty repartee at dinner.

"I guess I'm just wishin' I knew what you wanted from me."

"What I want?"

"I know you're thinkin' I'm not verra bright, Master Myles, but I do have some pride."

Myles's mouth went dry as she straightened her shoulders. And what beautiful ones they were, too. He was glad Clara had found a dress so well suited for her. It came off the shoulders, giving him a tempting view of the soft curve of her breasts and slender column of her throat.

"You wouldna be so nice to me if you didna want something," she continued, not seeming to notice that his mind had wandered.

Myles's fork stopped in mid-air. Her comment hit him full force. Bloody hell, she spoke as if she could read his less-than-gentlemanly thoughts. He felt at an uncomfortable loss for words. She thought he wanted to seduce her. Didn't he? Myles stared at the charming beauty sitting across from him. What were his plans for her? He couldn't answer, or could he?

The front door slammed. Oliver Springfield's valet and faithful companion, Roland, stumbled into the room.

"Master Myles, come quick!" The burly man groaned, holding his side. His hand came away red with blood. "I tried to stop him, but he stab ... ah ... you ... un ... out ... in the carria..."

"Oh, my heavens, he's bleedin'," Fiona gasped as she dropped down beside Roland. "Dinna worry. I willna let you die. I hope your sister doesna mind if I use part of her petticoat." She ripped a strip of her petticoat and began binding the wound.

Good God, not Uncle Oliver, too. Myles fought the panic welling up inside him. He darted outside, where he found his Uncle Oliver lying in a pool of blood beside the carriage. The driver was poised over him.

"I'll get him inside while you fetch the doctor."

The trembling young man stood slowly. "Yes, sir." He watched anxiously while Myles lifted Uncle Oliver before he climbed back up in the carriage to go for the doctor.

It took all of Myles's strength to carry Oliver's still body into the house. Thank goodness the older man had a slight build or they never would have made it. *Who could have done this*, Myles wondered as he stared down into his Uncle's ashen face. He pushed past the wide-eyed servants as he stumbled into his father's old room and laid the wounded man out on the bed. He placed a hand on Oliver's chest, feeling comfort in his uncle's steady breathing.

"I got Roland's bleedin' stopped. Charles and I moved him to the spare bedroom. Clara is with Roland right now," Fiona said softly from behind him. "We'll need to stop Lord Stratten's bleedin' or he willna last until the doctor gets here."

Myles watched in mute amazement as Fiona took over. She seemed to know just what to do.

"I think he'll be fine. Might need some stitches, though." Fiona didn't look up as she continued cutting away Oliver's shirt with the scissors she'd brought with her.

The sight of the blood turned Myles's stomach. He was frozen, unable to help or look away. This little slip of a girl acted where he could not. No wonder Serenity didn't come to him for protection. What the hell good was he?

Myles prayed for the first time in ages that his uncle would survive. He had lost so much family. Somehow losing another member was more than he could bear.

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

Inside the bedroom Rose told her was theirs, Serenity thrust her arms into the sleeves of her last clean dress. It was the simplest gown Sabrina had had in her New York shop. She had used her doll credit buying a couple of dresses and an extra pair of slippers after she fled Rudgewick. Now she wondered if they would be enough, especially if she would be cleaning house all day.

Serenity shook her head, remembering her first impressions of the inside of Collin's house. The phrase "utter disaster" came to mind. Never had she seen so much filth. She had worked all afternoon and hadn't made a dent in the workload.

She lowered herself down onto the bed, being careful not to crush the beautifully embroidered bedspread. Every muscle in her body ached. From upstairs she could hear the patter of the girls' feet mixed with snatches of conversation and

giggles. They were happy to be home. Somehow, she had to continue fixing up this place without them realizing how disappointed she was.

"This isn't what you expected?" Rose asked from the doorway.

"Actually it's better."

Rose chuckled. "Didn't lie to me, lass. I saw the pained expression on your face when we began cleaning the house. You're asking yourself the same thing I am. How do we make up for two years of neglect?" Rose dropped down on the bed beside her and took Serenity's hand in hers. "It can be done."

Serenity laid her other hand on top of Rose's. "My mind knows this, but my travel-weary body is protesting the notion."

"I will admit, I enjoyed the ride here. This landscape is so different from New York. I love the open space. I can understand why Collin wouldn't want to leave."

"I'm glad you can see past the dirt. Collin is a ver' lonely man. Looking around at the state of this house, I'd say he is just barely existing. What he needs is some warmth back in his life."

Serenity wasn't sure how to respond. Mrs. MacClarron expected a great deal from her if she thought her presence alone could pull Collin out of his grieving.

She stood and walked across the floor to the closet. Serenity's jaw dropped as she pulled the door open. Beside Collin's rumpled shirts were his first wife's dresses. She had this odd sensation of being outside her body looking in. The urge to slam the door ripped through her, and yet, she was

paralyzed. All she could do was stare at the row of dresses, wondering about Katrina. *How would the other Mrs. MacClarron feel about another woman taking her place?*

Her chest tightened when she noticed that, peeking out from between the row of dresses, was a dollhouse and small rocking horse.

"Oh, my," Rose said softly beside her, placing a hand over her mouth.

Serenity glanced over at Rose, staring into the closet with a sad expression. "The poor dear stuffed Felicity's toys in here, too."

Rose shook her head. "I should have helped him sort through Katrina and Felicity's things before I left. Collin told me he didna need my help, but obviously he lied."

Then came the thunder of little feet. Suddenly, Alisha jerked the door out of Serenity's hands, sending it crashing shut. Alisha leaned back against it, arms spread out like a priestess guarding a tomb in one of Uncle Oliver's stories.

"Papa said to stay out of there. You have no right to look at her things."

Serenity placed a hand on Alisha's stiff shoulder. "I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to snoop. I was just searching for a place to put my things away."

"You dinna need to put your things away because you willna be staying," Alisha blurted out in a thick burr that spoke of her upset mood more clearly than her words.

"Of course she will," Rose interjected. "She is your father's wife now."

Alisha's eyes blazed fury.

If one could be killed with a look of hatred, Serenity knew she would be dead. "Honey, I'm not trying to take your mother's place."

Alisha's face tightened, and Serenity sensed the young girl was fighting a losing battle with her tears. Knowing how Alisha felt about showing a weakness, Serenity knew the subject of her mother needed to be dropped, at least for now. When they were calmer, she would bring up the painful topic again.

"Did not."

"Did, too." Cherise's and Emily's voices echoed down the hallway.

"You're just mad 'cuz I went outside to help Papa while you were stuck in the house."

"Am not," Cherise argued.

"Are, too," Emily countered as they rounded the corner into the bedroom.

"Girls!" Serenity chided, hands on hips. "That is enough arguing. We need to get organized to help finish everything on my to-do list." Serenity tapped her mouth. "Now, where did I put that list?"

"I dusted our room," Emily said, glaring at Cherise. "Which was my job."

"I put away the clothes," Alisha said, looking pointedly at Cherise. "But Cherise refuses to clean the parlor."

Cherise's eyes widened in horror, but no comment escaped her lips.

"I'm sure Cherise has a good reason for not finishing her task," Serenity said mildly.

"Off reading her scandalous novel again, no doubt," scoffed Alisha. She folded her arms across her chest and leaned back against the wall, sulking.

"Now, Alisha," Serenity scolded, "that's more than enough. You're skating on thin ice." She gave Alisha a look to remind her that she hadn't forgotten this morning's catastrophe. They had made a deal Serenity wouldn't tell her father what Alisha did to her dress, if she promised to cooperate.

Alisha frowned and shuffled away from the wall. "Sorry. I'll behave."

Serenity smiled at this small victory. "Now?" She rubbed her hands together. "What else still needs doing?"

"Dusting," said Cherise in a little voice.

"Spider web removal," interjected Rose, with a wrinkle of her nose, as she shook one from her fingertips.

"Put away Papa's things." Cherise glowered at a haughty Emily.

"Eat," chirped Greta, ignoring her sisters' silent war.

Everyone laughed. Rose groaned. "Everything is cooking. All that is left to do is clean off the table and wash dishes so we have something clean to eat on."

Serenity chuckled. "Who wants to brave the kitchen with Grandma Rose?"

"I guess I will," muttered Alisha.

Serenity scribbled fast and furiously on her paper.

"Me—me." Greta jumped up and down.

"You can help Cherise dust the parlor."

Greta beamed, while Cherise seemed oddly quiet. Her eyes had widened when Serenity mentioned the parlor.

After everyone left to begin their duties, Cherise lingered in the hallway. Greta had gone with Rose to get dust rags. Serenity studied the unhappy child as she tied her apron. What should she do?

"Miss Springfield, do I have to go in the parlor?" Cherise asked in a trembling voice. Her eyes were round and brimmed with tears.

She knelt down in front of Cherise, placing a comforting hand on the girl's shoulder. "Why don't you want to dust the parlor?"

Cherise's eyes closed and her voice shook when she spoke. "T-there are ghosts in there. That's why Papa willna go in."

Serenity pulled the quivering child into her protective embrace and held Cherise while she cried. As the sobs quieted, Serenity collected her thoughts. "Cherise, honey, your Mama wouldn't want you to think her spirit frightens you. If she is looking down on you from heaven, it's because she loves you and wants to protect you—not to scare you."

"But Papa is afraid. He willna go in there. And he willna move the chairs back."

Serenity took a deep breath and straightened. She gave Cherise's hand a comforting squeeze as she led her to the parlor. At the door, she froze. The room was still set up for a funeral. The two big chairs and sofa were all facing a gaping hole. Why she hadn't noticed that when she opened the curtains earlier?

"See." Cherise pointed.

Serenity swallowed the lump in her throat as she stared at the bare spot Cherise was pointing to. If she closed her eyes,

she would, without a doubt, see images of two caskets in that empty space. She brushed back a tear. Her own parlor at home was also arranged this way. She doubted if anyone had fixed it—unless Myles insisted. For the first time since she arrived, she felt a bond with Collin.

"Sometimes it's hard to enter a place with sad memories, Cherry. I couldn't go in my father's study either. What we need to do is replace the sad thoughts with happy ones. Make the parlor into a family room again."

Cherise wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and gave a half-hearted smile. Then, nodding, she silently walked to a high-backed winged chair.

Serenity followed her and they began moving it.

"Papa will not like that," Alisha snapped, poking her head around the door jamb.

Before Serenity could answer, the front door slammed. The sound of Collin's heavy boots were heard in the hallway, followed by the sound of him bumping into something. She winced, thinking of the harness and saddle she had laid by the door.

Collin's deep baritone voice muttered words Serenity could only assume were Gaelic curses by their tone. Alisha shot her an I-told-you-so look. The war had begun.

Chapter 6

Collin tripped over a harness just inside the door. Sweet Saint Margaret, his house had been taken over.

Embarrassment surged through him. The things he should have carried outside a long time ago were stacked by the door. A message, he was sure.

He dreaded the look of pity his new bride would give him. He had had a belly full of that after Katrina's and Felicity's funeral. People, especially women, kept whispering behind his back, bringing food and well-intentioned advice, until he wanted to yell in frustration. That stopped when his girls left. All that remained now were the sympathetic looks. How he hated those, too.

With heavy feet, he followed the sound of his daughters' voices to the parlor, which he had avoided since the funerals. His only recent memories of that room were sitting, head in hands, crying. He wondered if, even now, he could face it.

Collin froze at the sight that met his eyes. The room had been rearranged. Shock, mixed with humiliation, rolled through him. The bare spot where the caskets had been now held one chair. Serenity and Cherise were in the process of moving the other one. One corner was dust free and the curtains opened. She had cracked open a dirty window, letting in a hot breeze. It sent a flurry of sun-kissed dust fairies dancing across the painted floor in a reminder of how much still needed doing.

"You haven't even had a chance to get unpacked and already you're reorganizing my house," Collin remarked.

Bracing his arms on either side, he leaned in the doorframe. His shoulder throbbed with an intensity that kept the painful memories at bay.

Serenity straightened up, knocking over and barely retrieving a candle before it hit the floor. She picked up Greta, who'd flinched at his gruff tone, making Collin regret using it. He had been alone so long he had forgotten how fierce he could sound. Lord, he was a clumsy oaf.

"For your information, Mr. MacClarron, I was attempting to clean. Unless, of course, you like wallowing in filth. In which case, I will march back down the hall and repack my things, since I won't be staying. I can tolerate many things, but utter chaos isn't one of them."

Despite her brave words, he could see Serenity's hands trembling. He didn't know whether to laugh or yell. His timid wife had a temper.

He liked this feisty side of her. As he stepped closer, Serenity backed up. Collin realized that, although she was getting braver around him, she was still wary of him and that bothered him. Especially after what they had shared last night.

"Please, Papa, don't be mad," begged Cherise, stepping in front of Serenity. She held up her hands to ward him off. Her green eyes widened with distress. "It was my idea to move the chairs back."

The gesture stunned Collin. How could his own daughter think he could hurt Serenity? He and his children had grown so far apart during these years of separation that they were no longer the close family they had once been. Regret lanced

through him. He had hoped, despite the miles that had kept them apart, that their feelings would remain intact.

Obviously, he had been wrong. He ruffled Cherise's hair.

"I'm not mad, Cherry." He tried to keep his tone gentle.

She flashed him a relieved smile. "Miss Springfield said you wouldna be upset."

"I ... um ... understand about losing a parent at an early age," Serenity said. "Death can be a scary thing. A child's imagination fills in what they don't fully comprehend with lurid details. I hope I didn't overstep my..."

Collin halted her words with a raised hand. "Dinna give it another thought. I never got used to bein' both mother and father to my lassies. Explaining her death was one of the times I needed Katrina most. She handled those sensitive subjects so well."

Serenity juggled Greta, so she could pat his shoulder. The simple touch conveyed her understanding more eloquently than words ever could have. The feel of Serenity's small hand on his shoulder was like a lightning bolt through his body. In his youngest's eyes, he saw warmth and caring.

Cherise took his hand. "Then help me, Papa. Miss Springfield says we need to work together to make this room livable."

"I agree." Collin helped Cherise move the other chair.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Serenity set Greta down. Her hands stroked little Greta's back in an instinctive movement he had observed her doing several times over the last couple of days. She smiled and sent Greta off to find Gran. As he thought about Serenity's soothing gesture, Collin

couldn't help but wonder if her hands would ever stroke him so lovingly. He wanted her, and it scared the hell out of him.

"Thanks," Serenity said, as they pushed the chair into place.

"I should have thought of it before." He dropped his gaze, shifting uncomfortably. "I'm embarrassed my children shared with you what they couldn't tell me."

She sighed. "Don't be. Often an outsider can see things in a different light. I have no painful memories of this parlor. That makes it easier for me to fix things."

An uneasy silence fell between them.

"Dinner is ready." Rose appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron.

Warm smells of potatoes and smoked meat filled his nose. His stomach growled in response. How long had it been since he had eaten a hot supper at home?

"Go wash, Cherise," Serenity ordered.

Collin studied Serenity for a moment, unsure of what to say. He hadn't been this tongue-tied since he was a callow youth. Dust covered her calico dress. Cobwebs dangled from stray curls that had escaped her loose bun. He doubted if she had ever done this much cleaning in her entire life. Yet, she did it for him. The thought was humbling.

"Mr. MacClarron—I hate to be so blunt, but either you want me to be a wife and mother, or you don't. I have a tendency to take charge, so if that's not what you want..."

Blunt was an understatement. She spoke with the confidence of a man. The question was, what did he want?

"A wife?" He raised a dark brow. "In all ways?" His lips quirked. He liked the images her words conjured up.

She took a step back, placing a hand over her heart. "T-that wasn't what I meant, and you know it."

Collin chuckled. Now he had Serenity rattled, a position he enjoyed very much. He realized that he liked this lady, temper and all. She was an odd mix of strength and nerves.

This angel with golden hair was his wife. That thought was both arousing and overwhelming. He had never thought to woo another woman. Bold Katrina had flirted with him. It had been so long...

He could sense her apprehension. Did the idea of sleeping with him frighten her? He was a man with normal needs. One who took as much as he gave in bed. At least, he had been before ... Collin pushed those thoughts aside.

Memories of last night flooded back to him. She had been so warm and soft in his arms. He wanted—no, needed—to touch her as much as he needed his next breath.

"Come here, little Ren," he whispered huskily. "It's past time we got to know each other."

She stared at him for several seconds. Long enough that he feared she would refuse. Then, after taking a shaky breath, she stepped forward.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said, hiding her trembling hands behind her back.

"That's good because I'm just goin' to kiss you."

His large hand slid around the slender nape of her neck, gently pulling her to him. He cupped her face in his hands, tipping it up. Her skin was like warm satin. Her mouth was

soft and inviting as he slanted his over it. Then she stunned him by standing on tiptoes and winding her arms around his neck.

"Oh, I'm not looking." He stiffened as the sound of Emily's voice teased from behind them. "Gran wanted to know what was keeping you two."

Collin laughed against Serenity's mouth, his forehead pressed against hers, before he lifted his head. Serenity's eyes were wide with shock and a bit glazed. She quickly composed herself.

"I'm sorry you witnessed that." A blushing Serenity turned to face Emily.

"I'm not," Emily retorted, grinning broadly.

"Em, go tell Gran we'll be right there."

"Sure." She bolted out the door yelling, "Hey, everybody, guess what Papa and Miss Springfield were doing?"

Serenity groaned.

"Better get used to it, darlin'. Once you entered this house, you lost all privacy. Very little goes on around here that the lassies arena aware of and comment about."

"I'll keep that in mind," Serenity muttered as she strolled off.

As he watched her disappear, Collin glanced around the partially cleaned parlor. It had a ways to go, but it showed promise. How had she accomplished this miracle in such a short time? The woman was a whirlwind. He had the uneasy feeling she could tip his world in ways he'd never imagined.

* * * *

New York City

Myles leaned back in the hard wooden chair, staring at a sleeping Oliver. The investigator said it had been a simple robbery, but was that true? His uncle still had money on him. The whole thing didn't make any sense.

At least the older man was resting comfortably. Tipping his head back, Myles closed his eyes. He had let Serenity down when she needed him. Be damned if he hadn't let Uncle Oliver down, too. He'd spend the night right here.

* * * *

Oliver Springfield propped himself up in bed as far as his painful ribs would allow. His head pounded, and his mouth felt like cotton. Where the bloody hell was he? He remembered struggling with a man he thought meant to rob him, but instead was intent on murder.

As his vision began clearing, Oliver scanned the room for clues. Dark blue velvet curtains pooled onto the white painted floor. It was partially covered with an Oriental rug he remembered bringing back to his brother, Edward, from one of his many voyages. In one corner sat a chaise lounge with his clothes neatly folded on it. A fire flickered in the elaborate marble fireplace.

He felt an uneasy sense of surrealism as he stared at Myles, asleep on the hard wooden chair beside the bed. His throat tightened. Myles looked so much like Edward had at his age. How could his baby brother be dead? The news still hurt. He closed his burning eyes.

Gentle hands touched his forehead. As he opened his eyes, he saw a dark-headed apparition dressed in a blood-splattered lavender evening gown.

"How are you feelin', Lord Stratten?" his caretaker asked in a melodic Scottish burr that reminded him of his dear, sweet Rose.

"Roland ... stabbed?" Oliver groaned.

"He's fine. It was just a nick. You both gave us quite a scare," she said, while straightening his pillow.

Something was oddly familiar about the girl, but he couldn't put a finger on it.

"Do I—know you?" Oliver inquired in a rusty voice.

She smiled. "I used to work at your town house."

"Used?" He coughed. "You mean ... some ... let you go?" He took a deep, painful breath. "I watched ... a ... you handle..."

She brushed a work-roughened hand against his unshaven cheek. "Just rest, sir. We'll talk more later."

He patted her hand as she brushed back a lock of his gray hair.

"Let me help you get more comfortable," she said in a firm tone that brooked no argument.

"Fiona." Myles awoke with a start. "How is he?"

"Fine. I have a feelin' keepin' him down to recuperate will take a miracle."

Myles laid a hand on her shoulder. When his uncle's eyes drifted shut, he took her arm, leading her out into the hallway.

"You impressed me tonight, Miss Cameron. Most women I know would have swooned at all that blood. I'll admit, my stomach rolled when Doctor Holmes began sewing up Uncle Oliver. But you helped without a thought."

She shrugged. "I canna stand to see someone hurtin' if I can help them."

As Myles tipped up her chin, his lips brushed hers. "I'm hurting. Come soothe me," he murmured.

She stiffened, pushing him away. "I'll not be your whore, Springfield. My mother let passion rule her, and I was the result." She paused. "I willna risk bringin' a child into this world as a bastard. I know how much that hurts."

Myles stared. Her tearful eyes told him how deep the pain ran. He swallowed hard, realizing what he had just about done to this brave girl. "I'm sorry, Fiona. Taking advantage of you was never my intention." He cupped her cheek, stroking its softness with his thumb. "I'm attracted to you. I won't lie. But I like you too much to act on it. Especially now that I know your feelings."

He felt her breathe a sigh of relief. Then he brushed a kiss across her forehead.

"I had the bed turned down in Serenity's room. Run along before I change my mind."

"But—I canna," she protested, before he stopped her words with a restraining finger.

"It's still raining outside. You said yourself that you had nowhere else to go. I'd be an ungrateful bastard to turn you out on a night like this. At least let me pretend, for once, to be a gentleman."

She patted his cheek. "There's no pretendin' about it, Springfield. You're every inch the gentleman."

As she turned to walk away, Myles slumped against the wall. He doubted Fiona would still agree if she knew what he wanted to do with her delectable body. Bloody hell, he hoped his sister was proud of him. Being a gentleman was damn hard work.

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

Dinner was a loud, noisy affair with everyone talking at once. The table was informally set with metal plates and cups, giving Serenity a warm, cozy feeling she had never experienced while eating in her elegant dining room in New York.

"The food is wonderful, Gran," Collin said, smiling at Rose beside him.

"Dinna be givin' me all the credit. We wouldna be eatin' in here at all if Alisha hadna cleaned off the table. I must say, Collin, it looked like a tack room in here."

Collin blushed, taking a bite of stew.

Serenity bit her lower lip to contain her laughter at Rose calling him to task.

"My horse is still here, Miss ... ah..." Emily paused. "Papa, what do we call her now?" She pointed at Serenity, who froze, embarrassed by all the sudden attention.

Greta pulled her thumb out of her mouth. "Mama," she said emphatically before continuing to suck on it again.

Serenity's throat tightened at Greta's response. *What would it feel like to truly belong to this family?*

Alisha's eyes widened. "She is not our mama."

The bitterness Serenity witnessed earlier was raging up again. Alisha would not make her new role an easy one.

"No," Rose replied quietly. "Serenity didn't give birth to you. But a stepmother is more than that. She loves and cares for you when she doesn't have to. Needing to have someone to fuss over you is somethin' you never outgrow."

Her words and gaze were directed at Alisha, whose lower lip quivered as she aimlessly stirred her stew.

"But she isn't Miss Springfield anymore. Now she is Mrs. MacClarron. We can't call her that, Grandma Rose," Cherise protested.

Alisha glared at Cherise, making Serenity feel even more uncomfortable with the turn this conversation was taking.

"Girls, this doesn't have to be decided tonight," Serenity said softly. She wished they could end this discussion. Alisha needed time to grieve. Pressing her was only making things worse.

"I agree," Collin interjected, thumping his hand on the table. Everyone jumped. "Now eat!"

"But, Papa," said Cherise, "how can we call her?" She motioned toward Serenity with her head. "If we don't know what her name is."

"It's a problem, Papa," Emily agreed, her head bobbing.

Collin groaned, tossing up his hands. He cast a helpless gaze at Serenity.

"How about just calling me Serenity for now? Then, when we get more comfortable with each other, we'll see."

The girls all looked to their father and then to Rose for approval.

Rose opened her mouth, then closed it.

He flashed Serenity an approving grin. "Sounds like a good suggestion. Now, let's get dinner cleaned up. We've had a big day and I think you lassies are ready for bed."

His words sent a chill through Serenity. *Bed. Good gracious.* She lifted her gaze to meet Collin's steady one. The image of getting into bed next to his warm, solid body made her knees weak. Heat crept up her neck.

She stood, bumping into the table. It jumped, dishes sliding. "I'll wash them myself," Serenity offered, frustrated by her own clumsiness.

"Why dinna you lassies go listen to your father's bedtime story?"

While heating the water on the stove, Serenity scrapped the plates into the slop bucket. Rose had told her that was for the pigs. She had never seen a pig.

They stood by the sink in tense silence. She washed and Rose dried. Steam rising from the water made her face burn. Her clothes felt uncomfortably tight, and the hair stuck to the back of her neck. Serenity wondered if she would ever grow accustomed to these chores.

Finally, Rose broke their silence. "You have nothing to fear tonight, lass. I know my Collin appears gruff at times, but he can be verra gentle when he wants to be. He'll be good to you."

Serenity almost dropped the plate she was rinsing. The images Rose's words invoked frightened the spit out of her. Shortly, she would be in bed with Collin.

"'Tis a good sign—the kiss. You can tell much about a man by the way he kisses." Rose winked.

If Collin made love like he kissed ... Serenity shivered at the thought. How would she handle Collin's questions? Would he know what Rudgewick had stolen from her that night in Maxwells' garden? As Serenity handed Rose the last plate, she wished she were anywhere but here tonight.

* * * *

Later that night, behind the Silver Spur Saloon, Rudgewick couldn't control his fury. His powerful body was taut with rage at the sight of Simon tottering before him. He had waited hours for news, while the fool had been off drinking.

"She gots mor ... maur ... married." Simon's voice slurred as he did a side step.

"Married!" The word exploded from Rudgewick, but was drowned out by the sounds of laughter and music coming from the saloon.

Rudgewick's hands went around Simon's throat, squeezing, venting his frustration at the loss of Serenity. In his mind, he saw his Serenity lying with another man. Hatred ripped through him. He wanted to kill. The smaller man's eyes widened with fear and distress as Rudgewick's grip tightened.

It was surprisingly easy to kill him, Rudgewick thought with disgust as Simon's body grew limp. Hardly the rush he

had anticipated. It did nothing to control the raging emotions churning inside him.

With cool, controlled movements, Rudgewick pulled Simon's body into a dark corner behind the saloon, where he dropped him with a sickening thud. Then he carefully took the money and valuables off his person. Now the stupid sheriff would label this a robbery.

Stuffing the bag of coins in his pocket, Rudgewick strolled back toward his hotel. *If Serenity thought marriage would save her, she was sorely mistaken.* He would have her. All his plans counted on it.

* * * *

"You aren't going to say a thing," a familiar husky alto voice whispered behind a trembling Bridget. Strong hands pulled Bridget into the darkness of the empty livery stable.

"B-but Lord Tarrington killed that ... that man. I saw him," Bridget sputtered as she turned to face Desiree, one of Lilly's girls.

"And who will believe you? How will you explain what you are doing out here late at night? Your mother would have apoplexy if she knew you was teaching a whore to read. She would stop you from coming. Is that what you want?" Desiree shook her, punctuating each word.

"No."

Desiree relaxed her tense stance. Hugging herself, she walked to the other side of the barn. "Then we're agreed." Her determined gaze pinned Bridget. "We tell no one."

Bridget worried her lower lip. "What if Sheriff Wallis questions us? I can't lie."

"He won't ask, as long as you don't act suspicious."

Bridget frowned. She had never lied before.

"Listen, sweetie, you've been kind to me." Desiree put a hand on her shoulder. "I won't let you ruin yourself." Desiree's brows knitted thoughtfully. "Here." The slight blonde pulled a fancy gold watch out of her skirt pocket. "I was saving this for my leaving-town money."

Bridget's eyes rounded. "Where did you get that?"

"From Lord Fancy Pants. I got paid to visit him last night. He went wild, muttering something about his family being titled. And how some stupid ... Anyway, I figured he owed me for the way he treated me, so I took it after he passed out on the bed. I know I shouldn't have ... but I couldn't help myself. I planned to sell it." She shrugged. "But we'll use it to ease your conscience."

She took Bridget's hand and pulled her out to where the dead man lay face down. Looking around to see if anyone noticed them, Desiree knelt beside the body and planted the watch underneath its arm.

She stood up slowly. Bridget could see the pain the movements caused written all over Desiree's face. Darkness may have hidden the bruises, but their lingering effects were obvious.

"There now." Desiree brushed off her hands. "When the sheriff finds this he'll have a clue to the killer's identity. If Lord Fancy Pants turns in that his watch was stolen, he'll have a great deal of explaining to do."

"Do you really think this will work?"

"I hope so." Desiree looked around nervously. "I have to go before Lilly misses me. Promise you won't crack."

"I won't." Bridget nodded. She watched Desiree run off toward the Lovenest, wondering how doing something so nice for a friend could get her in so much trouble.

* * * *

Serenity went to blow out the lamp, but stopped to stare at the wonderful toys lining the walls of the girls' loft bedroom. There was a huge rocking horse with a frayed rope mane and tail. Beside it sat a wooden dollhouse that looked remarkably like the MacClarrons' own home. It came complete with a barn, fences, family, and animals. All hand-carved and painted. This was the work of a man who loved his children. Serenity's heart warmed. Maybe she hadn't made a mistake about Collin after all.

"Please don't put out the lamp." Cherise pleaded, in a shaky voice.

Serenity jumped at the sound of the child's voice. She had thought all the girls were asleep. She had only checked on them as a stalling tactic to avoid crawling into bed with Collin.

She paused by Cherise's bed. "How about if I pull back the curtains and let more moonlight in?" Serenity draped the part of curtain closest to Cherise back over the rocking horse.

After a brief silence, Cherise spoke. "I don't like the dark."

Serenity sat on the edge of her bed. "Me neither."

"I have bad dreams."

"Me, too."

"What makes them go away?"

Serenity took Cherise's cold hand. "For me, it's feeling safe." *If there is ever such a thing.* "Maybe now that you are home, it will be better. After all, we fixed the parlor." She touched the tip of Cherise's nose. "Worrying about dreaming only makes it worse. Think of something happy and try to sleep."

Serenity rose and headed for the door.

"Will we clean out Mama's closet tomorrow?"

The question made Serenity freeze with her hand on the doorknob. She wasn't sure how to answer, since going into the closet had upset Alisha so much.

"We'll talk about it in the morning."

What else could she say without starting a fight between the two sisters?

Serenity waited for a reply, hoping her answer would suffice, but none came. She hoped Cherise had blissful sleep. Unfortunately, Serenity never did. What would Collin do when she cried out in the night tonight? Would he demand the explanations that he overlooked last night? She had no words of comfort for herself.

Chapter 7

When Serenity returned from reassuring Cherise, she found Collin standing in their bedroom. Still as a statue, he just stared at the ornately carved oak headboard and brightly quilted star spread. His presence dominated the small room. He had shed the dark coat and now stood in his white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up. It emphasized his broad shoulders. Through the top buttons, dark curls peaked out. His hair was damp combed. She realized that he had also just shaved. Serenity forced back her panic. *This man staring at the bed with pain-ridden eyes won't hurt me*, she told herself.

"I think I convinced Cherise to go to sleep. Something is bothering her, but she won't tell me what. She almost acted afraid to sleep in her own room."

He didn't respond, just stood there, leaning against the footboard.

She wasn't sure if Collin even knew she was there since he appeared so lost in thought. She reached out, placing a comforting hand on his rock-hard arm. The muscles jumped under her fingers. Without the barrier of shirtsleeves, his skin felt warm. The hair tickled her fingertips.

He reached over to touch her cheek and winced. He was in pain, she realized, but too proud to admit it.

"Is your shoulder bothering you?"

Collin nodded. "That and my back. I overdid today. Doc Hogan wanted me to be careful. The bullet dislocated my shoulder and, even though Doc put it back in, it takes time to heal. Since I move slowly these days, I let my brother-in-law,

Ethan, help me with chores. He and I share the horses and cattle. We also farm together. His land borders mine to the south.

"Anyway, I told him not to come tonight. He was invited to dinner by this lady he is courting."

Serenity chuckled. "So you do have a little of Rose in you after all. Is that why Mr. Holt came to take Ethan's place?"

"I never thought of that. I suppose I should have been nicer to him, but he just knows how to yank my strings."

"I'm sorry my being here caused trouble for you."

"Nothing I can't handle. I should have expected he would be hurt that he didn't know about our wedding before the fact. He thinks of me as one of his children."

Serenity patted his arm. "You don't have to explain. I understand. You have been a part of his family for fourteen years. He is afraid I will come between him and his granddaughters. I won't."

Collin studied her for a long moment. "This situation is more complicated than I imagined. I had never thought about remarrying, so I hadn't given much thought to what the Holts would feel about my doing so."

"You are lucky to have family that cares about you."

He groaned, straightening up.

"Here, lean on me. I helped my father with his evening rituals for eight years. Do you want to wash up?"

Collin shook his head. "I already took care of that. I just need to sit down for a minute, then I'll be fine."

Of course—what a goose I am.

His gaze met hers with a mixture of determination and pain.

"I have some cream that will help with the stiffness. If you remove your shirt, I can rub it in."

Collin regarded her thoughtfully for a moment. "I'm a wee bit embarrassed about this. It is our wedding night..."

Serenity brushed off his comment with a wave of her hand. She wasn't sure, but she thought she read relief in Collin's eyes. "What should we do first? Do you have a bandage that needs replacing?"

"I'm tempted to leave it off since it keeps coming loose anyway."

"Then let's slide off your shirt. I will check your bandage and rub your back."

Her hand trembled as each button revealed the broad, muscular expanse of his chest. A thick pelt of dark hair made a vee between his nipples and then arrowed down his flat stomach, disappearing into his pants. She noticed there was evidence of fading bruises. His ribs might have been cracked. She cringed, feeling his pain.

She swallowed, fighting the urge to caress him. "The bandage seems secure. I don't see any blood seeping out," she said in a tight voice. "I'll get my cream."

When she returned, Collin was gingerly lowering himself onto the bed. She climbed on behind him, tangled skirt and all. The cream felt cold against her fingers as she dipped into the container. His skin was hot under her touch as she smoothed it over his uninjured shoulder, neck, and carefully over his bruised back.

Collin groaned, his muscles relaxing under her tender ministrations.

"I smell too good," he teased in a strained tone.

"That is because I scented it for Rose. She won't let me use it on her otherwise."

"Does it usually smell bad?"

Serenity shrugged. "I'm used to it. Father never cared."

She closed her eyes, fighting back painful memories. She missed her father, and yet, she knew he was finally at peace. The question that lingered in her mind was why he didn't trust her to take care of things after his death. She took a deep, calming breath and shifted her thoughts back to the present.

"Did you make that headboard?" she asked in an awed whisper, hoping to break the silence building between them.

"Aye." His voice was rough with emotion. "I like to carve things. Katrina always wanted me to open a shop in town."

"I don't blame her. You're very talented. I noticed the dollhouse and horse in the girls' room. Did you make them also?"

"Aye." He paused, taking a deep breath. "Katrina never understood I only did it for pleasure. This farm, the land, that was what I wanted."

Serenity felt a rush of empathy for him, sitting here on the bed he'd so lovingly made. It was hard when someone died without warning. They leave an empty space behind.

"Rose must have turned down the bed," Collin said.

She glanced down, realizing for the first time it was unmade. All the while, her hands continued their treatment,

acutely aware of every muscle on his cream-slick back. Her hand ached to do more than rub, but she pushed those thoughts aside.

"Thank you. I feel better."

Her hands froze for a moment, then dropped into her lap. She moved to sit beside him on the bed.

Without a word, he turned and lifted her chin, staring steadily into her widening eyes. His mouth slowly descended on hers. Collin kissed her with so much tenderness, Serenity's stomach flip-flopped.

Rose had once told her that you could tell a lot about a man by the way he kissed, and she was right. Collin's lips held promise. She shuddered, thinking of Rudgewick's bruising ones. Serenity vowed to keep that scoundrel's memory out of her marriage bed.

Collin lifted his mouth, but kept her face in his warm, calloused palms. His thumbs caressed her flushed cheeks.

After carefully considering her, he pulled back. "Do you want to change? There is a screen over there in the corner. I fixed it for Katrina."

Serenity slipped off the bed, picking up the gown Rose had laid out for her.

Collin rose slowly. "I dinna sleep in clothes, except long johns in the winter."

Her face grew hot at the images his words invoked. She had never seen so much naked male skin before. And from the way Collin was shamelessly undressing, she had a feeling she would be seeing a great deal more. Heaven help her.

Collin never wavered in shedding his clothes. But he didn't look at her either, just calmly removed the rest of his things until he stood before her in all his unabashed male glory. She tried not to notice his aroused state. It made her fear mount. *I can get through this night*, she told herself over and over again.

Without giving herself a chance to change her mind, she took off her clothes and slid on the gown.

She avoided touching him as she climbed in the bed. Serenity crawled over to the far side, near the wall. The bed groaned under his weight as Collin joined her. He lay on his back, one arm resting under his head, staring at the ceiling. He was nervous, too, she realized with relief.

"Do you want the lamp on?" he asked gently.

"No."

He rolled over, giving her a splendid view of his muscular back. Then the room plunged into total darkness.

She clutched the cool sheets tightly. It took a few minutes for her eyes to adjust to the moon as the only light source.

Collin pulled her to him and nervously she went. He took her face in his warm, calloused hands and kissed her, letting her mouth adjust to his tender assault. Then his tongue traced its seams, asking for admission. She loved the sensation, but wished her fear would go away.

Serenity parted her lips, giving him full access to her mouth. Their tongues timidly touched and grew bolder. She savored his rough texture and coffee taste.

He pulled back, stroking her cheek. "You're a bonny lass, Serenity."

She swallowed hard. "You're pretty bonny yourself." Her voice quivered as she mimicked his burr.

He began kissing her again. Each one grew more insistent. Serenity felt her body melt. Collin's hand slid down the column of her throat to the lace covering her tingling breasts. He cupped and caressed them, sending waves of delight rippling through her. His thumb brushed over her aching nipple.

His other hand slid lower to her bare calf. It smoothed up her leg, bringing the gown with it.

The action ripped Serenity out of her sexual haze. Images flashed before her eyes. Herself on the hard ground, skirt up, Rudgewick's rough pawing.

Collin rolled her on her back, his full weight pinning her to the bed. Serenity's heart raced. She couldn't breathe. She pulled her mouth free.

"No!" she cried out, shoving him off of her with all her might.

* * * *

Collin lay in the dark bedroom with an arm over his eyes, listening to Serenity's unsteady breathing beside him.

Over and over he replayed the last few minutes in his mind. They had come together in passion, but then something had gone terribly wrong. All he had done was attempt to raise her gown...

"Serenity," he whispered, not moving a muscle.

"What?" she responded in a strained whisper. Her body was rigid and as far away from him as physically possible.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No."

"Care to tell me what you fear?"

"No."

He let out a harsh breath. His emotions were in a coil. On the one hand, he felt relief at not having to prove himself tonight. But then, he felt disappointment at Serenity's rejection. The life he had imagined with her was fading before his eyes. Could they bridge this gap?

Was it just wedding night jitters that made her so fearful of him? He hadn't experienced that with Katrina. Yet, they had courted before marriage. Shared many kisses and a few other sample intimacies before their wedding night.

Serenity was his wife and, yet, she was practically a stranger.

Collin cast a glance at her lying there, gripping the sheet for dear life. If he was uneasy about bedding a stranger, then she must be terrified. At least he knew what was supposed to happen.

He took another deep breath. She was not a soiled dove at Lilly's Lovenest. The lass was his wife. He shouldn't have pounced on her. He had just been caught up in the moment. He shuddered, thinking of what could have happened if she hadn't stopped him. What if he froze up like he did that night at Lilly's? What made him think it would be any different this time?

He pushed those fears aside. For both of their sakes, they had to get through this night.

After a long moment of awkward silence, Collin spoke again. "Serenity, we'll be sleeping in this bed—together—for the rest of our lives."

"I know that."

"I dinna know about you, but I canna lay stiff as a board—fearing to touch you and still sleep."

She let out a long sigh. "I'm sorry. You should not have married me. It was a mistake." Her voice choked off in a muffled sob.

Collin rolled onto his side, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder. She jumped. Her breaths came out in shaky spurts. He debated whether or not to move his hand, but left it there. They had to grow accustomed to each other, or it would be a long night and an even longer lifetime of sharing a bed.

"'Tis done. There isna going back."

"I know." Her tone sounded resigned.

"The way I see it, we have two choices here. We can let this control us and sleep apart. That isna a choice in my book. What example would that set for my lassies?"

"True," she said, relaxing slightly. "I wouldn't want them to sense a problem between us. They're still struggling to accept me."

They were making progress, as her body wasn't as stiff. Collin knew in his gut the longer they prolonged this, the harder it would be.

He took a chance, as he began stroking her arms. "It's hard for me, too. I knew Katrina for over a year before we got married. You and I are strangers. You dinna know me."

Her eyes lifted to meet his gaze. "I'm not afraid of you, Mr. MacClarron. Well, maybe just a little."

"Collin, please call me Collin," he said as he tried to read her expression. "I willna hurt you. I've never hurt a woman."

"I believe you."

"If we were courting, then..."

"We would have gone slower," she continued his thoughts. "I wouldn't be in your bed..."

Collin grinned. "We are in bed, lass. But that doesna mean we canna go slow."

"What do you want to do?"

"Let me hold you." He paused, searching for the right words. "Without your gown." Did he really suggest that? What was he thinking?

She froze, and he wondered if she would agree. The gown was a problem for her. *Maybe without it...*

"You just want to hold me?"

"And kiss you, but I willna do anything else unless you want more."

She trembled, then slowly sat up and removed her gown.

Collin swallowed hard. He couldn't see much. Her legs and bottom were covered. But her breasts—ah, those round globes stood proud and firm. It would take all his willpower to ignore them.

"Come here," he murmured hoarsely.

She lay back and rolled toward him. She felt all satiny and soft, like warm velvet. For a long time, he just held her loosely, savoring the feel of her body next to his. He hoped

she didn't recognize his body's reaction to her. Just having her relax would have to be satisfaction enough.

She trembled slightly. He leaned over, brushing a kiss across her lips.

"That wasna so bad." *But not nearly enough.*

"Better than I thought."

Even more than he'd hoped. He brushed a kiss across her forehead as a feeling of warmth spread through him. He could get used to sleeping with her like this.

If he didn't watch out, she would steal his heart. That was something he could not afford to lose again.

* * * *

New York City

Fiona shifted in Miss Springfield's overstuffed chair. After tossing and turning, she had finally climbed out of bed to think. What was she going to do? Since her mother's death a year ago, she had no one to fall back on. She couldn't depend on Myles's generosity forever.

Fiona rose and walked to the dressing table. She took out a brush and began the task of taming her tangled curls.

Without references, she wouldn't find another job. What would she live on once she left Myles's care? Her heart skipped a beat. He'd desired her tonight, but he'd turned her away, which was what she wanted. *Then why did his rejection hurt so much?* She closed her eyes. There was an option here, but it was unthinkable.

She could become Myles's mistress. How could she do that when she loved him so much? She wanted to be more

important in his life than that. Fiona sighed. If only she could be the one he loved. The one he married. Fiona tipped back her head, fighting the tears for what could never be.

What was she going to do?

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

Moonlight streamed in the loft window as Collin comforted his middle daughter. His large frame seemed to dwarf Cherise's small bed.

"Can you tell me about your dream now?" he whispered, so as not to wake the other girls.

Her sobs slowed and then she took a deep breath. "No, I ... canna ... remember all of it."

He wondered if it was the same one she'd had last night at the hotel. She had had them regularly after her mother and sister died, but Gran told him that they had come with less frequency when she was living with her. *Why had they returned?* He brushed the wet strands of red hair off her face.

"'Tis all right, lass. We all have our demons to fight. Rest now. The sun will be up in a few hours, and we have chores to do."

"Papa?" Her voice was raspy.

"Yes?"

"Are you angry about us fixin' the parlor? I couldna bear it to be left that way."

It melted Collin's heart to hear his daughter slip into their familiar burr. They all did when they were upset or tired. At least they had kept some part of him.

"No, Cherry, I couldna bear it that way either. That is why I never went in there. It hurt too much."

"That's what Serenity said. She told me Mama's ghost wouldna frighten us."

"She is right. Your Mama loved you lassies verra much. Hurtin' you would break her heart. She woulda been verra angry with me for neglecting her parlor. She enjoyed it so." He brushed a kiss across Cherise's damp forehead. "Sleep now, little lass."

"Night, Papa."

"Night, darlin'."

He rose, covering her. Then he checked on his other girls. Greta and Emily slept in a big bed by the wall. Both snuggled with their rag dolls that Serenity had made for them. He slipped Emily's leg back under the blanket.

He paused by Alisha's bed. She looked so much like her mother. Especially asleep. He bent down to fix her blankets and stopped short at the sight of a red-headed rag doll buried in the sheet beneath her arm. He smiled. Serenity had struck again. How did she know Alisha needed one, too?

He padded quietly down the stairs to his own room. As he slipped off his robe, he saw Serenity shift.

"No ... leave me alone..." She groaned. "Myles..."

He froze at the mention of another man's name. *Who is Myles?*

She thrashed around in the sheets, while Collin pondered whether or not to wake her.

He hesitated, then climbed in the bed, gathering her trembling body against his. She smelled of warm perfume.

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

"I'm so scared..." She moaned, snuggling closer. The simple movement was both heaven and hell for Collin.

"No one will hurt you now, sweetheart."

"Promise?"

"I promise," he whispered, brushing a kiss across her wet temple. *What frightened her so?* There were so many things about his wife he didn't know.

Collin stared off into the darkness, listening to her unsteady breathing. Could she chase away the ghosts that lurked in this house? Her dolls helped his girls. But could he help her?

Chapter 8

Dawn was lighting the morning sky when Sheriff Wallis discovered the gruesome sight of a dead man lying face down under a tree behind the Silver Spur.

"It just don't make any sense," Ralph, the gangly piano player, said. "Simon was an honest gambler. He lost as often as he won. Never bothered nobody." He shook his head.

Wallis stroked his beard, trying to put the pieces together as Doc Hogan ambled up.

"My missus said you had a mystery on your hands. What happened?" Doc asked, kneeling beside the man. He rolled him over. Something under the dead man's left arm glittered in the sunlight. Wallis bent to pick up the shiny object.

"He's dead," Doc Hogan said, looking up at Wallis. "For some time, I'd wager. Why did you call me instead of the new undertaker?"

"I wanted to know how he died. I don't see any evidence of gunshot wounds." Wallis brushed a thumb over the solid gold watch.

"Nope." Doc Hogan loosened the dead man's cravat. "By the looks of these bruises, my guess is his windpipe was crushed."

Ralph clucked his tongue. "I still say it don't make sense." He paced nervously.

It didn't, Wallis thought, flipping the watch open to find the initials W.R.T. The last time he had seen the fellow alive, he had been with Rudgewick Tarrington, the railroad man. Wallis doubted the R.T. initials were a coincidence because no one

around here, except the Holts, would own something so fine. The question was, should he show Tarrington the watch or do some more checking first before tipping his hand?

"Sheriff!" his lanky young deputy hollered. "Those two bank robbers just escaped from jail."

Damn, Wallis thought. *This will have to wait*. He hoped Tarrington hadn't skipped town by then. He had a sinking feeling Tarrington was more slippery than cod liver oil.

* * * *

"Papa, I canna sleep," Cherise moaned from the doorway.

Serenity's eyes flew open at the sound of Cherise's voice. Beside her, the bed was still warm from Collin's body. Her face flushed at the memories of him holding her last night. She had gotten braver with each passing night. In only a matter of days, she had gone from lying rigid beside him, to letting Collin kiss and caress her. She shivered at the thought of his calloused hands stroking her arms and back. He had kept his promise to go slowly and not rush her. He had yet to force her beyond the limits they had originally set. For that, she was grateful.

She could see him standing in lamplight, buttoning his shirt. Good grief, the sun hadn't even risen yet. Would she ever grow accustomed to these early hours? She started to get up, but a realization hit her. She was stark naked under the covers. Her gown lay on the floor—somewhere. *Merciful heaven*. Before, she had made sure to put it on once Collin fell asleep, but last night she was so tired she must have drifted off first.

"'Tis all right, Cherry. I was getting up to tend the livestock. If you get dressed, you can come help me milk Bessie," Collin whispered in a sleep-roughened tone.

"May I help, too?" Emily mumbled. She stood behind her sister, rubbing her eyes.

Dear heavens, they were all in here. Serenity wished she could slide deeper under the covers, so the bed would swallow her up.

"Emily, you go ahead," Cherise said. "I need to talk to Serenity."

"I dinna think she is awake, lass."

"I ... ahem ... am," Serenity interjected.

"How are you feelin'? You dinna sleep verra well again last night." He sat down on the edge of the bed, taking her hand in his large one.

She pulled the covers up to hide her nakedness. It was oddly comforting having her small hand blanketed in his. The look in his eyes as they probed hers was unsettling to her. Did she give away more of herself when she cried out in the night?

Embarrassment surged through Serenity as the fragmented images of him comforting her during a nightmare came flooding back.

"I'm sorry that I awakened you," Serenity said.

"I was already up." He brushed back an unruly lock of her hair as his gaze scanned hers. Concern was evident in it.

"Cherise also had trouble sleeping."

Relief poured over her. Maybe he hadn't actually heard her talking in her sleep. She could only hope that nothing drastic was revealed.

"I've often had bad dreams since my father's death." *More since the mishap with Rudgewick.*

"I see." Collin continued watching her, and she prayed he wouldn't press for more answers. He had been gracious so far, but how long would her luck hold out?

His mouth thinned a bit. "If you're sure you feel all right, I'm takin' Em out to do chores. We'll eat breakfast after the eggs are collected."

The mattress creaked as he stood. *My husband is not much for good-byes*, she thought as he abruptly left. Emily limped along beside him.

Collect the eggs. As in steal them from chickens. She cringed at the thought. Over the last few days, she had broken more eggs than she retrieved. She had marks all over her hands from the hens' pecks. She hadn't been here a week and already she was dreading farm chores. Did she really have the ability to make this work?

Well, she had never failed at anything before. This wasn't going to be the first time. With that, she leaned over the side of the bed to search for her gown. The movement made the blood rush to head. She fell back against the covers, feeling slightly dizzy.

"Mama, I'm wet," Greta's small voice came through the door.

"I told you I would change you," Alisha snapped in an impatient tone.

"Nooo! Mama change," Greta whimpered.

"She is not your mama."

"Is, too!" Greta protested.

"Is not," Alisha shouted.

"Girls," Serenity chimed. Drat Collin for leaving her like this.

"Alisha, please bring me some dry clothes for Greta."

"Fine." Alisha stalked off upstairs. Her bedroom door slammed with a resounding crash.

Serenity jumped at the noise. Where was Rose? To her dismay, she could see Cherise and Greta still standing there, staring at her. Her head spun as she attempted to get up again. Pulling the sheet around her, she swung her legs over the side of the bed with as much dignity as she could muster. She leaned down, scanning the dark floor for her misplaced gown.

"Dropped this?"

Serenity looked up to see Cherise standing over her with, to her mortification, the lost nightgown dangling from her fingers.

"Thank you." Serenity mumbled, too embarrassed to meet Cherise's gaze. She pulled it awkwardly over her head, while trying to hold onto the sheet. Her legs felt wobbly. Her stomach heaved and she prayed she wouldn't give in to the urge to throw up. That would be one too many humiliations for this morning.

Steadying herself, she walked to the dresser where her list of goals for the day lay. Leaning against the wall, she scanned it, prioritizing today's jobs. Greta tugged her gown.

"I'm wet," she said, tears brimming in her eyes.

"I know, dear." Serenity ruffled her hair. "Alisha is hurrying with your dry gown. I hope. Then I need to gather the eggs and fix breakfast."

Cherise wrinkled her nose. "I hate collecting eggs. The hens peck you and sometimes you find a snake in the bottom of a hen's nest."

A snake! Merciful heaven.

"The chicken poop—" Greta began, before Cherise cut her off.

"You're not supposed to say that word," Cherise whispered harshly.

"It's slimy," Greta continued undaunted by Cherise's rebuke.

Memories of the sights and smells swam before Serenity's eyes. Her stomach protested. Before she could think, she dropped to the floor over the chamber pot.

"Alisha!" Cherise raced out of the room bellowing. "Hurry! Serenity's sick."

To her surprise, when Serenity looked up, she found Alisha holding a wet cloth for her.

"Does Papa know you're not well?" Alisha took Greta's wet gown off, putting another one over her head with a smooth, practiced movement.

Merciful heaven, this was all she needed. Why was her stomach acting this way? After her encounter in the garden with Rudgewick three months ago ... her monthlies ... oh, dear. She couldn't be, could she? Who could she ask? *Oh, please don't let it be true.*

"There you are, dears," Rose's voice sounded from the hallway, breaking the tense silence.

"Serenity is sick, and Alisha is helping her," Cherise told Rose.

"I wet," Greta whined.

"I can see that Alisha changed you," Rose soothed.

Serenity sat back, shoving a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. Taking the rag from Alisha, she wiped her face. "I'm fine. Really," Serenity insisted as she tried to rise, bracing an arm against the wall. Her legs nearly gave way, but miraculously they didn't.

"Shall I get Papa?" Cherise asked.

"That isn't necessary." Serenity shook her head. "I'm truly fine."

Rose's brows furrowed. For a moment, Serenity feared the older woman would demand an explanation. Instead, she just offered a sympathetic pat. Then she turned and took Greta's hand. "Come help Grandma Rose make coffee."

"Okay," Greta chirped, following Rose out of the room.

"Cherise, can you remember where we put the coffee pot?"

Cherise continued to stare wide-eyed at Serenity.

"Go on, honey," Serenity urged. "I'll be fine."

Serenity leaned against the footboard, fighting another wave of nausea as Cherise left the room.

"Are you going to tell Papa about your illness?" Alisha demanded, strong accusation in her tone.

Serenity took a shaky breath. Her gaze lifted to meet Alisha's bold glare.

"Papa will be mad, you know. He hates when people are sick."

She reached out for Alisha, who pulled back.

"One way or another you will leave, too. I can not get attached to you." Alisha turned and fled the room.

* * * *

New York City

Myles stood up when a pale Uncle Oliver strolled into the sunroom for breakfast, as though he hadn't been stabbed two days ago. Myles could see the extra padding of the bandage under his uncle's borrowed shirt. The older man walked with slow, deliberate movements. Myles shuddered, thinking what a near miss he'd had.

Taking a teacup from the maid, Oliver added his usual dose of cream and two sugars.

"I'm surprised to see you around so early this morning. You should be resting, uncle," Myles said.

Oliver waved off the remark. "The best medicine for avoiding stiffness is to keep moving. I have too much to do. Spending another day in bed is a waste of time. Had to check on Roland. I found your lady tending to him, so I thought we'd have a man-to-man talk while she was occupied."

Myles blanched at Oliver's reference to Fiona.

Stirring his tea slowly and meticulously, Oliver scrutinized him. "I want a full account of the happenings around here. Beginning with why I wasn't informed of my brother's death."

"You were informed. We sent telegrams to every possible location. It was as if you had vanished."

Oliver leaned back in his chair, stroking his whitish-gray muttonchops. "I was poisoned in London."

"What?" Myles exploded.

"Someone has been trying to kill me. I can't help but wonder if Edward's death is—"

Myles cut him off. "Father had a stroke. More than one, I think. I'm not sure. Serenity hid things so carefully—I can't tell exactly how long he had been laid up. He died the night I arrived home."

Trying to control the emotion in his voice, Myles continued, "I came upstairs to find her cleaning and dressing him for burial. The doctor had just left. She refused to let someone else do it. Said Father had too much pride to let anyone, even the undertaker, see him when he wasn't at his best."

"That sounds like Edward. Your sister is a strong woman," Oliver said, his tone rough with grief.

"Too strong. I have a feeling she took a very active role in running Father's business. Looking over his records, I see her handwriting is everywhere. Makes me wonder just how long he was sick. She covered up so well for him."

Oliver coughed, taking a swallow of tea. "Did you two have a fight? Is that why she's gone? At least, that is the gossip among your staff."

Myles shrugged. "I honestly don't know. We never argued—at least not seriously." He cringed inwardly at the lie. Never would he admit that awful argument they had the night Serenity disappeared. Would he ever be free of that mistake?

"I know she was upset that Father left me in control of things. After seeing how much work she'd done, I can't say I

blame her." Leaning back in the chair, Myles steeped his fingers. "I arranged an escort for Serenity, since I was busy settling Father's affairs."

"If I may be so bold, sir." Charles stepped into the room. He paused, hands behind his stiff back. "I've debated saying this before now because Miss Serenity asked me not to, but..."

"It is my story." Clara, the housekeeper rushed in front of Charles. "Let me."

"Would someone just tell the bloody story?" Oliver blustered, slamming down his china teacup. He rubbed his temple. "Please." He groaned.

Everyone exchanged glances. Finally, Clara straightened her shoulders and defiantly tilted her chin. "The trouble began three months ago, when Miss Serenity went to the Maxwells' soiree with Lord Tarrington."

"Lord Rudgewick Tarrington?" Oliver gasped. "That rake."

Oliver pointed an accusing finger at Myles. "You let your sister go unchaperoned with that ... that bounder. She wasn't even out of mourning yet."

Myles threw up his hands. "Rudgewick was—is—a close friend of mine. His behavior had been nothing but gentlemanly toward my sister."

"I beg to differ, Master Myles," Clara cut in. "You didn't see the shape the poor dear was in when she returned that night." The woman humphed with righteous indignation. "Her dress was torn." Clara clucked her tongue. "The poor child about scalded herself in the tub trying to scrub her body clean."

"I have to agree with Clara's analysis, Lord Stratten." Charles nodded solemnly. "I had to order a bath and send for her maid because Miss Serenity just sat there on the edge of her bed, silently crying. It took a good hour before she would let anyone help her."

"Where were you, I'd like to know, while your sister was being mistreated?" Oliver thundered. "Off drinking and gambling at the clubs, no doubt."

Myles's face burned. He had gone out with his friends that night after meeting with his father's solicitor.

"Where is Serenity's maid? Maybe she has some answers," Oliver demanded.

"I already thought of that," Myles said. "Seems Ruby left for Queens to help her sister with a new baby. It had been arranged long before Serenity's disappearance." Myles's head dropped into his hands. "I must have been blind. She avoided me the next day. I just thought she was grieving over Father's death," he responded lamely.

Oliver made a rude noise. "Well, let's hear the rest of this sordid story."

"I pushed Serenity into attending the Billings' ball three weeks ago with Rudgewick. She never returned from that affair."

"Did he elope with her? God knows, since his father, the Earl of Norcliff, cut him off, Lord Tarrington could stand to marry an heiress."

"No." Myles jumped up, tossing his napkin down. "You do him a disservice. Rudgewick has been worried about her."

Myles hated lying for Rudgewick, but he wasn't ready to admit the man had dishonorable intentions toward Serenity either. *Surely, this must be a grave misunderstanding. Rudgewick had been an ally. Right?* Tarrington had stood up for him at Oxford when the other boys had taunted him about his Yank accent. He had been patient and helpful when Myles had needed to learn how to fit in with the English boys. He told him what popular clubs to frequent and games to play. How could his best friend have brutalized his sister?

"I'll just bet Lord Tarrington was worried," Oliver remarked dryly, over his steaming teacup. "More likely he feared losing his golden opportunity."

Myles clenched his fists. Rudgewick's betrayal rubbed him raw. He had brought Tarrington into his family. Seeing his uncle's face gray with pain, he was overwhelmed with regret. Somehow he had to see this situation right.

"I'm sorry to interrupt"—Fiona stepped into the room in a pink day dress of Serenity's—"but since your voices can be heard throughout the house, I couldna help but overhear."

Myles rolled his eyes, embarrassed Fiona had heard about his mistakes.

"Didna you tell Lord Stratten that we learned your sister is under the care of Mrs. MacClarron?"

"Rose?" Oliver sputtered. His face lost all color.

Myles felt a twinge of sinful delight that the mention of his mistress's name affected Uncle Oliver so.

"That's right," Fiona continued. "But her servants willna talk to us."

Oliver tossed down his napkin, wincing, and stood. He braced himself on the back of a chair and took a labored breath. "They bloody well will talk to me," he said, his voice gruff. "Come on," Oliver groaned, straightening up. "Let's get this mess sorted out before we have a scandal of epic proportions on our hands."

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

Serenity's stomach rolled at the sight of the heavy slop bucket sloshing in her left hand.

"The trough is over there," Alisha said, hands behind her back, a smug look on her face. "You can pour it in."

Serenity looked around for these mysterious pig creatures. *What kind of varmint would eat this disgusting stuff?*

As she poured the remains of last night's dinner into the trough, a squeal made her jump. Running behind her were the fattest, ugliest, loudest animals she had ever seen. Ears flopping, they grunted. Trying to get away from them, she tumbled, landing hard on the ground.

Behind her, she heard Alisha giggle. With all the dignity Serenity could muster, she stood and began walking out of their pen. The pigs crowded up to the trough, making the most awful noises. At least they weren't coming after her now that they were busy eating.

As she made her way across the yard, the ground felt soft under her feet. She looked down to find the hem of her dress and shoes covered with mud. Her feet felt like bricks as when she plodded toward the gate.

In a brave attempt to hold her composure, Serenity paused in front of Alisha, who was smirking at her. "Want me to help you gather eggs today?"

Serenity bit back her vile retort. Alisha was no help yesterday. In fact, if Serenity read the situation right, Alisha had deliberately told her the wrong things to do. She somehow got the chickens all riled up, leaving Serenity with more peck marks and broken eggs than whole ones. Collin had been polite, but she could tell that he thought breakfast was skimpy. There weren't enough eggs to go around.

Well, today would be different. She could accomplish anything once she set her mind to it. All it took was concentration and no advice from Alisha.

"Go on back to the house, Alisha."

Alisha's face fell. "But you need my help."

Like bloody hell. "To collect eggs? Pish-posh. Certainly, I can do that by myself. You did such a wonderful job showing me how yesterday."

Alisha had the good grace to flush at her sarcastic comments. Without a word, she turned and fled.

Serenity squared her shoulders, wondering if she was a brilliant strategist or the biggest fool alive.

* * * *

Behind the chicken house, Alisha paused to take a nervous breath. What would her father do when he found out about Serenity's illness? Surely, he would send them all back to New York. The possibilities danced through her head. She imagined all the things she would do once she got back to her

friends. The plays she would attend. She could see herself now back at Lady Sarah's Finishing School. Her fingers itched to practice the piano. Oh, how she missed New York.

First, though, she had to make her father aware of Serenity's frail health.

* * * *

Rounding the corner towards the chicken house, Collin collided with his eldest daughter.

"Whoa there, lassie. Where are you goin' in such an all-fire hurry?"

Alisha backed up, steadying herself on her father's arm. "To fetch Grandma Rose," she said, all out of breath. "She will know how to help Serenity. Grandma Rose knows all the healing tricks."

Collin sensed Alisha wasn't telling the entire truth because the lass was too nervous and refused to meet his gaze. *What is the lass up to? Serenity seemed fine this morning.*

"I'll check on her. You go see if Grandma Rose needs some help with breakfast," Collin ordered, patting her head.

She ran off without looking back.

As he neared the chicken coop, Collin could hear Serenity talking—no, lecturing would be a more apt description.

"I'm not going to let you intimidate me. I've learned other jobs I despised. I can conquer this, too. I won't let a hand full of birds get the best of me."

Collin chuckled to himself as he peeked at her through a crack in the wall. What a sight she made. She was all bluster.

Her hair was coming out of its bun. Loose, golden tendrils trailed down the slender column of her neck. He felt the strong urge to ease aside those curls and kiss the bare skin that lay underneath. His body tightened at the thought. It had been a long time since the sight of a woman doing something so mundane could arouse him. He wanted Serenity, he realized with a surprised jolt. Just holding her at night would never be enough.

He craved her soft hands on him. *What kind of sounds did she make in the throes of passion?* Despite her proper demeanor, Collin sensed she had a wild side to her personality. His sweet Ren wouldn't be proper in bed, if he could get her to relax once they got there.

"Now let me get those eggs, and I'll be out of your way," she commanded the noisy chickens, pulling his thoughts back to the task at hand.

"I dinna think they take orders, sweetheart."

Serenity jumped at the sound of Collin's deep voice. With a hand over her heart, she gasped, "You scared me. For a big man, you move so quietly."

Collin grinned. "You didna hear me, little Ren, because you were too busy bossin' the chickens."

She shrugged. "I suppose you have a better answer."

Collin quirked a brow. "I ran into Alisha on the way here. Didna she show you how?"

Serenity's gaze dropped. "I couldn't..."

Collin took a step toward the door. "I'll get her. She knows better than to be rude."

Serenity placed a hand on his arm. "This is my battle, Mr. MacClarron. Alisha and I need to come to an understanding. She has to learn to accept me."

Collin watched the determination in Serenity's eyes.

"Alisha is still struggling to accept the loss of her mother. My own mother died when I was Cherise's age. I was also raised only by my father. I know what your children are going through. There were times when I wished Father would marry again. Yet, I don't know how I would have dealt with someone trying to take my mother's place."

Guilt washed over Collin. Maybe he expected too much out of his girls. It irked him that Serenity comprehended his daughters' tender feelings when he did not. It was just more proof he wasn't prepared to raise them.

"How do you plan to convince Alisha? By asking the chickens for help?"

She snorted. "No. By making myself worthy."

Her response bothered him, though why, he couldn't say.

"Worthy, how?"

"By showing her I can do the chores she doesn't think I can. By proving I belong." She reached into her apron pocket and pulled out a pencil and journal. "If you show me how, I will take notes."

He wanted to laugh. *Take notes*. Her serious expression told him that she would be offended if he laughed, so he choked back the urge. Then he noticed the bottom of her gown was muddy, along with her shoes.

The lass was trying. All these changes couldn't be easy for her, yet he hadn't heard her complain. He admired that. She also was too stubborn to ask for help.

"Doin' things is the best teacher. Come here and I'll help you. Watch out for sir rooster over there with his red head. He'll peck you."

"Don't they all?" she muttered.

Serenity stared at him uncertainly before putting her journal away. They brushed against each other when Serenity went to reach for an egg. Feeling the soft swell of her breast against his arm brought back vivid memories of the past nights when she'd slept naked in his arms. His body tightened in response.

Her gaze rose to meet his. The flush on Serenity's cheeks told him that she, too, had been thinking of those nights.

Collin put a large hand on her shoulder. He cleared his throat, wondering what to say. He wanted to demand answers from her about as to why she feared making love, but the stricken look on his wife's face told him that none would be forthcoming. Could he be patient? That wasn't a virtue of his. He liked things spelled out. Puzzles bothered him. His wife was definitely the biggest mystery of all.

Why this city-bred lady would give up her soft life in New York to live here with him gnawed at his mind. Her irrational fears on their first night still worried him. What caused her to have such nightmares every night?

Rose's face appeared around the door. "You have company, Collin. The Holts are here."

Collin muttered a Gaelic expletive under his breath. *Damn Joseph for stirring up trouble. He could have at least let Serenity get settled in.*

"Who are the Holts?" Serenity asked. Her gaze traveled from Collin to Rose.

"Katrina's family. You met her father the day you arrived. She has—ahem—had four brothers and a sister who live here, too."

"Oh," Serenity said, paling slightly. "Do you think they all came? I haven't even fixed breakfast."

"Dinna worry," Collin replied gently. "Mrs. Holt wants to see her granddaughters. I doubt they'll eat, but if they do, Inga always brings food."

As they stepped out into the sunlight, Collin could see his girls hugging their grandparents. All except Greta, who came bounding toward Serenity. She flung her pudgy arms up, asking wordlessly for Serenity to hold her.

As he watched them snuggle, a lump formed in Collin's throat. His own daughter went to this stranger instead of him for comfort and reassurance. He had to remind himself how young Greta was when her mother died and he sent her away. It was his own fault the lass didn't know him.

Rose stepped in front of him. "It will take time, laddie, to make this group a family again."

He studied her. Part of him relished the second chance he had been given, while the other half resented her interference. "It occurs to me, Gran, that you have made no arrangements for returning home. Are you planning on

staying, or do you want to take Serenity and my daughters back with you?"

She stiffened at his impertinent tone.

"How can you ask me that?" Her hands flew to her hips.

"They belong here."

Off in the distance, Collin watched his petite wife greeting the big Holt boys and then Anna, who stood several inches above her. Once again his fears for Serenity mounted. How would she survive here? Katrina had been raised in this ruthless environment, and still she died.

Rose touched his arm, as if reading his thoughts. "She'll thrive here. Give the lass time."

"She is a city flower bloomin' in the desert, Gran. I canna help but think she'll wilt. What then? I canna bury another wife. I almost didna survive the last time. I'm thinkin' the lassies should return to New York with you."

Collin walked off up the hill to meet his dead wife's family, with Rose scrambling to keep up. His mind was heavy with questions of what he should do. Maybe he had been given a reprieve these last few nights. He wouldn't have the heart to send his new wife away if there was a chance she was carrying a baby.

Chapter 9

There are so many people, Serenity thought as she watched the Holts pile out of the wagon.

A large, robust woman with a tight brown bun and warm hazel eyes pulled her into a fierce embrace. The woman almost crushed her in her exuberance. Then she backed away, taking Serenity's face in her calloused palms. "Let me look at ya. Joseph told me that my little Collin has finally opened his heart." She patted Serenity's hot cheek. "Pretty as a picture."

Behind them, someone cleared his throat harshly. Serenity turned to face Joseph Holt, who sized her up, while the MacClarron girls looked on. It was then she remembered that Greta was firmly attached to her skirt. She lifted Greta up in her arms. The little girl buried her face in Serenity's shoulder when Mrs. Holt reached for her. Mrs. Holt didn't take offense. Instead, she gave Serenity an understanding smile.

Mr. Holt didn't speak, just offered her a curt nod.

"Don't worry, dear," Mrs. Holt whispered. "We were married almost a year before Mr. Holt decided to speak to me."

"Humph," the older man said.

"Pa, don't be a bear," chided a taller dark-haired girl with a formal smile. "I'm Anna, the girls' aunt. This is my Jimmy," she said, pulling a cute blond boy in front of her. Her eyes held a warning note, and Serenity sensed this woman was none too pleased by her presence.

Anna ruffled Jimmy's hair. "Those are my two unmarried brothers, Ethan and Kyle." Anna pointed at a tall blond and a redheaded boy, who appeared a few years younger than she did.

"Unca Collie," Jimmy chirped, racing across the yard to Collin, who lifted the giggling child up high in air above his head.

"Hi, Collin," Anna said shyly, as he put the boy down and hugged her. "I was surprised when Pa told me you had taken a wife."

Serenity could hear the edge of hurt in Anna's tone.

Collin's response stunned Serenity. He squeezed Anna's shoulder. "Gran brought me the lass. I needed her more than I knew. The lassies deserve a mother."

"I would have..." Anna said without meeting his gaze.

"I know," Collin replied quietly.

Serenity wished she hadn't heard this conversation.

"I'm just glad you brought my girls back," Joseph's gruff voice rumbled. "You're letting them stay, aren't you?"

Collin's gaze met Serenity's.

"I havena made that decision yet, sir."

The older man humphed his disapproval.

Serenity's heart fell. Collin could still send her back to New York. He didn't even know all her secrets. For the last few nights, she had denied him his husband's rights. Her hand went to her woozy stomach. Icy pangs of fear crept up her spine. Even though it was hot, she felt a chill. What would happen to her if Collin decided to send her back now before she was ready? The thought was too frightening to ponder.

* * * *

New York City

Oliver stared at the door that had just been slammed in his face. Even the damn brass gargoyle was laughing at him.

"It is nice to know that you rank down there with me," Myles teased.

Oliver wanted to plant a fist in his nephew's smirking mouth.

He rapped the end of his cane as hard as he could against the door. "Open the bloody door, or I'll break a bloody window and climb in that way."

"Sorry," he muttered to wide-eyed Fiona. He hit the door again.

As he raised his cane for a final blow, the elderly housekeeper ripped open the door. "Really, your grace. This is hardly necessary."

Oliver rolled his eyes. "I'm not a duke. You don't have to call..."

A redheaded maid popped her head around the corner. "I'm glad you finally admitted it. I never thought you were a prince."

Myles laughed under his hand.

Oliver took a deep breath, praying for patience. "Enough! We are straying from the reason for my visit. I want to know exactly why I'm not welcome here." He folded his arms over his chest in an attempt to look imposing. "Well?"

The younger and older women exchanged glances before the older one finally spoke up. "How could you come around

here with your gifts and flowers building up my lady's hopes, then tell your staff not to receive her while you're away?"

Oliver frowned. "That's not true. My staff would never turn..." He glanced at Fiona, who was nodding her head. "I see there was a grave miscommunication somewhere. For that, I humbly apologize."

The older woman deflated somewhat.

"I need to know how to find Mrs. MacClarron and my niece."

A heavy silence hung in the air and, for a long moment, Oliver feared they wouldn't answer him. Finally, the younger woman spoke up. "Miss Springfield went to Dry Gulch, Kansas, with Mrs. MacClarron and the wee lassies. She plans to be governess for them."

So Rose took them back to Collin. His spirits should have been lifted, but a nagging fear kept his happiness at bay. He needed to confront Rose in Kansas, but he worried what he would find there.

* * * *

With a heavy sense of foreboding, Fiona walked up the stone steps to Lord Stratten's townhouse. How would she face his butler, Henry, and housekeeper, Nellie?

Fiona turned, watching Lord Stratten giving instructions to his driver about where to drop off Myles. She wished Myles had stayed behind for moral support.

Before she even got in the entryway, Nellie spotted her. "You have some nerve coming back here. I saw Master Myles handing you out of the carriage like you were some queen."

Don't think he'll be helping you—" Nellie broke off as she saw Lord Stratten looming in the doorway.

He raised a dark brow. "Go on. Don't let me interrupt. You were saying..."

Nellie's face turned beet red. "Oh, my! Dearie me!" She raced out of the room.

With a grimace of pain, Lord Stratten leaned against the hat tree for support. "Where the bloody hell is everyone? This place is quiet as a tomb."

Henry appeared pale as snow when he charged into the foyer. "I didn't know you were back, milord," he sputtered, practically tripping over the suit of armor.

"That is obvious. For some reason, I get the distinct feeling I was not expected to return from this trip."

"We heard rumors, sir, but I did nothing to propel them."

"That seems to be the thrust of the problem, Henry. You did nothing. When my niece and Mrs. McClarron came by, you sent them away."

Henry blanched. "I felt Miss Springfield's being here would further fuel the speculation about your whereabouts. I told that brassy Scotswoman that Miss Serenity should go back to her brother."

Seeing Henry shaking like a leaf was a novel experience for Fiona. This man, who had bullied her all these years, didn't look so fearsome now. He looked like an old man who had made a grave miscalculation. For reasons Fiona couldn't understand, she decided to smooth things over.

"He is telling the truth, Lord Stratten. I heard the whole conversation. He told Mrs. MacClarron to take Serenity to Myles."

"With the rumors going around about attempts being made on your life, sir, I felt it might not be safe for her here."

He studied Henry for a tense moment. "I can see where you could have drawn that conclusion."

"I never thought that, well ... Master Myles wouldn't be able to find Miss Serenity." Henry rang his hands. "Made me wonder if the little miss had reasons of her own for not contacting him. I decided to stay out of it. I knew the child was safe with Mrs. MacClarron."

"You overstepped your authority."

"I know, sir. But it was not my place to interfere in their private squabble."

"I suppose you have a point."

After a long, uncomfortable silence, Lord Stratten looked directly at Fiona. "May I lean on you, Miss Cameron, to get to my study? I feel a bit weak at the moment."

"Certainly." She saw a flicker of anger in Henry's eyes as they lumbered down the dark hallway.

When they reached Oliver's haven, the older man sank down into the huge leather chair. Here he looked perfectly at ease among the piles of papers, stacks of books, vases and broken bits of pottery. Oliver stroked his muttonchops, making Fiona more nervous by the minute.

"What a bloody waste of a morning. I can't believe Rose's staff was so tight-lipped about her whereabouts." He frowned. "The way I see it, we have a big problem. Serenity has

agreed to be a governess for the MacClarron children. Now, knowing my stubborn niece, she will see the task done, unless we give her an out. That is where you come in."

"I dinna understand, sir."

"Shut the door, Fiona."

Fiona closed her eyes as she closed the door. She hoped the added privacy didn't bode ill for her.

"Good. A bit of privacy is what we need for this discussion. No doubt Henry and Nellie are still lurking in the hallway." His voice rose. "It would be a pity to turn them out for being so nosy."

The sound of footsteps trying to tiptoe on the hard wooden floor made Fiona giggle.

Oliver chuckled. "Now, where were we? Ah, yes." He motioned for her to sit in the leather-bound chair in front of his huge desk. "My brain wasn't injured last night."

She felt her face burn, knowing what was coming, but hoping to avoid it. "I'm sorry. I dinna know what you mean."

"I do remember you. You appeared on my doorstep one rainy October morning with no references."

Fiona glanced down at her trembling hands, recalling in vivid detail that morning when the Sandersons had let her go.

Mrs. Sanderson had caught Mr. Sanderson cornering her in the library. She winced, remembering every one of the older woman's hateful words. Their groom had felt sorry for her and had given her Lord Stratten's name. He had said Stratten was an odd sort who was never home, but good to his staff.

"Nellie never let you forget your sudden arrival either, I imagine. The woman thinks everyone is out to steal her husband and her job."

Fiona stifled a gasp of surprise. She didn't know Lord Stratten was aware of her situation. "Miss Nellie doesn't like me. That's the truth."

"So I can assume it took no large infraction for her to turn you away the other day."

"'Tis true. I was a wee bit late for lunch." She conveniently left out that she had been meeting Myles.

"Yes, well ... the way I see it, staying on here is a mistake. The minute I'm gone Henry and Nellie will find some reason to send you away again."

Well, that was that. He would let her go now, too. "I'm afraid you're right." She tried to keep her voice from trembling.

"Then maybe we can help each other. Mrs. McClarron took my niece out to be a governess for her great-granddaughters. Why? I still have not figured it out. If I'm going to convince Serenity to come home, I need to replace her in that position."

Fiona's eyes widened at the prospect. "You want me to be a governess for the wee lassies. But ... but I'm not suitable."

"Why the bloody hell not? You've more than proven you can handle any crisis."

"But I'm a..."

He cut her off with a wave of his hand. "Don't say that word. Some of the bloody kings of England were bastards, too. So you're in good company."

She squeezed her hands tight.

"You're a fine, upstanding lady. You have a penchant for mischief, but so do the MacClarron girls. I'll pay for your trip and offer you return fare in case it doesn't work out. We'll say you're a distant cousin or some such story."

She swallowed hard. "How can I turn down such a handsome offer?"

Oliver paused for a moment, lighting his pipe. The fragrant smoke encircled his head. "One more thing, Miss Cameron, before you make a final decision. You should know I plan on dragging Myles along with us. That boy needs to learn to live up to his mistakes. Apologizing to his sister is a good start." He blew another smoke ring. "Myles is a dashing rogue..."

She raised her hand. "I understand. I'm not worthy of him."

"On the contrary, my dear. At this point, I doubt the lad is worthy of you."

Oliver rose and, crossing the room, he opened the door to find Henry waiting with a tray of tea. Henry followed him in, sat the tray on the only clean spot on the table, and began filling the teacups.

"I'm taking a trip," Lord Stratten said. "Roland is recovering from his injuries at Myles's house. When he feels better, see that he returns here. No duties, until Dr. Holmes thinks it's wise."

"But, sir, do you think you're up to this adventure?"

"No choice ... this situation with Serenity demands my immediate attention. If it had been handled properly in the first place, this trip would not be necessary."

The softly spoken rebuke rang out loud and clear. Henry paled.

Fiona nervously accepted the tea, hoping she didn't make any etiquette blunders. Taking a sip, she wondered if it were possible to make a new start in Kansas where no one knew her. Her gaze traveled to Lord Stratten, who was shuffling through the papers on his desk. She would make him proud. Her behavior would be beyond reproach. Now she had to stay away from Myles Springfield. The man could tempt the resolve of a saint.

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

Serenity leaned on the doorjamb just inside their bedroom closet. She had thought the Holts would never leave. Oh, how could she have let Mrs. MacClarron talk her into coming here? With an exasperated sigh, she hurled another one of Katrina's petticoats at the growing pile on the bed. Hands on hips, she stared at the partially empty closet. A sense of remorse for her rash actions swept over her.

She wondered why it bothered her so much to have Katrina's dresses still hanging beside Collin's shirts. Maybe it was because they were a constant reminder of the things Katrina was that she could never be. The other woman held a place in Collin's heart she could never hope to gain. That knowledge hurt. In frustration, she pulled down another dress, tossing it over her shoulder.

She couldn't blame Mr. Holt for mistrusting her. After all, she was taking on an important role in his granddaughters'

lives. Serenity knew Mrs. Holt had meant well when she grilled her about her experience with children and past life. But that didn't make it sting any less.

It was one more painful reminder she would never belong here. Never before had she felt so all alone and lost. She wished for the familiar comfort of her old brick house, where she had her own quiet spot to read. She missed playing the piano every night. She wanted to be in her father's study where she escaped to work. She needed the satisfaction of doing a job at which she excelled. Not belonging anywhere was eating her up inside.

Glancing down at the dress in her hands, she realized that putting her belongings in the closet represented staking a claim here. With all her misgivings about this marriage, did she really have a right to do that? If she overturned her father's will, then she would have to return to New York and run Springfield Textile Mills. She might be able to train Myles, but that could take months or even years. Collin deserved a full-time wife.

How could she leave when the girls needed her? Yet, how could she stay and let Myles ruin everything she had worked so hard to keep together? Didn't she owe it to her father's workers to make sure Myles didn't gamble away their livelihood? Was insinuating herself in the MacClarrons' lives setting the girls up for an even greater hurt when she left? Now, looking at Katrina's clothes and personal belongings all laid out across the floral bedspread, Serenity realized she might have made a grave error in judgment.

Heavy, measured footsteps made her freeze with one of Katrina's dresses ready to fly from her hands. She looked up to see Collin standing rock still in the doorway. Serenity knew she had overstepped her bounds at that moment. Collin silently entered the room. Even without words, Serenity could feel his anger radiating toward her. He just stood there, staring at his dead wife's things. She wished he would shout or something. The cold silence was ten times worse than a tongue-lashing.

Serenity's throat tightened as she saw tears glisten in his eyes. She wanted to go to him and offer comfort, but the tense set of his shoulders told her that he would shun any attempts at sympathy.

"I needed the closet space ... so I began packing up Katrina's ... your ... ahem..."

"Dinna!" he snapped, picking up a flowered print dress and carefully hanging it back in the closet.

Serenity turned at the sound of footsteps to see a wide-eyed Cherise standing at the foot of the bed.

"What are Mama's dresses doing out here? I thought you wanted to let us help." Her tone quivered as she picked up a pansy scarf, letting it drift through her fingers.

"Nothing," Collin said, taking the scarf from her and folding it. He gently placed it on a shelf.

"But ... Papa," Cherise protested, "I want—"

The closet door slammed with a resounding crash.

"We arena discussing this, Cherry. This closet will remain closed."

Choking back a sob, Cherise fled before Serenity could catch her. Collin leaned against the door. His powerful body sagged. He ran a trembling hand through his thick, dark hair. Serenity wondered if Rose had been wrong about him. That maybe he wasn't really ready for a new wife because he had not properly laid to rest his first one.

Serenity took a calming breath. If they were even going to attempt living together, she had to make him understand her need for a sense of place. If her things didn't belong here, then neither did she.

"I regret invading your privacy, but I'm not sorry about making room for myself." She pressed her hands together in a vain attempt to stop the flow of bitter words. "I've lived my entire life struggling to please someone who was never satisfied. I spent every waking hour trying to outguess my father. To always be a step ahead of his endless demands. In the end, I almost hated him."

Collin didn't respond, just stared.

"It wasn't until I discovered making dolls that I found peace. It sounds silly, I know, but I'm very good at it. It was something no one criticized me over. I had freedom..." Her voice choked off as she struggled to force back a sob.

"Serenity."

Clearing her throat, she held up a hand. "Wait ... let me finish. It is hard to put the past behind you. Even from beyond the grave my father controls my life." *More than you know.* "I still keep his morning routine. Sometimes I wake with this sense of uselessness. I wished him out of my life and, now he is gone, I miss him terribly."

Pulling her close, Collin released a harsh breath. He held her loosely with her head snuggled against his soft cotton work shirt. The buttons pressed into her wet, flushed cheeks as his steady heart beat soothingly under her ear.

"Letting go is hard," she murmured. "I know—I haven't yet. But one thing I'm learning is that life is for the living. The dead are at peace. It's you and I who are not."

Collin cleared his throat. "I thought I was ready for this"—he motioned toward the bed—"until I saw her ... things ... discarded."

Serenity stepped back, placing her hands on his beard-roughed cheeks. "I wasn't going to throw them away. Honest. I thought I'd redo the dresses for your girls. Give them each a piece of their mother."

His large hands encircled her wrists, pulling hers away.

"I canna deal with this now, Ren. Not yet. I need time. Bringing you here was a mistake. I'm not ready for a new wife. I just dinna know how to undo the damage."

* * * *

Collin bumped into Rose as she tried to flee before anyone realized she had overheard. How she wished she hadn't been privy to that particular conversation.

"Do not say anything," Collin growled.

Rose turned, hands flying to her hips. It was better to stay and fight than to retreat now that she had been caught.

"Collin MacClarron, you are the most stubborn man alive. Once you decide somethin', it's etched in stone."

Collin frowned. "Your point?"

"You keep pushing Serenity away and one day she'll leave. Then you'll realize what a mistake you've made."

He folded his arms across his chest. "The only mistake I made..." He sighed, flexing his fingers. "Did it ever occur to you that I dinna deserve a new wife. I couldna take care of Katrina properly."

Rose reached for his arm, but he shrugged her off.

"I canna talk about his right now." He raised his hands. "I have chores waitin'."

Rose leaned back against the wall. Had she really misjudged Collin's needs? He was lonely. She sensed his pain each Christmas when he could hardly leave the girls. They deserved to be a family again, even if Collin was too stubborn to admit it.

Had she been wrong to include Serenity in those plans? The lass needed a family and Collin needed a wife. The situation hadn't allowed for a lengthy courtship. Or had she convinced herself of that to lighten her own guilt over making the girls return to their father? She would miss her precious darlings. Was she doing the right thing? What business did she have at her age marrying Oliver Springfield and going off to England? Maybe her doubts were an omen. She hoped not, because, saints preserve her, she loved her eccentric Englishman.

Chapter 10

The early afternoon sun beat down on Collin as he paused in the middle of the half-plowed field to wipe the sweat from his brow. Before Serenity had come into his life, being out in the field all day long hadn't bothered him. It beat facing his empty house. But today was different. The hours out here seemed endless. He kept replaying the scene in their bedroom over and over again in his head.

How could he have denied his wife something as basic as use of the closet? He cursed, kicking a dirt clod. Did Serenity understand his dilemma? He doubted it. She didn't know what it had cost him to take Katrina's and Felicity's clothes and hide them away after their funerals. It was like pretending they had never existed.

A giggle and the sound of feminine laughter caused him to look up. Much to his surprise, he saw Serenity at the top of the ridge, pulling Emily in the wagon he had made for the girls their last Christmas together on the farm. After that, he had traveled to Gran's for the holidays. Those memories weren't nearly as painful as seeing Emily with a heavy lunch basket on her lap. Guilt surged through him. After the way he behaved, Serenity had brought him food. He didn't deserve this simple act of kindness.

A lump formed in Collin's throat when Serenity took the basket as Emily slowly climbed out of the wagon. She limped toward him with amazing agility, considering the unevenness of the ground. His gaze met Serenity's cautious one as she

made her way to him. He wished for some eloquent words to soothe her fears.

She had on a sunbonnet that he recognized as Katrina's. Instead of the anger he expected to feel, he had a sense of regret. He had brought his new wife out to the prairie without even considering that she might need to buy different clothes.

Her gray dress was too heavy and not a cut designed for the work she would do now. With a jolt, he realized Katrina had dresses that would almost fit Serenity. They would have to be altered a little because Katrina had been a larger woman. What was he thinking to keep those things all locked up?

"I-I fixed you lunch," Serenity stammered, eyeing him warily.

Rose's words haunted him.

"You didn't have to do that, but I appreciate it." He couldn't remember ever feeling this nervous around a woman.

"And we brought feed bags for Stormy and Windy and a jug of cold water," Emily interjected.

"I sure am hungry, but I'll wager not as much as you two. Bet you worked up quite an appetite traveling all the way out here."

"Boy, did we ever." Emily nodded. "I think Serenity was beginning to believe I was leading her in the wrong direction. Didn't you?"

"Well, I had my moments." Serenity grinned sheepishly.

Collin led them to a shady spot under an oak tree. He watched her as she spread the blanket with graceful, fluid

movements. He and Emily laid out cold meat and bread, along with hard-boiled eggs.

Serenity flushed as she untied the strings of her bonnet. "I hope you don't mind that I borrowed this from Katrina's closet. Mine are more decorative than practical."

He shook his head. "No, I'm the one who ought to be apologizing. I should have known there would be things you needed." *Take the clothes*, his mind screamed, but somehow his mouth wouldn't form the words.

Her eyes widened in surprise at his comments, making him feel even more like a heel.

Collin cleared his throat. "I was wrong about the closet. I overreacted. As long as I don't have to see..." He paused, taking a slow breath. "Maybe you can make over some of them to fit you. If you don't want to, I'll understand."

"Thank you," she said quietly, covering his hand with hers.

A tingle of awareness rippled through Collin. He was sorry when she pulled her hand away.

"I appreciate the gesture. I know how hard it must have been for you to offer. I'll think about it."

They lapsed into silence as each began to eat.

"What is everyone else doin', Em?" Collin asked before he stuffed a piece of bread in his mouth.

"Greta is taking a nap. Cherise and Alisha are helping Grandma Rose make cookies."

"Cookies?" Collin felt like a small boy. It had been ages since anyone had made him cookies. "What kind?"

Emily's eyes danced. "Molasses. We packed you some of the first ones out of the oven."

Collin reached into the hamper and retrieved the warm cookies along with a piece of crumpled paper. Serenity's face flushed as he scanned the note, before folding it up. It was Serenity's list of jobs to be completed. The contents shocked him.

Serenity had even listed ways to be a better wife. The words "wifely duty" leapt off the page at him. Was he such an ogre that she felt compelled to please him for fear of reprisal? Did she really think he would turn her away? Right or wrong, she was under his care now. That wasn't something he took lightly.

He ate a bite of a warm, sugary cookie, savoring its rich flavor. How he missed these simple pleasures.

Emily stood, brushing the crumbs off her skirt. "Can I pet Stormy?"

Collin nodded. "Be careful."

As Serenity started to rise, he grabbed her slender wrist, pulling her back down. He held up the crumpled paper and gave her a questioning look.

"I see you found my list," she said softly, reaching for it. "I was looking for that everywhere. You hold my life in your hands because I'm lost without it."

He held the paper just out of her grasp. "Serenity, you dinna have to do everything today."

"I know."

"Then why did you make this list?"

"I always make them. My father had strokes, you see, and was very forgetful. In order to show him what I had accomplished, I made lists and marked them off. It saved us

from many an argument. Although, towards the end, it didn't make any difference."

She turned away from Collin, but not before he saw the sheen of tears in her eyes. He'd had a belly full of pity after Katrina died and wouldn't inflict that on her.

"How old were you when you began helping your father?"

"Fifteen—well, actually thirteen the first time."

"Th-thirteen," Collin sputtered. A dawn of understanding came with her statement. "That is only a year older than Alisha. How much did you do?" This was no pampered princess.

"Everything—I tabulated the books, wrote out letters and kept track of the household accounts." She shrugged.

"That must have been hard." This delicate city flower wasn't really as delicate as he had at first thought. She had a certain quiet strength he was beginning to admire.

"Not really. I like numbers. The worst part was watching Father struggle to relearn simple tasks like walking and talking. It was dreadful. He hated the nurses I hired."

Collin put a hand on her shoulder. "How did you cope?"

"One day at a time. Dr. Holmes helped me set up a routine for him. Then I found a young apprentice of Dr. Holmes named Kenneth, who took care of Father. Together we kept the world from knowing how bad off he was."

"Didna his business partners question his abilities?"

Serenity bit her lip, shaking her head. "He had a reputation for being eccentric. Kenneth took credit for most of his business dealings."

"What happened to Kenneth?"

Serenity smiled. "He went on to become a doctor. He works with other brain-injured patients and their families. I miss him. We got to be good friends. Last year, he married this sweet girl named Lydia."

"Then you were left to handle things by yourself?"

"Not entirely. Kenneth still came by once a day. Our housekeeper, Clara, and butler, Charles, gave me quite a bit of support. Father got worse the last year and became completely bedridden. Once that happened, I totally ran things until he died four months ago."

"What changed after your father's death?" His eyes searched hers as many questions still plagued him. Had creditors chased her out of her house? Was that why she fled with only the clothes on her back? "Were you left in debt?"

Serenity frowned. "You mustn't think I'm a very good business manager if you can ask me that. No, he left the textile mills and all his holdings to another relative."

"Why?" he asked hesitantly. He wished she would open up more, but he knew this had to be a sore subject for her.

"I've asked myself that same question countless times since his death. I don't know. Maybe he didn't trust me to run it all alone."

"Or maybe he didna want to burden you. As a father of daughters, I can honestly say I wouldna leave the responsibility of the farm to them. Not that they couldna handle it, but I couldna go to my eternal rest worryin' about them having the burden."

"I never thought of that. Thank you."

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

After a tense silence, Serenity began packing up the leftover food. Collin collected the plates. Then she stood, folding the blanket. Collin's fingers brushed hers as he attempted to help. He jumped as though burnt by the contact. How could such a simple touch excite his senses? He longed for the chance to hold her slender body close to his. To see her unbound hair spread out across his pillow, or better yet, brushing over his bare chest.

Her wary eyes brought him back to reality. How could he make her his wife when he couldn't protect her from whatever she feared? "Serenity?"

"Yes."

"You dinna have to impress me."

He cupped her cheek in his palm, savoring her soft skin. She closed her eyes and shivered slightly. That spontaneous reaction sent a wave of desire coursing through him. How could he resist taking her?

"My comments about sending you away had nothing to do with your worthiness to be here. I just want what is best for my lassies and you. Life in the West is hard. There are more comforts in New York. More chances for my lassies to make good matches when the time comes."

He wanted to kiss her pouty lips and taste their sweetness again. Instead, he only allowed himself a quick brush of his lips across hers before stepping back. Sweet Saint Margaret, he wanted more—so much more. Her eyes mirrored his own confusion.

"I understand what you're saying, but desire can't dictate what is in the heart. This place is in your daughters' blood."

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

Taking them away from it wouldn't change that. You'll just end up hurting them. Don't make the same mistake my father did."

With a heavy heart, Collin watched her walk away. He understood the conflicting emotions Mr. Springfield must have felt when he made out his will. Putting someone else's best interest first is never easy. No matter how much he desired Serenity, he had to keep those emotions in check. Before the summer ended, he had a difficult choice to make. He wondered if Serenity was right—if his lassies would forgive him if he sent them back to live with Rose. Could he bear being alone again?

* * * *

New York City

The bell chimed in Sabrina's dress shop as Myles stepped through the door. A clinging scent of various perfumes lingered in the air. He had only been here once before, with his sister, for a fitting years ago. It hadn't changed.

A tall, buxom, brown-haired lady in an elaborate green gown met him as he looked at a few dresses on display.

"May I help you, sir?" she asked in soft southern drawl.

"I'm looking for Miss Sabrina," Myles said, trying to determine if he knew this lady.

"You've found her. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Myles Springfield. I understand you are acquainted with my sister Serenity."

Her face registered concern. "I haven't seen Miss Springfield for several weeks now. She has only been in once

since her father's funeral. Usually she comes by every Monday to collect orders and bring me new dolls and dresses, but the last few times Estelle Taylor has come. Something isn't wrong, I hope. Estelle is the most tight-lipped lady I know."

His sister made dolls? The idea surprised him. Myles didn't even know she sewed. "I didn't realize my sister had a business arrangement with you."

"Oh, yes. Her special rag dolls are quite popular. Why, at Christmas, I can hardly keep them in stock. Is she quitting? I hope not."

Myles wasn't sure how much to tell this lady. If he brought Serenity back home, he didn't want her reputation smeared. The fewer people who knew about Serenity's troubles, the better. That way, when she returned, she could resume her normal life with as little gossip as possible.

"My sister has gone on a trip with a friend. She didn't tell you?"

"No." Sabrina paused, tapping her fingers on her mouth. "That isn't like her. Miss Springfield is one of the most organized people I know. Her date book is impeccable. She writes down everything and double checks it." She worried her lower lip. "You say you're her brother?"

Myles nodded. "Twin brother."

Miss Sabrina took his chin in her long fingers and checked out his profile. "I see the resemblance now. The blond, curly hair and deep blue eyes. The same button nose, but your features are more masculine. Now I remember..." She narrowed her gaze. "Miss Serenity brought you in with her to

pick out her debut dress. That awful chaperone of hers had chosen one in the wrong color. You let her get the one she wanted. It made her look like a princess."

"You do remember." Myles smiled at the memory of his sister in the soft pink dress. She'd looked like an angel.

"I don't forget much." Miss Sabrina sighed. "I wish I could forget this. The last time I saw Miss Springfield was about three months ago. She came in for a high collar mourning dress. She had these awful bruises around her neck. When I helped her disrobe, I noticed that her ribcage was black and blue, too. She could hardly wear her corset. In fact, I offered her a heavy chemise if she wanted to leave it off, but she refused to even consider it."

Fury coursed through Myles. How could he have missed that Serenity had been injured? Had he been so caught up in his own problems he had ignored his sister completely? Miss Sabrina's story did match with Clara's and Charles's accounts. Rudgewick had much to answer for. If the man had been there, Myles would have shaken the truth out of him.

"Thank you for telling me." Embarrassment clogged his throat, making his voice hoarse. How could everyone know these things but him?

She touched his arm. "I like your sister. She had a hard time of it, with your father sick and all. I don't know how she managed, being a young woman paying the bills, running the business and caring for him. I hated to give her more to do, but she loved creating dolls. Said they brought smiles in world of frowns."

Myles listened to the woman drone on, realizing he didn't know his sister at all. She had struggled through hardships he had known nothing about. Why didn't she mention any of this in her numerous letters? No inkling had been given that their father was gravely ill. *Bloody hell, did she think he wouldn't care?* That he would leave her to handle the situation all alone? Her opinion of him must have been very low indeed, but not any lower than his of himself. Good God, how could he ever convince her of his desire to help? Would she reject him once he found her?

"I was wondering if you have any dresses in my sister's size. Day dresses. I want to surprise her."

"A mourning dress?"

"Ahem ... no," Myles fumbled. His face burned. It was not appropriate for him to buy Fiona clothes, but he felt he owed her something for all the trouble he had caused.

"I see," she said, with a knowing glint in her eyes. "What color?"

"Something bright."

"I have just the thing." She showed him a deep green print dress with small blue flowers on it. "I have a matching bonnet, too."

"I'll take both of them," Myles said, imagining its satiny texture over Fiona's soft curves.

Myles tapped his fingers on the counter while he waited for Sabrina to wrap the dress. He could picture Fiona wearing it. He had never felt the desire to spoil a woman until now. Something about the lass brought out this possessive need in him to pamper her. Maybe it was guilt for not taking better

care of Rennie. Maybe it was in exchange for someone else watching out for Serenity.

Something caught his eye on the top shelf. A dark-haired rag doll smiled down at him. She looked like a storybook princess. He instinctively knew Rennie had made it. She loved fairy tales.

Standing on tiptoes, he took the doll down.

"Wrap her up, too," Myles said. Maybe this part of his sister was what he needed to remind her and himself of happier times. He would get her back.

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

The next morning, as Serenity stood on a chair hanging the freshly-washed curtains, she saw two buggies pull up. This was all she needed with the house still in chaos. *A very fine how-do-you-do.*

"Anna didna waste any time spreading the word," Rose muttered, handing Serenity a lacy curtain. "Dinna look so glum, child. 'Twas bound to happen. People love a good story. Gossip out here spreads faster than fire in a dry forest. Seems the women of Dry Gulch want to welcome you to their town."

"Get a peek at Collin's new wife, you mean." Serenity laughed mirthlessly.

"That, too," Rose replied, patting her shoulder. "I'm taking the lassies outside to hang wash. That way you can visit without distractions."

"I don't know, but maybe a distraction might be a good thing, considering how nervous I am."

"You'll be fine, lass. Remember, Collin has known Anna for many years. If he'd wanted to marry her, he could have done so, but he married you."

Serenity wasn't at all that convinced Collin had exactly chosen her. Nonetheless, for his sake, she had to at least try to fit in here. With that thought, she untied her dusty apron and headed for the front door. Taking a deep, calming breath, she opened it.

Climbing out of one of the buggies was a large lady with an enormous flowered hat. She recalled this lady being unfriendly to her at Hannah's store. From the look on her face, Serenity could tell the woman had already made up her mind about her.

Mrs. Big Hat was followed by a petite, dark-haired woman and a bubbly lady Serenity recognized as the widow who had waved at Wallis to help her at the train station. Hannah climbed out of the second carriage by herself. *One ray of sunshine in this bleak morning*, Serenity thought. That meant she had at least one friend in the crowd.

Anna stepped forward, holding out a pie. "I hope you don't mind, but some of the Ladies Quilting Society wanted to meet you, so I thought there was no time like the present.

"This is Bertha Richards." Anna pointed toward the lady with the large hat. "Her husband owns the saw mill."

Serenity nodded. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Richards."

"Yes," the older woman replied, looking down her nose at Serenity.

"Miss Minnie runs the boarding house." Anna smiled at the petite companion of Bertha Richards.

The short lady smiled brightly.

"I'm Darcy," interjected the bubbly redhead. "My farm borders a corner of yours. Your husband and Ethan Holt graze cattle on the back part of my land. They help me with repairs. My children and I never would have made it after Seth died if they had not helped me. I'm forever in their debt."

"We all know what a big heart Collin MacClarron has." Anna spoke up before Serenity could reply.

The smile Anna gave her was less than sincere, and Serenity couldn't help but wonder what her true motives were for bringing the other women to visit. She glanced around at the half-finished parlor. One of the curtains was still draped over a chair. Anna's smug expression told her that she noticed, too. Serenity flushed with embarrassment.

"I guess we came at a bad time," Anna said with raised chestnut brow.

"Don't be silly." Serenity took the apple pie. Its cinnamon scent reminded her of how long it had been since breakfast. Her knees felt weak from nerves and hunger. "I wasn't expecting company, so you'll have to step over the mess." She tried to keep her voice from shaking.

Mrs. Richards and Miss Minnie exchanged knowing glances.

"I can't believe all the changes you've made," Darcy said, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Ah, thank you. I'm still working on it."

"It must be hard," Anna said, "to be an intruder ... I mean a stranger in a new town."

"I was so surprised to hear that Mr. MacClarron married a lady from the big city," Mrs. Richards said. "I guess we all assumed he'd marry our Anna." She patted Anna's shoulder affectionately.

All heads turned toward a blushing Anna. "Everyone knows I haven't gotten over my Jamie. Why just the thought of remarrying is out of the question right now," Anna said.

Serenity felt a stab of empathy, thinking of Anna being a widow at such a young age, but those feelings fled when her gaze met Anna's cold one. It left Serenity with an awkward unease. This woman had no intention of being her friend.

"Oh, of course, Mrs. MacClarron had to make changes." Hannah slid an arm around Serenity's shoulder. All the women were watching her closely.

"Why, poor Mr. MacClarron was just wastin' away out here. This place just begs for a female touch."

Anna's jaw tightened at Hannah's remarks. Hatred flashed in her eyes before she quickly composed herself. "My parents want to have our customary wedding dance we have for all newlyweds for you and Collin on Saturday night at our house. Please say you'll come."

"Afternoon, ladies. Is that Miss Minnie's famous apple pie I smell? Brought me all the way up from the barn." Collin's deep voice rumbled as he passed through the parlor.

Minnie preened under his praise.

Serenity jumped when he put a possessive arm around her. She wondered what they thought of his supportive gesture.

"We'll be at the weddin' dance with bells on." He winked at Anna. "I'll even bring my fiddle."

Serenity wanted to protest, but knew it was unavoidable. Just the thought of that crowd of strangers made her knees weak. Thank heavens for Collin's strong arm around her. She could only hope he wouldn't regret his decision to stand behind her. The thought of embarrassing him in front of his friends gnawed at her conscience.

* * * *

Rose came around the corner of the house with a basket of clean clothes. She paused at the sound of Bertha Richards's voice.

"Well," Mrs. Richards drawled as soon as they were out of earshot of the door, "I'd say the rumors were true. Did you see the way Mr. MacClarron put his arm around his new bride?"

"Must be love," Minnie Jenkins agreed. "Wonder how they met?"

"Old Mrs. MacClarron just dumped—" Anna started before Hannah elbowed and Darcy glared her into silence.

Rose flinched at Anna's comment. If this is the way people saw Collin's marriage, she had underestimated the town's reaction. Anna Ralston was a complication she had not counted on. She could only hope Serenity was strong enough to battle Anna Ralston and whoever else wanted to sabotage her marriage.

* * * *

Rudgewick sat at a small, clean table in the empty hotel restaurant, drinking his coffee and eating a cinnamon roll. What he wouldn't give for a good cup of English breakfast tea.

He glanced up from buttering his roll to see the sheriff standing over him, trying to look intimidating.

"Do you want something?" Rudgewick asked. He had no intention of losing his composure in front of this crude man.

"I was wonderin' if you arrived in Dry Gulch alone. Seems to me that I remember seein' you with another man."

Rudgewick slowly stirred his coffee, tapping the spoon when he was done and setting it on the saucer. The sheriff could bloody well wait on him. He would not be rushed into answering.

"You're right, Sheriff. I always travel with my valet, Simon Layne. My man seems to have found a second home at your saloon. In fact, he spent the last couple of days there."

The sheriff pulled out a chair and lowered his large frame onto it. "No, he didn't. At this moment, your man is at the undertaker's parlor. It appears someone crushed his windpipe. You have any idea who might want to do that?"

Rudgewick let his mouth drop open, feigning shock.

"Simon is dead, and you're only telling me now? Bloody hell!"

"I'm sorry, but I had to round up some escaped prisoners."

Relief rushed over Rudgewick, but he fought to hide it. Now his trail would be cold. "Inform the undertaker to send the bill to me. Layne deserves a proper burial." He cleared his throat, pretending to grieve. "I haven't the foggiest idea who would want to hurt him."

Sheriff Wallis's brows furrowed. He ran a slow hand over his beard, while studying Rudgewick. "So you're saying that Simon, as far as you know it, spent last evening gambling?"

Rudgewick shrugged. "Everyone is entitled to some time off."

"Uh-huh."

The sheriff's disbelieving gaze bore into him. Relief rushed through him when Bridget ran up. Yet, something about the way the girl looked at him unsettled him. It was almost as if ... no, she couldn't know what impulsive thing he did the other night.

"Sorry to bother you, Sheriff, but Mama wants you to know there are a couple of girls from Lilly's Lovenest out in the street wrestling and carrying on. They are pulling each other's hair over a cowboy who is just egging them on."

Wallis rolled his eyes as he stood. "We'll discuss this later, Tarrington."

Like bloody hell we will. Being suspected of murdering Simon was a new wrinkle in his well-laid-out plan. It didn't change anything, though. Just moved up the timetable. He would have to find a way to gain Serenity's cooperation sooner.

He had been pondering that anyway, ever since he had gotten the wire from his younger brother about their father's failing health. There was no way in hell he was going to let the old man die without making Norcliff reinstate him in his will. If anyone was going to be the next Earl of Norcliff, it would bloody well be him.

He sipped on his coffee. By now, Myles should be mourning the death of Oliver Springfield. Being his uncle's heir, Myles would soon be off in England handling Lord Stratten's affairs. Once he was married to Serenity, he would convince Myles to let him run Springfield Textile Mills. He could earn back the money he owed and then some. He would show his father just how successful he could be.

Once they returned to England and his normal life, he would leave Serenity at his country estate. Unless, of course, she still amused him. Rudgewick chuckled to himself, taking another drink.

He reached into his pocket to check the time. Where the bloody hell was his watch? *Simon would have ...* He ruthlessly cut off those thoughts. Damn, that watch was all he left of his father. He would tear the room apart looking for it. The watch was a connection with the past and a reminder of his bright future. He wouldn't be swayed from his goals.

All he had to do was get Serenity to divorce MacClarron or make her a widow. One way or another, the chit was his.

A portly, balding, elderly gentleman with grey muttonchops and round spectacles lumbered his way. What the hell did he want?

"Sir." The man extended a hand. "I'm George Brown. I heard from Bridget that you are with the railroad."

Rudgewick smiled to himself. That lie he'd invented after overhearing some gossip about Dry Gulch losing its position as train stop was working well. It was definitely the leverage he needed to gain access to this community.

"Yes, I'm Lord Rudgewick Tarrington," he said smoothly.

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

"Saturday night we are having a reception for one of the pillars of our community, Collin MacClarron." Brown winked. "Now that MacClarron has brought home a wife, we hope to coax him into running for mayor."

Rudgewick's spirits lifted. *What a perfect situation.* "I would be honored to attend."

George Brown grinned. "I'll pick you up around seven."

Rudgewick smiled. "Sounds wonderful. Thank you for inviting me." His mind whirled with all the possibilities Saturday night offered.

Chapter 11

Serenity shielded her eyes from the bright afternoon sunlight as she walked outside in search of Collin. She stopped in the middle of the yard, wondering where he might be working. The view of endless rolling hills gave her a sense of calmness. A warm, gentle breeze tickled her nose and ruffled her skirt.

It would be wonderful to actually belong here, she thought with a pang of remorse. She could get used to all this open space.

As she neared the barn, Serenity froze at the sound of Collin's burr and Wallis's drawl coming from inside it.

"You sure you don't want the sheriff job back, MacClarron?"

"Aye. A man with a family has no business riskin' his life on a daily basis. My lassies have already lost one parent. I willna give them a chance to lose another."

Should she interrupt them to tell Collin to pour out the heated water so they could get ready for Holts' party tonight? As she reached out to open the door, Wallis's next comment made her pause.

"I'm sorry to hear that, MacClarron. After the couple of days I've had, I'd gladly give the job back. I had to shoot those two bank robbers. Damn fools thought they could hide out the in the hills and take shots at me. I had to defend myself..."

"You did all you could," Collin replied softly. "Killin' a man is never easy, but sometimes you got no choice. It pricks my

conscience, too. That's why I had to get out. I knew I couldn't come home to Katrina with blood on my hands."

Wallis was silent for long moment. "Collin, I have a puzzling murder that would be your specialty to solve."

"Murder?"

When Collin's voice piqued with interest, Serenity prayed he wouldn't take Wallis up on his offer. She couldn't bear the thought of Collin getting hurt.

"Who was killed?"

"A gambler named Simon Layne. He traveled with a snotty English gent, Rudgewick Tarrington. In fact, I found a gold pocket watch with the initials W.R.T. Interesting, huh?"

Serenity's hand flew to her throat as she choked back a scream. *Merciful heaven, Rudgewick was still in town.* He had shown her that very watch during the early days of their doomed courtship. It was special to Rudgewick because it had belonged to his father. All her muscles tensed. *Why hadn't he left?* Behind her closed eyes, she could see the vision of their last disastrous encounter. She could still feel his hard fingers closing about her throat, cutting off the air. *Rudgewick could kill.* She knew that with absolute certainty. He had come close to doing just that the night she turned down his marriage proposal.

Her spine stiffened at the thought of just how far Lord Tarrington would go to achieve an objective. He had taken her innocence on one occasion without remorse. If she had not stopped him, he would have forced her again a few months later. *Why couldn't Myles see what kind of monster Rudgewick was?*

Rudgewick's cruel remarks in the Billings' music room thundered through her memory.

"Maybe you need another display of how good we are together," Rudgewick taunted, backing her against the dark paneled wall, his brutal hands shaking her to punctuate each word.

She was pressed between his unyielding body and the wall with no avenue of escape as he continued tormenting her.

"No one else will have you. You're ruined. You're lucky I will lower myself to marry you after I've sampled your wares. Don't worry, love, you'll get better with practice."

Her heart raced. She had to break free.

The rest of the encounter was a blur. Somehow, the heavy candlestick holder had appeared in her hand. She had swung it at him with all her might, leaving a bloody gash on his face.

Shocked at what she had done, she'd fled with his profane words still echoing in her ears. Serenity deplored violence, but had vowed after the first time in Maxwells' garden to never let Rudgewick hurt her again. She had been such a fool to let him lead her off to see a painting in Billings' music room. Being alone with the cad had been a mistake. One, Serenity feared, she would continue to pay for ... for the rest of her life.

Getting out of the Billings' house without attracting attention had been no simple feat. She didn't even have a chance to relish this small victory when she'd found herself face-to-face with Simon. He had chased her through the back streets of New York, taunting her with the severe consequences of her actions.

She relived those terrifying moments often in her nightmares. Only sheer luck had sent Rose's carriage around the corner and her into its path that night. Rose's quick thinking driver had stopped just in time to save her from being run down. Serenity could still see Simon's hate-filled gaze as he'd stalked off into the darkness. Her body trembled. *Merciful heaven, now Simon was dead.*

"Do you suspect the Englishman?" Collin's baritone voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Yes, but I can't prove it," Wallis replied. "According to the hotel staff, Tarrington was in his room all night. I think Hannah's daughter Bridget knows something she is not telling. This morning she acted frightened of the man."

Silence hung in the air.

"Bridget has been slipping out to meet Desiree. I've followed her for the last few weeks. They meet at the livery. Bridget has been teaching Desiree how to read. I don't want to get her in trouble for doing a good deed, so I just follow her at a safe distance and make sure she gets home. A couple of nights ago, she ran home like her tail was on fire. You should've seen the look on her face when she saw Tarrington this morning. I'll have to keep my eye on her. Might have to pay a visit to Miss Desiree."

"What a tough job." Collin chuckled. "Seeing how you avoid Lilly's."

"Okay, I'll admit, I spend my share of time there. But it's not what you think. Sometimes a man needs a little female companionship. It's not Desiree I'm worried about. I can

protect her. Bridget is another matter. That slippery snake could get to her real easy."

Serenity shivered. *Bridget has every reason to fear Rudgewick*, she thought. The sweet little girl had no idea what a man like Rudgewick Tarrington was capable of doing. She was no match for his vile threats. Rudgewick would get away with murder. No one would stop him this time.

When a branch cracked under her feet, Serenity realized she couldn't stay hidden forever. Taking a calming breath, she decided to enter the barn before her nervous clumsiness gave her away. On shaky legs, she stepped inside.

The men's conversation abruptly halted. Collin paused in mid-sentence while tossing the last of a hay bale into Lightning's stall. Showers of loose hay rained down on her. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dimly lit barn. The musty scent of hay, horse, and virile males made her skin tingle. With a jolt, she realized she had never been inside a barn before. The horses were always harnessed and the carriage ready when she went somewhere.

"I ... um ... was looking for you, Collin," she blurted out, hoping her voice didn't sound as shaky as she felt. She swallowed hard.

Collin chuckled, obviously unaware of her distress.

"Well, you found me."

"Afternoon, Mrs. MacClarron." Wallis tipped his battered hat.

"Good afternoon, Sheriff Wallis," Serenity said with forced cheerfulness. She didn't want them to suspect she had

overheard their conversation. If Rudgewick's name came up, she doubted she could hide her revulsion or fear.

Collin smiled at her. "Ready for baths? I saw Gran heating up the water when I left to bed down the animals. I bet she needs help dumping the barrel. I'll be right up." He dusted his hands off on his jeans.

"Thanks." Serenity turned, feeling Wallis's gaze on her.

Did Sheriff Wallis suspect something? Why should he? No one could link her to Rudgewick, or could they? Guilt swept over Serenity. It was her fault Simon had died. She was sure of it. Simon had lost her the night she fled Rudgewick and then again the day she married Collin. Serenity rubbed her stomach. Rudgewick must not find her.

Collin surprised her when he took her hand in his large, calloused one as they headed out the door.

"Sheriff Wallis!" Emily shouted as she and Cherise came bounding towards him.

"Hello, little ladies."

"Were you trying to sneak off on us?" Emily put her hands on her hips.

"No, ma'am. I wouldn't dream of doing that."

Both girls grinned. They giggled as he reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a package of peppermints.

Alisha came out of the house carrying a sleep-rumpled Greta. Serenity's heart lightened when Greta reached out her pudgy arms so she could hold her.

"Did you have a good nap, sweetie?" Serenity asked.

"All done with nap," Greta declared.

Alisha ruffled her little sister's hair. "She was standing on the bed, pointing out the window when I went in to get her."

"I better head out." Wallis stretched. "I have things to do before the party. Think on what I said, MacClarron. Any ideas you have about the case would be welcome."

Serenity flinched inwardly when Wallis waved to her as he mounted his grey horse. She couldn't help but like the man. What would he think of her if he knew she was withholding information about the murder? Could she make him understand her plight? How she wanted to relieve her guilty conscience and blurt out the truth about Rudgewick. Sheer terror kept her quiet.

If Collin knew about her past, he would surely turn her away. He would know once and for all what an unfit stepmother she was for his girls.

What would happen to the girls if she was sent back to New York? They were becoming close to her.

Her hand covered her stomach. Standing beside her new family, she knew that somehow she had to protect them from Rudgewick. But how, if she couldn't tell Sheriff Wallis the truth without incriminating herself?

Greta snuggled in closer to her as they all waved good-bye. She turned to look at Collin. Serenity was struck by the man himself. For all his strength, he had a gentle side. She had seen it time and again in his treatment of his daughters and patience with Rose's scheming.

Collin was a good man. He deserved better than a fallen woman for his wife. She should just share her secrets and leave before she embarrassed him further. But heaven help

her, she could not—not now when she needed his strength and kindness. Once she gained control of her father's business, she could support herself and the baby, if there was a baby, when Collin threw her out. She could only pray he would forgive her in the end.

The girls continued waving as they chattered excitedly about the party. Serenity wished she could enjoy their enthusiasm, but she could not. Too many fears plagued her mind.

With Rudgewick still lingering around Dry Gulch, she wondered if it was safe to go to the Holts' party. Surely, he couldn't follow her there. But then, since his arrival in New York four months ago, Rudgewick had managed to be at every social engagement she attended. Her scalp prickled at the thought. What would she do if she ran into him tonight?

* * * *

Collin reclined against their bedroom doorframe. With mixed emotions, he watched his wife fluttering around putting the final touches on Cherise's dress. Her movements were jerky and uncharacteristically clumsy as she tried, for a third time, to tie the bow on the back of Cherise's ruffled blue dress.

He couldn't help but wonder what had made her so flustered she was unable to do such a simple task. One she normally did with grace and ease. She seemed unable to concentrate. Was she nervous about going to the Holts'? He wasn't sure why she would be since she had already met so many of the townspeople. He would have thought Anna

bringing the Quilting Society out to meet Serenity would have set her at ease. Anna was taking his marriage much better than he'd expected.

"Papa, Serenity finished my dress in time for the party. See, Marybelle has one just like it." Cherise held up the redheaded rag doll with an exact copy of her flounced dress.

His gaze met Serenity's over top of Cherise's head. She flushed slightly at the praise.

"I'm impressed, sweetheart. When did you find the time?"

Serenity shrugged. "When it is important, I make it. I fixed the other girls' dresses before we left New York. I worked on this one on the train."

"She did a wonderful job, didn't she, Papa?" Cherise twirled around.

"Aye, lass. Serenity has a rare talent. Grandma Rose is lookin' for you. Somethin' about face inspection."

"Gotta go." Cherise shot out of the room.

The patter of her small feet echoed down the hallway and pounded up the loft steps. Collin chuckled at the giggles resounding from above.

"They sure are excited." He shut the bedroom door.

"I'll say."

Collin continued to watch Serenity as she fussed around the room. The words on her to-do-list that he had found on the dresser a few hours earlier haunted him. *Make a good impression tonight*. Above that underlined statement were jobs to accomplish before they left. It gave him an odd, warm feeling that she included his hot shaving water along with the bows for his daughters' hair.

She tried too hard. He just wished he could understand why. Collin hesitated, rubbing the cloth-wrapped package, wondering how she would accept this gesture.

"Does it feel strange to be dressing up everyone else? I mean while you're still in black. I hadna thought of that until now."

"It wouldn't be proper to be seen in anything else." She fidgeted with the last hairpin in the twist that swept the blonde hair off her face. All the while, he longed to take it down.

"But then, getting married this soon isn't proper either." She sighed. "I don't know that I was ever proper. Most of my life I was doing things most young ladies my age wouldn't dream of doing."

Collin shifted uncomfortably, not sure of how to respond. "I thought this might go well with your outfit. It might make you feel more dressed up." He opened his hand to reveal a cameo pin partially wrapped in a soft cloth.

"It's beautiful."

"Thank you. It belonged to my mother. She always wore it whenever she and my father went out. I used to joke as a child that, when Ma put on her lady pin, I got left at home."

She took the pin. Her eyes misted. As she turned from him to fasten it in front of the mirror, he saw her shoulders shake. She was crying, he realized with a jolt.

Laying a hand gently on her shoulder, he turned her around. He felt her stiffen. The sight of silent tears trickling down her face tugged at his heart. Without a second thought, Collin pulled her close to his chest.

"I'm sorry, little Ren. I didna mean to make you sad."

Her chest heaved in steady breaths before appearing calm enough to speak.

"You didn't. I'm ... I'm just touched."

Collin's arms tightened protectively around her. He could feel her body coiled with tension. *Women. They were such sensitive creatures.* This lady he had married was a complex mix. One minute she was standing up to him and the next she was insecure. He wanted all of her, the fiery passion and the soft tenderness.

As he stroked her back, Collin realized he was beginning to care for Serenity. He enjoyed her faint perfume scent. He savored the way her slender form fit just perfectly against his hard contours. The more he held her, the more he wondered how he could send her back to New York.

Rose had definitely known what she was doing. His whole body ached to have Serenity naked, beneath him.

She trembled, regaining her composure, and backed out of his embrace.

"Why are you putting on a show?" She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. "I mean pretending to care for me, Collin? Why haven't you told everyone that Rose pushed you into marrying me?"

His eyes narrowed. "Now, wait a minute. That is no one's damn business. The reasons for our abrupt marriage are our own. I dinna feel compelled to share them with every gossip in town."

"I appreciate that. I didn't realize how people would talk—until the ladies came over. They made me feel awkward and out of place. I just hope you won't regret..."

Collin lifted her chin, placing a thumb over her quivering lips, effectively silencing her.

"I have lived here long enough to know people will speculate about anything they perceive as odd. I would never intentionally put you in a position where their comments could hurt you."

"Thank you," she whispered, trying to pull away, but he held her firm.

"Serenity, Rose didn't force me to marry you. I thought you and I would deal well together. There is no shame in a marriage based on mutual respect."

"I'll try not to disappoint you, Collin. You're a nice man. You deserve a good wife."

"I didn't think you could ever disappoint me, sweetheart. I think we made a good match."

"I hope for all our sakes you're right," she whispered.

He sensed a double-edged meaning to her soft words. In her luminous blue eyes, he could swear he read apprehension. She pulled away, refusing to meet his gaze, but not before he saw the naked vulnerability in their depths. Despite the fact she had accepted his offer of comfort, she never relaxed in his arms. Something had wounded her deeply. Collin just wondered if the damage was irreparable.

* * * *

Cleveland, Ohio

The train rocked, its annoying rhythm pounding in Myles's ears as he stared at a sullen Fiona. She had been avoiding him all day.

"Aren't you going to talk to me?" Myles brushed back a lock of Fiona's dark hair. "Come on. All I did was buy you a dress."

Fiona's eyes widened. "And labeled me your mistress in the process. No man buys a dress for a woman he isn't sleeping with."

Myles groaned, hunching down in his seat. The train's throbbing tempo equaled his mounting temper.

"She has you there, old boy," Oliver put in. He pulled a pipe out of his vest pocket, then stuffed tobacco in it. "It's bad form for you to buy a lady, not related to you, something so intimate. If my travels hadn't taken me so far from society, I would have thought about what a risk we are taking by bringing Miss Cameron with us. If word gets out that she traveled alone with two gentlemen, her reputation will be ruined. The story of her being a distant cousin will only go so far."

"I shouldna even be riding in this fancy Pullman car either."

Oliver dismissed her objections with a wave of his hand.

Myles's temper simmered as he replayed her angry reaction when opening the dress. She had told him she couldn't accept it. But when he insisted, she stormed off to her room and put it on. Giving her the dress had been a disaster, even if she did look enchanting in it.

"But she doesn't have a decent one." Myles frowned. "I was just trying to help."

"Who made you fashion king? There's nothing wrong with me clothes."

Oliver's lips twitched as he took a puff of his pipe.

Myles groaned. He hated having his private life be a source of amusement for his uncle.

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with your clothes. You just don't have very many," Myles retorted in an exasperated tone. "I thought you might like a new dress for traveling."

"And what do you want in return?" She waved her arms in search of a word. "Payment?"

"Payment," Myles choked on the hateful word. "It was a gift. Nothing more."

"She has a point, Myles." Oliver pointed the end of his pipe at him. "Other people might see it differently."

"Oh, you're a fine one to talk, Uncle Oliver. I can't believe you took one of the wealthiest widows in the country and made her your mistress."

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?"

Myles rolled his eyes. "Rose MacClarron isn't your mistress?"

With a speed Myles never dreamed his uncle possessed, Oliver pulled Myles from the seat by his coat lapels.

"Say that again and I'll throw you off the train."

* * * *

Rudgewick took a swallow of the syrupy sweet punch Joseph Holt offered him. It made his tongue practically stick to his teeth.

"Quite an impressive place you have here, Holt." Rudgewick glanced around the large split parlor. It was as fancy as any home in New York, with its elegant fireplace, wallpaper, and gaslight fixtures. He had been stunned to find such a large, elaborate house out here in the middle of nowhere. There were close to hundred people milling around. Probably the entire population of this so-called town.

Joseph puffed up with pride. "My son, Alex, designed it. Seems these split parlors are all the rage back East. We added it two years ago. With seven children and sixteen grandchildren, my family needs all the room it can get."

Rudgewick didn't respond to Joseph's reference to his family. The thought of his Serenity being a part of it still burned him.

"Enjoying yourself, Lord Tarrington?" George Brown waddled up beside them. "I see you have met our host. Joseph Holt is one of our town's founding fathers, not to mention the biggest landowner."

The older man flushed deep red under his white beard. Modesty was a virtue Rudgewick had learned to exploit.

"Now, don't be braggin' on me," Joseph said. "Hell, with the way my family keeps expanding, we just naturally spread. Never did like doin' things in a small way."

George Brown thumped Holt on the back. "One thing we love about you is your willingness to take risks. The railroad

would have bypassed us all together if Holt here hadn't owned or recently bought the extra land they wanted."

"Costs a lot of money to maintain a railroad track," Rudgewick interjected.

"Is that why the company keeps balking at having so many stops?" Holt tugged on the end of his beard.

Rudgewick's heart raced. These men were stepping right into his plan.

"Yes. That's why some towns have set up trust funds to repair the track in their area. Their willingness to do this could sway the company's decision as to which towns remain on the line."

Holt stroked his beard and mustache. "How much money are we talking about?"

"I won't know for sure until I survey the track."

"Is that what you do, Lord Tarrington, survey?"

It wouldn't be a total lie to say yes. He had surveyed as one of the many jobs he'd worked after his father cut off his funds. He calculated the amount he would need to pay off the rest of his gambling debts. He had to take care of those before he could safely set foot on English soil.

"Kyle." Holt motioned to large, red-haired boy. "This is Lord Tarrington. Tomorrow, will you take him to see how the train tracks run through our town?"

"Sure, Pa."

"Thank you..." The rest of Rudgewick's sentence stuck in his throat when he saw Serenity come in on the arm of a tall, dark-haired man. The chit looked beautiful in the simple black dress. He ground his teeth, remembering how she wouldn't

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

marry him because of the mourning period, and here she was, less than four months later, married.

Around her were four excited girls and one regal old woman. Rudgewick thinned his lips, wondering how to work this new knowledge to his advantage. How far would she go to protect them? He watched Serenity make her way through the crowd. He willed her to look at him. Excitement soared through his body as he anticipated the expression on her face when she saw him. How he loved the smell of fear.

Chapter 12

The room began to spin. All conversations around Serenity were a mere buzz in her ears. She fought for a breath as the blood drained from her face. George Brown was making his way toward them with Rudgewick Tarrington trailing behind him. She felt trapped between Collin's questioning gaze and the underlying dark menace in Rudgewick's mocking eyes. Merciful heaven, her worst nightmare had come true!

The intent look on George's face reminded her that she had yet to tell Collin about retaining Mr. Brown's services to overturn her father's will. How she wished she could just disappear.

With the ease of years of friendship, George sauntered up. "Ah, there you are, MacClarron." Brown extended a hand to Collin. "Congratulations on your marriage."

Smiling at Serenity, George said, "Come to my office this week, Mrs. MacClarron. I have some information about your case."

"Thank you. I will," she sputtered, stunned Mr. Brown would mention her business in front of others. Things were handled in a much more relaxed way here than in New York.

* * * *

Collin's gaze locked in on the tall, blond stranger, who watched his wife with more intensity than was polite. Despite his elegant clothes, the man gave off a dangerous air, which unsettled him. He bristled.

George's words suddenly hit Collin. His eyes widened.
"You've already met my wife?"

If it were possible, Serenity grew even more pale, and Collin's protective nature took over. "I didn't know my wife consulted you, George. But then, being newly married, we have other things on our minds." He winked, sliding a possessive arm around her.

"Oh, I ... I must have spoken out of turn." George stroked his gray muttonchops with a trembling hand. "I ... I just assumed Mrs. MacClarron had told you about her desire to overturn her father's will."

Collin felt Serenity stiffen, but outwardly she remained calm. It was those eyes, though, that spoke volumes about her churning emotions. In them, he saw regret, tinged with fear. He watched her take a deep breath and struggle for control of the situation.

"My mind has been so full—what with being a new bride and all. I know I mentioned that Father had left his business to another relative."

"I remember something of the sort," Collin muttered, recalling the conversation they'd had during their picnic. His gaze probed hers. Why hadn't she told him all of it?

And now wasn't the place to talk. But damn it he wanted answers. Of course, he doubted she'd offer any, even if they were alone. His wife kept her own counsel. From what little he had gathered of her background, Collin assumed this was a learned trait. She had been forced at an early age to accept the reverse role of parent and decision-maker.

* * * *

Serenity relished Collin's protective hold and wondered how long it would last. Behind George, she could see Rudgewick watching her. Would he add his comments to the mix, or make her wait for him to mete out his own special brand of punishment for leaving him? She winced at the sight of the scar she'd inflicted, marring his handsome face. He reached up, running a long, tapered finger over its jagged edges. When his cold eyes met hers, the anger there made her body quiver with fear.

George cleared his throat. "Where are my manners? Collin, here's someone I would like you meet—Rudgewick Tarrington, who's with the railroad company."

Serenity watched nervously as her husband shook hands with the man who had made her life a living nightmare.

"Oh, and this is Mrs. MacClarron," George said. "She's from New York, too."

"Charmed, Mrs. *MacClarron*." Rudgewick lingered over her new last name as he bent to kiss her hand.

Serenity fought the impulse to rip her hand away, but creating a scene was the last thing she wanted to do, although, Rudgewick's insolent stare dared her to try. He wasn't finished with her, she realized. Like an animal caught in the fangs of a predator, she would have to wait for the final deathblow.

"There you are," Anna drawled, approaching Rudgewick. She looked all sweetness and light in a pink rosebud dress. "Mama told me there was a handsome stranger in our midst."

"Thank you for the compliment, lovely lady." Rudgewick's voice was satiny smooth and sent a shiver of trepidation up Serenity's spine. "I hope we won't be strangers long, Miss..."

"Actually, it's Mrs. Ralston. I'm a widow. My husband passed away last April after being bitten by a rattlesnake. I'm still adjusting to being alone."

Serenity could see Rudgewick's eyes scanning Anna. She didn't like the young widow, but attracting Rudgewick's unsavory attention wasn't a fate Serenity would wish on any woman.

Collin squeezed her shoulder. "Care to dance? I can see Inga motioning for us to start."

She hesitated a moment. Her brows furrowed with concern. "Do you think we should?" she whispered. "I'm not out of mourning yet."

Collin took her hand, kissing it, before tucking it in the crook of his arm. "This is our wedding dance. More people would talk if you didn't dance than if you did. There is probably some superstition about bad luck if you didn't. Besides, it's a tradition."

She sighed, letting him lead her to the area that had been cleared away for dancing. When he swept her into his arms, Serenity savored the delights of having his hard body brushing against hers as they swayed to the music. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of Rudgewick leading Anna out to dance. Serenity's heart stopped. How could she warn Anna about Rudgewick without giving Anna the ammunition to tear her marriage apart?

"You look a wee bit pale, sweetheart." Collin's baritone voice somehow broke through the blood pounding in her ears. "Are you worried about my reaction to your talkin' to George Brown?"

Serenity lifted her gaze to meet his intent one, but she could think of no honest response to his gentle probe.

"I dinna like lies, Serenity," Collin said with deceptive softness. "But I can accept you've been overwhelmed with all that has been recently thrown your way. Think on this, sweetheart. We canna have a real marriage without trust."

Without trust. The words echoed in her mind. She wanted to reach out to him. She needed Collin's strength, but there was no way she could confide in her husband. Half of the story would be more damning than the complete truth, which she could never tell. The stakes were higher now than ever before because Rudgewick was here in Dry Gulch. Somehow, she had to protect her new family. If Collin knew the truth about Rudgewick, his pride would force him to take action. That was a risk she could not take. Rudgewick could kill Collin. Her stomach tightened at the thought.

"I need some air," Serenity croaked. "I've never liked crowds."

As if on command, the music ended and Collin offered her a sympathetic smile. "Would you like to go outside?"

Cold dread swept over Serenity. Right now, she needed to be alone. If she took Collin outside with her, she would give into the temptation to tell him her woes. That was something she couldn't do until she thought things through. Desperately she looked for an answer. When she spotted Alisha swaying

back and forth to the music, eyeing the dance floor with such longing, Serenity knew she had found her solution.

She tapped Collin's shoulder, discretely pointing in Alisha's direction. "Go dance with Alisha. I guarantee it will put a smile on her face."

"Are you sure?" Collin's gaze searched her face with a mixture of concern and suspicion.

"Yes. I think I just overdid it a bit today. All this physical work is new to me. I'll rest and be fine. You'll see."

"If you're certain that's what you want, then I'll dance with my daughter."

Serenity brushed him away with a flicker of her fingers. "Go."

It did her heart good to see Alisha's face light up with excitement when Collin led her toward the dance floor. Content with that accomplishment, Serenity threaded her way through the crowd toward the door.

* * * *

He had frightened her. Rudgewick was smug with satisfaction as he watched Serenity leave the dance floor. His prey had walked into his trap. Now all he had to do was bind her to him. Make her need him again.

Anna Ralston smiled up at him so trustingly.

"Have you known Mr. MacClarron long?" Rudgewick asked.

"He was married to my sister, Katrina, before she died. If you ask me, Collin could have found a better new wife than that city lady. The new Mrs. MacClarron will never last out here."

Her words brought a curl to Rudgewick's lips. *An ally*, he thought, as he noticed the way Anna's eyes strayed to MacClarron. A tumble with the tempting widow was just what he needed to cool his passion for Serenity. A little jealousy could suit both their purposes.

* * * *

Outside the night was cool and the sky so clear Serenity could see all the stars.

"Beautiful view, isn't it, love?" whispered a smooth, polished voice from behind her. "It's the only thing that might sell this miserable place."

Rudgewick. Being alone in the dark with him was frighteningly familiar. How could she have been so stupid to put herself in this vulnerable position again? She fought the urge to flee. If she angered him, he might do something to attract attention, and that was the last thing she wanted.

"Good evening, Lord Tarrington. What a surprise to find you here." She kept her tone cold and impersonal, trying not to let her fear show.

"Tut, tut, so formal." His eyes glittered in the moonlight. "Considering how close we are, I think you can call me Rudgewick."

His insulting tone made her want to scratch his eyes out.

"I hardly think that is appropriate, milord, since I'm a married woman now."

His finely sculpted face hardened, making the fresh scar even more pronounced. She cringed, remembering how she had created it that fateful night.

"You don't need to remind me. I heard all about your hasty wedding from the good folks of Dry Gulch."

He reached out a hand in an attempt to caress her cheek, but she flinched away.

"What shocks me is that you could marry some dirt farmer when eventually I would have made you a countess."

"I decided we weren't compatible." She stepped back, but he loomed over her, large and intimidating.

"That wasn't what you implied the night we came together."

He was too close. His hot breath touched her cheek. Bile rose in her throat as she pushed back the appalling images of the awful scene in the Billings' music room. She instinctively drew back.

"I hope I'm not interrupting." Anna's voice broke through the tense silence that had followed Rudgewick's crude words. "Mama wanted me to tell everyone dinner is served."

Serenity turned, both relieved and appalled to see Anna. She wondered how long the merry widow had been standing there and just what she had heard. Rudgewick's eyes glowed with delight at the two of them facing off.

She was in trouble, no doubt about it.

* * * *

"Excuse me," Collin said as he accidentally bumped into Bridget.

"H-hello, Mr. MacClarron. I guess I wasn't paying attention."

Bridget's face was pale, and Collin had noticed her hanging off in the corner ever since they got there. It wasn't like the girl not to be in the middle of things.

"What's wrong, Bridget?"

"N-nothing," she sputtered.

Collin was unconvinced, but she wasn't his daughter, so he had no right to question her further. He wondered if Wallis might be right about the girl having witnessed something.

Collin stepped out onto the porch with Wallis. A slight breeze cooled off the early evening air. In the distance, he could see Anna and Serenity talking to Rudgewick. His wife appeared flustered, nervously straightening her skirt. Serenity's rigid shoulders also told him that she was worried about something. What was so awful she couldn't confide in him?

A surge of protectiveness shot through Collin when he noticed Rudgewick offer an arm to Anna and Serenity. Anna, batting her thick lashes and cocking her head, took the gentleman's arm. But his wife stepped back, stiffly refusing. Part of him was glad. He didn't like the thought of the smooth fellow even talking to his wife. It gnawed at his gut that the man probably had more to offer Serenity than he did. Anna's encouragement of Rudgewick only fueled his anger further. Why this man caused such a violent dislike in him, Collin couldn't say. But, for some reason, he mistrusted Rudgewick.

"Did you hear me, MacClarron?" Wallis interrupted Collin's thoughts by bumping him in the ribs. "I said Tarrington paid for the dead gambler's burial. Then he demanded all Simon's

personal belongings. Took everything except, of course, for the clothes Simon was wearing."

Collin scratched his chin. "Makes me wonder if Tarrington had something to hide."

A slow grin spread across Wallis's face. "We think alike. You sure you won't join me on this one?" He cocked a brown brow.

Collin watched Rudgewick smiling at and talking to a very vulnerable Anna. It hadn't escaped his notice that Serenity shrank from the Englishman's touch, or that the normally confident Bridget acted like a scared child around Rudgewick. His old lawman's honed instincts told him that Mr. Smooth was trouble in polished, fancy paper.

"I'll help," Collin said. "Unofficially, of course."

"Of course." Wallis beamed.

* * * *

Serenity walked up on the porch, trying to plaster a smile on her face. Did Collin realize his voice had carried? He was going to hunt for Simon's killer. She glanced over her shoulder at Rudgewick, who was laughing at something witty Anna had said.

The last laugh will be on me, Serenity thought morosely. Unless she could find a safe solution to her problem, Rudgewick would win. Merciful heaven, how many lives had she pulled into the quagmire that had become her life?

* * * *

St. Louis, Missouri

Fiona watched as Oliver and Myles glared at each other. Never was the similarity in their appearances so pronounced as when they were angry. Both sat rigid as posts with their jaws locked.

"I can't believe you actually thought Rose MacClarron was my mistress," Oliver growled.

"You mean you've never had a mistress before?" Myles asked in mock surprise, raising one golden brow.

"Of course I have." Oliver leaned forward. "This is no conversation to be having in front of a lady."

Fiona blushed. Having a man of Lord Stratten's caliber call her a lady was a shock.

Putting his pipe in his mouth, Oliver reclined back in his seat, crossing his legs. "I asked Rose MacClarron to marry me before I left for Africa."

"Really?" The corners of Myles's lips crinkled up into a smile. "What did she say?"

"She was fretting about leaving her great-granddaughters. Wanted to think about it. This spur-of-the moment trip to Kansas makes me wonder what she decided."

Fiona studied the old earl. Lord Stratten was very distinguished with his gray hair and silver mustache. She could imagine him with the silvery-white-haired Rose MacClarron. They would make quite a striking couple. *How could anyone turn him down?* Myles would look like the earl years from now. The thought sent a shiver through her as she wondered if she would be around to see him grow gray and distinguished.

"The big question is why she took my sister."

His pain-filled gaze met Fiona's as she started to say something about the night Mrs. MacClarron came by the earl's house. He was embarrassed, she realized, that his sister hadn't come to him for help.

What Fiona could not understand was why Miss Springfield didn't trust her brother. Myles could be considerate when he wanted to be.

"For some reason, Mrs. MacClarron wanted Serenity out of New York," Oliver replied. "I'm hoping we'll find the answers in Kansas."

He chuckled. "Rose had better watch out. I'm one determined, old coot when I set my mind to something. She is going to be the next Countess of Stratten, or I'll bloody well know the reason why."

Rose MacClarron is one very lucky lady, Fiona thought. Would Myles ever feel such love for her? She chided herself for even considering the possibility. His kindness toward her was nothing more than guilt. He could never want her as a wife. The thought of him wanting her as only a mistress made her insides burn.

She would just have to be content with the time she spent traveling with him. The images of her remaining in Dry Gulch after Myles left caused her heart to ache. But she vowed to never let the depth of her feelings for him show. It would be far too humiliating.

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

"May I have this dance?" Serenity turned at the gruff voice behind her. "Now that dinner is over, Inga wants everyone to enjoy themselves for a while longer." Joseph Holt stood, handsomely dressed in a black suit and string tie.

He looks rather nervous, Serenity thought, for a man who usually exudes such a dominating presence.

"I would be honored." Serenity made a slight curtsy.

He swept her out on the dance floor, his eyes studying hers as they moved to the rhythm of the lively reel.

"I figured we should get to know one another, Mrs. MacClarron. Collin has been like a son to me over the years. Darn it all! It's hard to see him married to someone other than my daughter."

Serenity felt his pain. "I understand. I don't want to replace Katrina. Honest. But your granddaughters need a woman in their lives. For a feminine touch."

"So Inga tells me. She says I'm being a stubborn, old codger. Maybe I am. I just don't want my little ladies getting hurt."

Serenity opened her mouth to say they wouldn't when she heard a familiar voice.

"May I cut in, Mr. Holt?" Rudgewick asked in his polished, boarding school English.

All intentions of claiming to protect the MacClarron children died on her lips when she turned to stare the devil in the eyes. He would hurt them, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do to stop him.

When Rudgewick's arms closed around her, Serenity's heart constricted. Fear prickled the hair on the back of her

head. She now knew how an animal caught in a trap felt, as she watched Joseph Holt begin dancing with his wife.

"You don't have to look so bloody frightened," Rudgewick snarled. "I'm not going to accost you on a dance floor full of people."

"That's something, I suppose."

As they continued with the flow of the music, Serenity prayed the song would end soon, so she could escape.

"You surprised me, Serenity. I would have thought that, after everything you went through with your father, you wouldn't want a new set of responsibilities so soon."

She stiffened at his casual use of her first name. He had remembered more of her ramblings than she had realized. *Maybe he cared more ...* She blocked that thought out of her mind. She reminded herself what power he held over her. He had been raised to handle himself in all public situations and fake comments when necessary. She would not be taken in by his insincere concern for her welfare.

"Marrying a man with a family is a big gamble," he continued. "What becomes of you if Collin MacClarron meets with an untimely accident?"

"Are you threatening me?"

He chuckled. "Just pointing out the difficulties of your situation. Remember, love, that I will take care of you should anything unforeseen happen..."

She tried to pull away.

"You can't run from me. I've already proven that I can always find you. Don't be a fool. Certainly you can come up with an easy solution to our predicament."

"There is no predicament, Lord Tarrington. I'm married to a man who protects his own."

"One can never be too careful. When you least expect it, tragedy can occur. It would be a shame to see those little girls get hurt." He squeezed her hand until her knuckles ached.

When the music ended, Rudgewick released her so swiftly Serenity almost fell over.

"I can't believe even you would be so low as to hurt children," she whispered, hoping her voice didn't carry above the swell of the new song.

"Leave MacClarron and return to New York with me and I don't have to." He ran a threatening thumb down the jagged scar.

Appalled, she fled to find Collin. In the hallway, Serenity pressed her back against the flowered wallpaper as soon as she recognized the two people in the passageway, heads together. Anna and Collin were arguing about Rudgewick, she realized with a jolt.

"I mean it, Anna," Collin said in low, harsh whisper. "I dinna trust Rudgewick Tarrington. The man is too polished, too smooth. I dinna buy that he works for the railroad. The man strikes me as gambler."

Anna's voice rose just above a whisper. "You have no say in what I do, Collin MacClarron. You lost that privilege when you married Miss New York City."

"Please listen." Collin let out an exasperated sigh.

"I still don't understand why you had to marry her in such a hurry."

"Anna"—Collin's tone was impatient—"I needed a wife. My lassies needed a mother."

"But why her? I would have married you. But you didn't want me. And now you are sending away my first suitor. What's the matter—jealous?"

Serenity covered her mouth with her hand and slid deeper into the shadows as Anna stalked away in the other direction, leaving Collin looking dazed.

Would he have been better off with Anna? At least she wouldn't have put his family at risk. Serenity's heart tightened. Anna had no idea how dangerous her harmless flirtation with Rudgewick Tarrington could be.

The sound of little feet gave her pause.

"Serenity, come quick! Jimmy climbed up a tree and Emily is stuck trying to get him down," Cherise blurted out, all in one breath.

Chapter 13

Cherise led Serenity through the kitchen, past the stack of clean dishes and desserts, out the back door to the yard.

Once outside, Cherise stopped by a huge oak tree.

"Emmie," Cherise whispered hoarsely into the darkness.

"Up here," Emily replied in a trembling voice. "Jimmy is crying."

"Mama." A small sob broke out.

Serenity glanced up the tree. There, perched on a high branch, with Jimmy clinging to her, was Emily.

"Help!" Emily groaned. "Papa will be furious when he finds out I dared Jimmy to get up here."

"I told you to stop," Cherise hollered back.

"What's going on?" Alisha's round-eyed gaze traveled up the tree. Her mouth formed a perfect O. "Oh, my, Aunt Anna and Papa are going to be very mad."

"Tell me something I dinna know," Emily snapped, as Jimmy whimpered.

"Girls!" Serenity let out an exasperated sigh. "Bickering is getting us nowhere. What we need is a plan of action."

Serenity surveyed the tree for low branches. Then she tested the strength of the lowest one. She guessed it would hold her weight plus some extra. "I think I can climb up, but I'm not sure how to get you back down. I can't descend and carry one of you at the same time. Emily, can you get down by yourself?"

"No," she moaned. "My leg hurts."

"I will need something to tie around Jimmy that's long and strong enough to lower him down."

"I have an idea." Alisha snapped her fingers. "There is a long coil of rope in the barn that Grandpa Holt runs from the barn to the house in case of a storm. Sometimes we get rain here that is as blinding as snow. I'll go find it."

"Will this work?" Emily asked, fear evident in her tone. "My leg is starting to cramp from Jimmy sitting on it."

"I'm hungee," Jimmy whimpered.

"Hold on, honey. I'm coming up as soon as Alisha is back with the rope. I remember a story of Uncle Oliver's where he rescued a friend of his sister's by lowering her over a palace wall."

"Wow," Cherise said. "Why didn't she just use the door?"

"The story goes that this sultan bought Alexandra for his harem. Oliver and Nathan had to rescue her before she was totally ruined."

"What's a harem?" Emily's eyes glowed like jewels in the moonlight.

Serenity groaned. She wished had never brought up this story in the first place. "Something a young lady ought *not* to know about."

Emily giggled. "That means Serenity isn't going to tell us, Jimmy. Sometimes she has to modify Uncle Oliver's stories for our delicate ears, as she puts it."

Serenity chuckled. Emily was right. She never realized how risqué Uncle Oliver's adventures were until she found herself in the middle of explaining one. The girls' tenacious questions didn't help either.

"Here." All out of breath, Alisha flung the rope at Serenity. "What are we going to do now?"

"I'm going to climb up and tie this around Jimmy and then lower him down," Serenity explained as she took and recoiled the heavy rope so it fit as comfortably as possible over her left shoulder. Its coarse texture chafed her hands.

She leveled a gaze at Alisha, who worried her lower lip. "Do you think you can catch him?"

Alisha and Cherise exchanged glances. "We'll try," Cherise said in a none-too-certain tone.

Serenity laid a comforting hand on both of their shoulders. "I know you'll both handle things just fine. I trust you."

With that, she began scaling the tree. As she neared the upper branch, she could see Jimmy huddled on Emily's lap. Emily's face was etched with lines of pain and she appeared pale.

"Okay, Jimmy. Let's tie this around your waist."

The little boy stared at her through green eyes that were wide with fright. His colorless face showed every freckle.

"I've done this before." Serenity leaned over, patting his leg. "My brother would never admit he was afraid of heights until he looked down. So, oftentimes Charles, our butler, and I had to rescue him."

Jimmy looked unconvinced.

"Pirates do it," Serenity prodded.

His face lit up. "Really?"

"Would I lie?"

"What the hell's going on up there?" Sheriff Wallis's deep voice bellowed from below.

"Serenity is rescuing me and Jimmy, Sheriff," Emily yelled back when Cherise and Alisha were too stunned to speak.

Relief flooded over Serenity at the sound of Sheriff Wallis's voice. Now she would not have to worry about Alisha and Cherise trying to catch Jimmy. From the sheriff's great height, the little boy would not have to be lowered as far.

"Good, I'm glad you're here, Sheriff," Serenity said. "Can you get Jimmy if I lower him down?"

She made a secure knot and slid the loop around Jimmy's waist. She leaned back, bracing herself against the tree for support as she inched the rope lower hand-over-hand. *I won't look down*, she told herself. A rumble of voices below hinted to her that a crowd was starting to gather underneath them.

"My baby!" Anna's voice cried out.

"I have the lad."

Her husband's thick burr made Serenity jump. *What on earth must he be thinking?*

* * * *

Collin's heart caught in his throat as he held a trembling Jimmy in a fierce embrace. After he felt sure the child was unhurt by his ordeal, Collin released Jimmy to Anna's waiting arms.

"Are you ready?"

Serenity's voice floated down like sunbeams. The full impact of what she was asking hit him like a heavy stone when he watched helplessly as his daughter grimaced and shifted in pain. Serenity already was attempting to secure a rope around Emily's waist. Visions of them both falling flashed

through his mind. Emily was far too heavy for Serenity to lower. He would guess Emily weighed at least maybe half as much as his petite wife did.

"No!" Collin bellowed. "I'm coming up."

Wallis caught his arm. "What about your stitches? Maybe I should go up instead?"

Rose clung like moss to his other arm. "Let Wallis go."

"They are my family!" Collin growled through clenched teeth as he brushed Wallis and Rose off. "Just be ready to catch my lassies."

The lowest branch buckled under his weight as Collin made his slow, painful ascent up the tree. Without looking down, he settled himself on the branch across from Serenity and Emily.

"I didna know you could climb, Papa."

"To tell the truth, I didna know myself. I havena been in a tree since I was a wee lad."

"That long ago?" Emily giggled.

"A verra long time ago. Now, Emily, let Serenity secure the rope around you."

"Just like the princess in Uncle Oliver's story. He lowered her over a palace wall to save her from a mean sultan who wanted to ruin her. What does ruin mean?"

Collin arched a dark brow. His wife blushed deep red. *Who had filled Serenity with these wild tales? This Uncle Oliver was too outrageous to be true.*

"This isna the time to discuss that, Em. Let's get you down before these branches give. The motion of the wind is making me sick."

"Is Uncle Oliver our uncle now, too?" Emily chirped, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Collin groaned. Emily was not a bit daunted by his brusque change of subject. She never let anything drop gracefully.

"Yes, I suppose he is," Serenity replied in a shaky voice.

Emily smiled. "Then I'll be very brave, so maybe someday he will take me on one of his great adventures." With that she nodded and her father began to lower her.

Wallis caught Emily and held her in a tight bear hug before handing the little girl over to her anxious grandparents' waiting arms. Inga and Rose checked Emily over, while hands on hips, Joseph scowled up the tree at Collin. "You okay up there, sonny? It would be a helluva fall."

"That's a daft thing to say!" Rose snapped, poking a finger in Holt's chest. "You'll make the lad lose his concentration."

Inga bristled, holding Emily close. "Honestly, Rose, he didn't mean it the way it came out."

Collin rolled his eyes at Rose and Holt facing off.

"I'm fine, everybody. Just gonna lower my other princess down." He winked at a blushing Serenity, who was now trembling. The shock had worn off, he realized. If he didn't act fast, she might talk herself out of letting him help her.

"I'm fine. I ... I can c-climb d-down."

Collin studied the miles of skirt and flimsy slippers and wondered how she had made it up in the first place.

"You promised to obey me. You wouldna be breakin' your word now, would you?"

"N-no. I..."

"Trust me, sweetheart, the longer you think about it, the harder it will be."

She nodded and slid the rope over her head and secured it around her slender waist. His heavy body rocked the branch, and Collin had to brace himself on the trunk to keep from falling. He brushed a quick kiss across her lips, which brought snickers from his girls, and hoots of laughter and various comments from the gawkers.

Lowering her took forever. His arms throbbed and shoulder burned from the strain of keeping the rope at just the right tension. When Wallis caught Serenity, Collin was torn between relief and the urge to throttle the man for daring to touch his wife.

Anna shoved Wallis aside and flung herself at Serenity. "Thank you for saving my baby."

Serenity held her tight. "I'm so glad he's safe. I was afraid he would fall."

Once he hit the ground, Collin pulled Serenity into a fierce embrace. "You scared the hell out of me, sweetheart."

Only the feeling of having her close soothed the fear raging inside him. He didn't know when it had happened, but he was starting to care deeply for her. If she took his girls back to New York, he would miss her. He would miss the strange Uncle Oliver stories and the endless to-do lists he found lying around the house. He would also miss how his home was suddenly organized.

When she buried her face in his shirt, a jolt of desire surged through him. His hands stroked her back, while he lost himself in the fragrance of her silky blonde hair. Could he live

without ever seeing it fanned out across his pillow? He longed to feel its lush softness against his bare chest and to hold Serenity's hot body underneath his and drink of her warmth.

When Serenity pulled back, her eyes glistening with tears, Collin gave in to the urge to taste her trembling lips. He molded his mouth to hers, savoring its sweet taste. She felt so damn good in his arms. With great reluctance, he released her.

"I'll get the wagon ready," he said huskily.

"The girls and I'll be ready," she whispered.

He caressed her soft cheek. "Thanks for rescuing Emily. You scared the life out of me, though, when I saw you up there. I couldna stand to see you get hurt."

As he turned to walk away, Collin saw Inga and Joseph hug Serenity. She had finally been fully welcomed into the family, but not before she had put herself at risk. That realization gnawed at his gut.

* * * *

A few minutes later, Collin was still thinking of his former in-laws' reaction to Serenity, while he began hitching up his team of horses.

"Collin," Joseph's voice growled behind him in the lamp lit barn. "You okay?"

"Sure. A little stiff, but otherwise okay." Collin shrugged, ignoring the pain lancing through his shoulder.

"I was a tad hard on your wife when she first got here." Joseph paused. "Serenity has more grit than I gave her credit for having."

"She isn't your typical city flower, that's for sure." Collin shook his head. "Appearances can be deceiving."

Joseph scratched his chin, leaning back against the stall door. "That's true. Sometimes circumstances are, too. Sometimes in the heat of the moment we say things we later come to regret."

Collin finished harnessing the horse, while he struggled to control his temper. "What are you getting at, Holt?"

"I was hurting after Katrina died. I made accusations—ah, hell—I know you loved my Trina. Hell, nobody else would have put up with her antics the way you did."

Collin shrugged, embarrassed by the direction this conversation was headed.

"I doubt I've told you this. I don't talk about this painful time in my life, but I was married once before Inga."

That caught Collin's attention. His head snapped up.

"Sadie was a pretty, little thing. She died after giving birth to Alex. There I was, on a wagon train headed west with a new baby. Thank God, Inga took pity on me."

Joseph stepped closer and lowered his voice. "I didn't love her at first. I regret that now, but she had love enough for both of us. She let me do my grieving."

Collin's throat tightened and he coughed. "Did you ever feel like you were betraying Sadie's memory?" Collin asked hoarsely.

"Hell, yes. It took me six months to touch Inga."

He put a heavy hand on Collin's shoulder. "Katrina would want you to move on. My guess is that Serenity and Trina

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

would have liked each other. Don't close yourself off. You cheat everyone when you do."

Wiping a hand across his teary eyes, Joseph walked away. Collin snorted at the irony of the situation. His former father-in-law had given him permission to sleep with his new wife. But could he give himself the same permission?

Chapter 14

Did you have a good time?" Collin asked a short while later, as he lifted Serenity down from the wagon. He could sense the thrum of sexual energy coursing between them as he let his hands linger at her waist. He felt her breath catch, but she didn't pull away from him. Was she beginning to trust him enough to let him get closer to her? Joseph's words buzzed in his ears. Standing beside her made his mixed feelings come painfully close to the surface. He wanted more than just being able to sleep next to Serenity at night, but did she? Tonight, he was going to attempt to find out.

"You've been awfully quiet. Not that the bairns have let you get a word in edgewise." He lifted her chin, trying to read her expression.

"It was lovely," she said without meeting his gaze. "I especially enjoyed hearing you play the fiddle."

He swallowed the lump in his throat. "I havena played in public since Katrina died. Not much reason to." He paused, searching her eyes for the understanding he knew he'd find there. "I'm learning to get back some of the old pleasures in my life. I owe that to you."

She smiled. Behind them, his girls continued to chatter excitedly about the party as they had all the way home.

"My leg hurts," Emily groaned. "I scraped my arm on the tree. Next time Jimmy can get himself down."

"It would not have happened if you had not teased him about being a baby," Alisha snapped.

Emily puffed up. "I did not."

"Did, too," Alisha taunted, her face in Emily's angry one.

"Lassies," Collin and Rose chided in unison. The three adults laughed.

"To bed now, lassies. If you hurry, there might be time for a story," Collin said.

The girls exchanged glances before scurrying into the house.

"I ... um ... better go supervise or they will giggle all night," Serenity said.

She sauntered away, leaving Collin alone with Rose, who flashed him a self-satisfied smile.

"Well, these old bones need a rest." Rose yawned. "I'll get up with the lassies in the morning."

Collin groaned as he headed off to see his girls. Gran was getting entirely too proud of herself.

Standing in the doorway of the loft, he could see his girls in bed. Serenity was finishing an Uncle Oliver story about his time in India with a snake charmer. An odd, unsettling emotion emerged in Collin's chest. For the first time since he brought Serenity home, he felt like they were really a family.

"Tuck us in, Papa," Emily pleaded.

"Kiss-kiss." Greta held up her pudgy arms. This simple gesture touched him more than words could adequately express.

He pulled away from the doorway and gave each girl a kiss, tucking the blankets around them. Serenity repeated his actions. For reasons he didn't understand, it felt so right to share this private, intimate moment with her.

Extinguishing the lamp, Collin took Serenity's hand and led her out into the hallway.

"Come sit outside on the swing with me," he murmured, kissing her knuckles.

"But..." Uncertainty flickered in her eyes.

He placed a finger over her soft lips. "Five minutes or I will come looking for you."

* * * *

"Desiree ain't seeing customers tonight." Miss Lilly stood with hands on her ample hips in front of Sheriff Wallis.

"But we've been waiting all evening," a young cowpoke complained.

Wallis glowered him into silence.

"Come on, Lilly. Desi always sees me." Wallis flashed her a cocky grin.

"She isn't working tonight. Not even the King of England is seeing her. You're the one who convinced me to give my girls a night off when they weren't up to par. Now you're asking me to break the rules."

Lilly pulled herself to her full height. Wallis still stood a good foot taller, but he didn't press his advantage. Instead he stepped back, putting his hands up in surrender. "You're right. It was rude of me to ask."

"It's okay, Miss Lilly. I'm sorta healed up." Desiree appeared at the top of the stairs to the shouts and hurrahs from the collection of cowboys in the parlor.

Wallis dug the reward money he had gotten for killing those outlaws out of his pocket. *At least, some good would come of this blood money*, he thought.

"Sorry, boys. I'm buying the whole night." He wagged his eyebrows.

Lilly frowned at him, but took the money.

"Yes sir, after two days on the trail and a night of making nice with Joseph Holt, I need a little tender loving care."

He left a string of catcalls behind him as he took the steps two at a time.

"Hi, darlin'." He kissed Desiree amid the war whoops, chuckling at the noise. With a flourish, he swept her up in his arms. "Free show is over. Find your own pleasure, boys."

Wallis stalked down the row of brightly colored doors to Desiree's pink one. Everything in her room was either pink or red. He never got over how different these bright colors were from her soft personality.

He kicked open the ajar door with his foot. When he lowered Desiree to the floor, he noticed how gingerly she moved.

"I, ah—"

He stopped her flow of words with a finger.

"Who hurt you, Desi?"

She kissed his fingers and then moved just out of his reach. "You know I can't you tell that. Miss Lilly has rules about tattling on customers. That way no one gets put off. She handles things her own way. Besides, he might come after you, and I couldn't stand that."

Wallis cursed himself for being so blunt. He should have eased into this discussion after Desiree had let her guard down.

"It's my job to protect you, sugar."

She ignored his comment and batted her thick blonde lashes at him. "What'll it be, Sheriff, the usual?"

Wallis curbed his temper. Did she really think he would take her when she could hardly move? "I'm getting around slow right now myself, sugar. How about a game of checkers?"

Her pouty mouth thinned. "That's an awful expensive game of checkers."

Wallis dropped his large frame down on the red carpet. "The money was a reward for ... catching those bank robbers."

She pulled the checker set out of a drawer and knelt with stiff, awkward movements on the floor across from him.

"You had to kill them, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said softly.

She patted his leg in a soothing gesture, but made no further comments. In the two years he'd known Desiree, they had spent more time playing checkers than tangled in her red satin-sheeted brass bed. He had offered more than once to help her leave Lilly's, but she steadfastly refused. Why, he never understood. What he did know was that they had an odd friendship. For some reason, he came to her whenever he was hurting. Somehow, she soothed him without making a fuss.

After she arranged the pieces, she leaned back, tossing a mass of golden curls over her shoulder. Wallis froze as she made her first move. Something about Desiree seemed different tonight. She reminded him of someone else, but who?

* * * *

Kansas City, Kansas

"Have you thought about what you're going to say to your sister once we get there?" Fiona asked, poking Myles out of his gloomy thoughts.

Lord Stratten snored across from them.

Myles felt a surge of relief. At least she was talking to him again.

He shrugged. "I haven't..." He gave an exasperated sigh. "That's a lie. I can't quit thinking about it. Why the bloody hell would she run away from home? Why couldn't she at least have left a note?"

"Fear?" Fiona's gaze searched his.

"Of me?"

"You have control over her life. Lord Tarrington was a friend of yours. She had every reason to believe you'd take his side over hers."

"Am I that big of a louse? Do you fear me, Miss Cameron? Am I that unreasonable?"

"No." She bit her lip, shaking her head. "But then you didn't have control over my destiny either."

Myles stared at Fiona, wondering if she knew how very much he wanted to kiss her. *Control her destiny. Bloody hell.*

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

I would like to do a hell of a lot more than that, Myles thought as his lips descended on hers. He was lost in a swirling myriad of emotions. Her lips tasted like mint and sweet coffee. His body was intensely aware of her hand stroking his cheek.

The train's shrill whistle jerked him back to reality. He pulled away, staring into Fiona's wide blue eyes.

What the bloody hell had he done?

* * * *

Dry Gulch, Kansas

Serenity paused at the door, staring out into the star-filled sky. Memories of the kiss in the Holts' yard made her shiver. *Did Collin want more tonight?* She swallowed hard. Collin wouldn't hurt her on purpose. His kisses never left the taste of blood lingering in her mouth. His lips coaxed hers, never forcing or bruising.

For a man of his size, Collin was extremely gentle. She had watched him tame the snarls in Emily's hair when the little one refused Rose's help. He didn't once yell or jerk the comb hurriedly through the tangled strands. *He did everything slowly*, she thought with a shiver. *Would he make love that way, too?* The images of his tender assault on her body made her skin tingle.

Maybe her experience with Rudgewick was not something to base all assumptions about the marriage bed on.

She had been so isolated over the last few years. No suitors called. She rarely went to parties.

Men didn't make her uncomfortable because she held her own with her father's associates. She was intelligent. Perhaps

too much so for her own good. Most men didn't want that trait in a wife, or did they?

Collin was different. He made her feel protected and cherished. His touch was soothing, and yet, unsettling.

Could she trust him with her body and afterwards with her heart? It would change things between them. She wasn't naïve enough to be fooled into believing otherwise. If she made love to Collin, he would know part of her secret. Would loving him make telling him the worst part of her shameful secret easier to handle?

There were no easy answers. She had to follow instincts that had, once before, led her down the wrong path. That frightened her to death. Hiding in here all night would solve nothing, so despite her fear, she forced herself to push open the door.

She walked out onto the porch and stood, braced against the delicately carved rail. The porch swing creaked, making Collin's presence known.

"Did you carve this?" She ran her hand over the rail's intricate design.

"Aye." Collin's voice drifted out of the darkness.

"It's lovely. The whole house is."

The swing stilled. "Thank you. Joey, one of Katrina's older brothers, drew the design and we built it together."

"You did an amazing job. I can see you have an eye for details."

She turned shyly toward Collin. He was watching her with a thoughtful expression.

"Was there something you wanted to talk to me about? Are you angry that I climbed the tree? Honestly, I didn't expect such an audience."

He nodded. "I just didn't know how to begin." He stood and walked toward her. The nearness of his powerful body sent a tremor of apprehension up her spine. She gripped the rail for support. His lips brushed hers tenderly.

"No." He groaned and, much to her surprise, pulled back. "We have to talk."

His hesitance stunned her. Didn't men just take advantage once they had gained control of the situation?

Collin took her hand, leading her over to the swing. The ropes creaked as he sat. He motioned for her to join him.

She fidgeted with her hands in her lap until Collin's warm hand covered both of hers.

"This is about my not telling of my plans to overturn Father's will."

"Yes," he replied slowly. "Partly. Mostly, I want to discuss our future. Up until tonight, we have behaved as polite strangers. We share a bed, but try not to touch each other."

She choked at his blunt statement.

"That was crude. What I'm trying to say, and blundering, is to ask you what you want from our marriage?"

Serenity stared. What did she want? "Friendship. Kindness. Security ... I-I don't know."

Collin took a deep breath. "I want honesty between us."

His words sent a chill through her. Honesty was the one thing she couldn't give him.

"I want to understand you," he pressed on.

He took one of her hands and pulled it into his lap. Watching her with an intensity that made her skin prickle, he began stroking the back of her hand with his thumb. The sensation unnerved her. She swallowed hard.

"I'm not that difficult to figure out."

"I disagree. You are a mass of inconsistencies. Why would a lady of your..." He paused, but continued stroking her hand.

"What is wrong with the relative who inherited your father's holdings? Is he a lecher?"

Serenity coughed. Myles had been called many things including a rake, but a lecher was going too far.

"No. He wanted to force me into an unsuitable marriage."

"And I'm suitable husband material?" He cocked a dark brow.

"You don't think you are?"

"Hardly. I have four outspoken daughters, a nosy grandmother, and more family than I can shake a stick at. I willna mention my farm that might be lost if we dinna get rain soon. Need I go on?"

A rush of relief swept through Serenity as Collin had shifted the topic back to himself. That broke with Collin's next question.

"What made this man so unsuitable that you would be willin' to marry a stranger to avoid him?"

How could she answer that question? Would Collin believe her about Rudgewick?

"He has a violent temper," she replied.

"Is that why you didna tell me about your visit to George Brown? You feared my reaction? I tend to yell, but I wouldna raise a hand to you ... ever."

Serenity returned his hand squeeze. She sighed. "I'm not afraid of you." *Only of your rejection.* "I'm just used to handling my own problems. I honestly didn't think."

He lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss on her open palm. "Someday, Mrs. MacClarron, you'll trust me."

Serenity opened her mouth, but he silenced her with a tap of his finger. "Your actions speak for themselves. One day you'll come to me with your troubles. Only then can I help you."

His hands held her cheeks, while his gaze searched hers in the moonlight. Her heart pounded. This was the time—there was no going back. She should tell him everything. Yet, she couldn't bear to see the warmth in his eyes fade. Maybe as they grew close tonight, he could accept her mistakes.

"I've tried to go slow with you and only take what you're willin' to give. But I need you, Serenity. I canna take another night of just holdin' you. I willna force you. Will you let me love you?"

Collin slid his fingers into the thickness of her hair, loosening the pins. His mouth took hers in a slow, sensuous kiss. She felt herself being lifted until she sat across his lap with her body pressed against his rock hard one. Even through layers of skirts, she could still feel the evidence of his desire pressed against her bottom. She shivered at the intensity of the feelings he brought out in her.

"No." She pushed him to arm's length, then scooted as far away from him as the swing's seat would allow. She tried to control her unsteady breathing.

"Are you sure? I don't want to just be a substitute for Katrina."

He frowned. "I suppose I deserve that for constantly throwing my late wife up in your face. I canna help it. A part of me canna let go of the guilt I feel over my part in her death."

Serenity reached over and took one of his huge trembling hands. "How did she die?"

Collin swallowed hard. "One day, when I was helping Ethan work his fields, Katrina took the girls on a picnic. She had wanted me to go, but I felt she was too weak from the baby she had lost a few weeks earlier. I told her to wait a few days and we'd go then. She didna want to wait." His voice came out in a harsh, agonized whisper.

"It began raining. They got caught in it. By the time I found them, they were soaked. All my lassies caught a chill. Only Trina and Felicity developed the terrible cough. Doc Hogan did his best, but they died the next night."

Each word of his pain-filled confession tore at her heart.

"It wasn't your fault," Serenity whispered.

Collin stared at her for a long time. "My head knows that, but my heart willna agree." He dropped his head in his hands. After a long moment, Collin straightened up. "It hurt too much. I was empty and dead inside. They needed so much more than I could give them. Gran had boundless love and

patience. New York offered them promise. I offered them nothin'." His tone grew hoarse.

"You offered them love, too. Sending them away must have been hard, but without help, what choice did you have?"

* * * *

Collin's eyes widened in surprise. She didn't think he was a selfish bastard for sending them to live with Rose. Serenity understood his need to give his daughters a stable life away from the bad memories.

He cleared his throat. "Inga and Joseph blamed me. I couldna defend myself because I knew they were right. I had let Katrina down when she needed me most. As hurtful as that knowledge was, I still couldna let them poison my lassies with their anger. Maybe I was wrong, but I couldna live with my lassies hating me."

"The Holts were wrong, Collin. Katrina's and Felicity's deaths were horrible accidents."

"It has taken me years to realize that."

"I did the same thing—blaming myself for my father's death. I knew he was ill for years, but that didn't make any difference. I imagine having their deaths suddenly thrust upon you would be even harder. You did the right thing sending the girls to Rose."

His gaze probed hers. "Thank you. You are the only person who has said so."

"Sometimes tough times call for tough choices. Not everyone approves of your decisions. I have been in that position myself."

Collin touched her cheek. "You aren't a replacement for Katrina. When you first arrived, I battled with those doubts. I pushed you away because I was afraid of letting you become too important to me. But you did anyway." He cupped her cheeks in both hands. "I want you as my partner, wife and lover."

"I want you, too." She offered him her hand.

Collin stood, pulling her up. He swept Serenity into his arms, cradling her against his hard chest. Her arms went around his neck.

"Tonight we start over. This is our official wedding night. I promise you will never regret this, Mrs. MacClarron. I will take good care of you."

* * * *

"Damn." Rudgewick stumbled over a desk chair in George Brown's dark office. "This is no good." He fumbled with lighting the lamp. "I can't see a bloody thing."

He sank down onto the creaky wooden chair. Pawing through the stacks of papers on the desk, Rudgewick found a note marked Springfield.

Ah, just what I've been looking for. So Brown has investigated Myles, huh? It says here that Myles is missing. Probably searching for Serenity. Better speed up my plan. At church tomorrow, I'll start putting the pressure on so that leaving with me is Serenity's only option. Of course, having her divorced will not sit well with my parents, but with any luck, they won't find out. Gossip doesn't always flow from America to England.

He slammed his fist down on the paper. "After we're wed, she'll learn her place."

* * * *

"Do you want help with your clothes, Mrs. MacClarron?" Collin asked in a husky voice, as he let her body slide seductively down his.

He saw the brief moment of panic flash across her face before she covered it up. Collin cupped her chin. "Darlin', tell me what you fear."

"N-nothing. I just don't know what to do."

Collin slid his other hand to her cheek. His thumbs brushed its satiny texture. Tonight, Collin vowed, he would go slowly. Before the evening was over he'd find some way to ease her fears. A marriage without intimacy was not a marriage at all.

"You can do anythin' or nothin'. You can touch me as much as you feel comfortable doin'. All I ask is that you trust me enough to let me touch you."

Serenity swallowed hard. "I do."

Collin smiled. "Relax, sweetheart. It will all come natural."

"I want to believe you."

Her face had gone pale, and Collin sensed once again that there was more to Serenity's worries than normal wedding night jitters.

"I willna hurt you, lass." He wiggled his brows. "I do have some experience in the matter. I can make it good for you." Under his thumb, he felt her pulse racing. "We dinna have to do this, lass. I willna force you." He took a step back, giving her the freedom to retreat if she wished.

"I know," she replied. "You could have forced me at any time. I am, after all, your wife. I trusted you with my life when I made those vows."

Her words said one thing, but the tremor in her voice said another.

"'Tis okay, lass. I'm nervous too."

"You are?"

Collin nodded, wondering how much to tell her. Admitting his failed attempt at Lilly's Lovenest was out of the question. "I dinna want you to regret this night. Remember lovin' is a precious gift that takes time to unwrap. We'll go slowly. Nothing will happen that you dinna want."

Serenity licked her lips. The shadow of fear was gone from her eyes, replaced with amazement and slight twinkle of desire. When she put her hands on his chest, Collin's heart jumped. His body tightened with anticipation.

"Shall I unbutton these for you?" Her fingers trailed tentatively down his shirt.

"Aye," he answered, knowing restraint would be harder now than he had expected. *Sweet Saint Margaret, give me patience.*

Serenity's nimble fingers undid each button, then she spread open his shirt. Collin shivered when her warm palms touched his bare skin and fingers smoothed through the thick mat of curly dark hair.

"This is only the beginnin'," Collin murmured against her mouth, while his hand slipped behind her, trying to undo the buttons on the back of her dress. His hands got entangled in her thick blonde curls.

"Turn around, darlin', or this could take all night." With that, he spun her around. A breath caught in his throat at the sight that beheld him. Down the small curve of Serenity's back, her hair hung in loose curls like gossamer sunbeams. His mouth went dry. During all their nights together he had seen it swing down her back in a golden rope and had fantasized about what it would look like unbound. The reality was even better than he'd ever imagined.

"What's wrong?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Nothing." Collin planted a kiss on the back of her head. "I've just discovered something new about you to appreciate."

His hand moved through the golden silky curls—parting them to expose a row of pearl buttons.

"My hair is always in the way. That's why I never leave it unbraided."

"I didna know how I can stand seeing it up after this treat." He kissed the slender column of her neck.

Then, slowly, he undid each button, brushing his lips over each newly bared area. As he reached her waist, Collin struggled with the knots in her corset. When it fell open, his hands smoothed over the satiny chemise and back up to her shoulders, relishing the surprised gasp as he slipped her dress and corset off.

She tensed as the gown pooled at her feet. Trying to relax her, Collin massaged her shoulders.

"Your turn." Before she could question, he turned her to face him. Taking both of her wrists in his hands, he placed them on his bare chest.

"Take off my shirt." His voice was rough with desire.

Serenity's hands brushed across his chest, then grew possessive as she slid his linen shirt down his arms.

He pulled her to him and she rubbed her face in his furry chest. He shivered at her small breaths against his heated skin.

Collin lifted the lacy end of her chemise up her sides, raising her arms with it. He pulled them around his neck as he tossed the chemise aside. His hot hands pressed against her back as their bare bodies rubbed sensually together.

"Oh, Collin."

Collin tipped her head back, taking her mouth. His tongue explored its exotic flavor. The taste, the feel of her burned through him.

"Ren—help me undo my pants. I want us naked. Skin to skin. Heat to heat. Melting together."

Her tentative hands found the fastening of his pants.

His hands stopped hers when he saw how hard she was shaking. "We'll do this together. I'll take off my pants, and you remove your bloomers."

Soon they both stood naked. Sweet Saint Margaret, she was lovely. High, firm proud breasts, tiny waist, and flared hips. He wanted to lose himself in her softness.

He led her to the already turned down bed. As they fell back onto it, the sheets felt cool against his flushed skin.

Collin couldn't get enough of her. He wanted to taste and touch every luscious inch. She shivered as he lavished attention on both of her beautiful breasts, stroking each one's nipple till it beaded before taking it in his mouth. She arched beneath him, her moans driving him wild.

His hand sought her center, finding it hot, wet, and ready. As he slid his body over hers, she froze, hands gripping his shoulders.

Collin looked down into her rounded eyes. Swallowing hard, he knew a different tactic was needed. Before she could protest, he pulled her on top of his aching body.

"You take me, darlin'."

"I don't understand."

Collin wondered, with her lack of experience, if this position would work. At least the trepidation had been replaced with amazement.

"What do you want me to do?"

Collin adjusted her hips so she slid down over him. She was so tight, hot, and wet, but ... but ... there was no...

His eyes met Serenity's terrified ones.

"I'm sorry," she moaned, as she tried to pull away from him.

Chapter 15

Serenity was trapped, held tight by Collin's firm grip on her wrists.

"Struggle all you like, lass, but you arena leavin' this bed." Collin's soft burr echoed as loudly as if he had shouted.

Now she knew she would pay.

For long, heavy moments, she sat astride him, his strong hands encircling her wrists, his gaze probing hers. She waited, heart pounding, for some sort of reaction, but got none. Instead of yelling, he lay very still beneath her.

In the suffocating silence, Serenity could hear both of them breathing.

"I don't know what to say," she replied quietly.

"How about the truth? That would be a refreshin' change."

Serenity sighed. She was caught in her own web of lies. How much could she explain of her total situation to Collin and still protect this family from Rudgewick? If he knew the whole story, Collin would feel honor-bound to go after Lord Tarrington. No, she couldn't tell it all.

"I'll tell you what you want to know."

As if sensing that she wouldn't flee, Collin released her wrists. With quiet dignity, she moved to sit beside him. He propped himself up against the headboard, watching her intently. She was just out of reach, with her arms wrapped around her legs.

"Wait a minute." Collin arose from the bed and padded naked across the room to fetch her gown. "If you willna share my warmth, then you must have this."

A look of relief crossed Serenity's face as she took the gown. She appeared more at ease in its generous folds.

Without another word, Collin returned to his spot.

"I'm not sure where to start. After my father died, this man came courting."

"Myles?"

Her body tensed and her hand shook before she quickly covered it up. *How did he know about Myles?* "I beg your pardon?"

"That's the name you cry out in your sleep. I just wondered if you loved him."

Her eyes dropped to the bed. There was a long, uncomfortable silence before she spoke again. If he contacted Myles, that could lead him to Rudgewick. The thought made her blood run cold. What could she say to untangle this mess of lies?

"I used to care for Myles. He was a dear friend, but he betrayed my trust by setting me up with a man who hurt me. This gentleman tried to coerce me into marriage by making me worthless to any other man. He seduced me and then turned violent when I refused to marry him. I could never live with a man who would treat me like that."

* * * *

Collin watched his wife in stunned silence. She looked like an angel with her golden hair tumbling around her shoulders. Serenity's legs were tucked under her gown in a pose he had seen his daughters sit in so many times. She appeared so young and innocent. How could she not be?

Images of their first night together flashed through his mind. She had been terrified. Looking at her now, he could see the old remnant of fear. He regretted that.

"I'm not going to condemn or send you away, if that's what you're afraid of. I knew when we married that you had secrets, but I took those vows anyway. I promised to protect you—and that I will."

"How can you accept this so lightly? Don't you see, I went alone into the garden with him. Aren't you worried that my loose morals will rub off on your daughters? Do you really want a whore for—"

Collin grasped her shoulder, punctuating his words with a gentle shake. "Dinna ever call yourself that ugly name. One mistake doesna make you a whore."

"But—"

Collin covered her mouth with his hand. "I dinna take this *lightly*. I'm hurt that you didna confide in me, but I canna fault you for trying to protect yourself. A woman alone is easy prey. I'm thankful Gran found you when she did."

Collin dropped his hands. "Ren, that doesna mean this conversation is over. I'm willing to forgive your past. It's done. Buried. Now we must begin again. This time with no lies and no secrets."

"I wish for that, too," she whispered, her voice raw with emotion.

"Then you have told me everythin'?"

Serenity didn't look him in the eye. "I tried."

"Come here," Collin said in a husky voice.

Slowly, warily, Serenity moved toward him. He took her hands in his.

"Look at me. I want the truth. Do you have any feelings for this other man? If you do, say so now because I havena done anything to get you with child. I could still let you return home."

He noticed her flinch ever so slightly at his words.

"No, she replied, shaking her head. "When I left, I knew that I would never marry him."

Collin reached out a caressing hand to her cheek. He was relieved when she didn't shrink away from his touch. She was his wife. He had promised to take care of her and protect her. Even if that meant denying himself.

He started to pull his hand away from her soft cheek, but she placed her small hand over his. Then she rubbed her face against his palm.

Collin groaned. "Have mercy, sweet Serenity," he murmured against her open palm as he kissed it.

She laughed a warm, bubbly laugh.

Right or wrong, he wanted her. The thought of another man holding Serenity sent waves of fury coursing through him. Collin didn't want to, but he knew he was falling for her. In that instant, he knew that he had to make love to her again, tonight. Only by intense intimacy could they erase this ghost and forge a new bond between them.

"Look at me, Serenity. Will you trust me?" He inched closer, tugging her on top of him. "I want you verra much," he murmured against her mouth.

"But..." she protested, breaking off the kiss.

"There arena buts." He brushed back a golden curl, then cupped her face in his hands. "Let me wipe away all the bad memories. Let me love you." Collin eased her mouth down to his, taking slow deliberate nibbles. "Mmmm, you taste good, darlin'."

"You ... ah ... do, too." Her voice was breathy and unsteady. "Never thought I would like kissing. But ... you make my mouth tingle."

Collin chuckled. "I can make your whole body tingle if you'd let me. Will you?"

She nodded.

"I promise to be as gentle as I know how, sweetheart." He slid the gown off over her head.

Her eyes widened. "I want you."

Collin shivered at her soft declaration. In one smooth movement, he rolled her underneath him, blazing a trail of kisses down her throat.

"I want to explore every ... mmm...."—he licked across one nipple, relishing her shiver of delight—"delectable ... mmm ... inch of you."

She arched as he took the hard tip into his mouth, gently sucking. Her nimble fingers threaded through his hair, tugging him closer.

"You're sure?" He blew on the other taut nipple.

"Don't stop," she pleaded.

He licked and nipped his way down her stomach, making lush circles around her navel. She tasted like sweet, warm sunshine. When his finger probed her treasure, he was relieved to find her open and wet.

"Look at me darlin'," Collin demanded. He waited for her to open her eyes before he continued. "Can I make you mine?"

"I already am."

Collin thrust inside of her welcoming heat, feeling as if he had come home. She clung to his shoulders, raining kisses along his neck and chest.

"Collin ... I..." She contracted around him, sending him into an earth-shattering climax.

He pulled her close, trying to blank out any lingering doubts and fears. She was his.

* * * *

The next morning Serenity sat on her freshly-made bed, trying to gain some comfort from the breeze rippling through the open window. Her face was flushed, and she prayed she wouldn't throw up again. She smoothed some wrinkles out of Katrina's flower-print dress that Rose had convinced her to make over. It was an odd sensation wearing another person's clothing. Although Alisha hadn't said anything when she saw her working on it, Serenity wondered how the young woman would feel when she actually saw it on her.

Besides, she still had nagging doubts about leaving her mourning clothes behind.

She could hear Collin's heavy footsteps coming down the hallway. She shivered at the thought of confronting him in the daylight. What would he think of her this morning? Last night she had come apart in his arms. She had given all of herself. Afterward, he had held her while she slept.

"The lassies are already in the wagon. Whenever you're—" Collin stared at her with concern written all over his face. "Sweetheart, do you feel all right?"

She had to get moving. "I'm fine," she replied quickly, hoping he would believe her. The man had four daughters, after all. Now that he knew part of her secret, would he suspect the rest of it? She had to put on a good front.

She could see he doubted her words. When Collin dropped beside her and took her hand, her heart lurched. His strong, calloused hand enveloped hers in its warmth. How could she continue lying to him? Yet, how could she not? As long as Rudgewick was in Dry Gulch he could hurt Collin. If Rudgewick ever found out about her condition ... She shuddered at the thought.

"Maybe you should rest." He grinned sheepishly. "I did keep you up verra late last night."

Her face burned at the unbidden memories of their special pleasures in the dark. Never in her wildest dreams could she have thought this man, who used to frighten her, could set her blood on fire. What he could do with those wonderful hands!

She was beginning to love him, Serenity realized painfully. It was up to her to protect him. No one could know about the possibility of a baby until she convinced Rudgewick to leave town.

Now she had to concentrate on appearing fit. With that resolve, she stood a little shakily, but stubbornly.

"I'm fine. I can't make you the talk of the town by missing a church service. What would Reverend Henderson say? Besides, I have to stop by George Brown's office."

Collin's jaw tightened. For a moment, she feared he would argue with her. A thunder of feet interrupted, breaking the heavy silence between them.

"Papa!" Alisha burst through the door. "Grandma Rose says to hurry," she snapped in a perfect mimic of Gran's tone. "Greta is getting restless. She can only keep her clean for so long."

Alisha's eyes raked over Serenity.

Please don't, Serenity prayed silently.

"Is Serenity sick again?" Alisha shook her head.

Serenity wished the ground would open up and swallow her. She couldn't stand the way Alisha and Collin were staring at her. The blood pooled in her cheeks.

"Again?" Collin quirked a dark brow, catching Serenity's elbow as she tried to leave.

His firm grip sent a wave of panic coursing through her. After last night's discovery, she wondered how far Collin would tolerate her secrets before he sent her away.

"Run along, Alisha. We'll be right there." His voice whipped through the tense air like a lash, sending Alisha scurrying from the room.

"What does she mean by sick again?" he asked in a deceptively soft voice. "Have you been ill before that I wasna aware of?"

She tried to pull away, wanting to get some distance between them, but he refused to release her.

"No. I ... I just get an upset stomach when I'm nervous."

"I thought we agreed—no more lies."

His green eyes grew hard, and she knew she had pushed him to the edge of his patience. If he only knew how much she wanted to unload this burden she was carrying. What she wouldn't give to throw herself on his mercy and confess. With Rudgewick here, though, she couldn't do that. Ever.

So they stood there at a silent impasse. She could see his chest heave with every one of his tense breaths. He was putting himself back in control, she sensed.

"Nothing can be that bad, darlin'." He gave a resigned sigh. "I willna force you. It's your choice—either you trust me or not. A marriage without trust isna a marriage at all."

When she didn't respond, his hand dropped. "I'll meet you at the wagon in a few minutes."

As he walked away, Serenity fought the urge to run after him, throw her arms around him, and tell Collin everything he thought he wanted to hear.

Serenity brushed back a tear. Never had she felt so all alone.

* * * *

Inside the general store, Collin watched the determined sway of his wife's hips as she headed off to meet George Brown. He surprised himself that he had let her go alone. He had wanted very much to hear all about the plans to overturn her father's will. He assumed that they were talking about a great deal of money. Enough that it would drive someone to desperate measures to get it. Not that he wanted her money.

It would be more of a complication than a prize. He just thought that unlocking the clues to her father's will might somehow bring the pieces of Serenity's puzzle together.

She had been so insistent, though, that, in the end, he'd let her go alone. He hoped if he gave her some freedom she would begin trusting him.

"Collin?" Wallis's baritone voice broke through his deep thoughts. The sheriff turned to stare in the direction of Collin's gaze.

"What?" Collin asked absently, as he fingered a bolt of blue calico.

"She sure has you tied up in knots. If love does that, I'll pass."

Collin frowned. "I'm not in love." Embarrassed Wallis could goad him into raising his voice, Collin quickly lowered it. "Just concerned. She is my wife after all."

He turned to Hannah, who was eyeing him speculatively after his outburst. "I want enough of this material for my wife to make herself a new dress and a sunbonnet. Is there anythin' else a woman would need?"

"Pretty near everything, from the looks of her. The poor mite is now wearing Katrina's clothes."

Collin sensed the heat rising in his cheeks. He had noticed the dress this morning, but hadn't said anything for fear of embarrassing Serenity. Now he could only pray Anna wouldn't comment. It had never occurred to him to consider how his wife would feel about people knowing she had on a dress of Katrina's. Shame coursed through him. She had obviously

grown up wealthy. It must have taken a great deal of pride to walk away from all that.

Collin groaned when he realized Wallis and Hannah were both still staring at him.

"Can't hear a damn thing through that door," Wallis commented.

Collin hated to admit he pondered trying to listen. He glared at Wallis.

Wallis held up his hands. "Whoa boy, don't git all riled."

"What the hell do you want anyway, Sheriff?"

"Just to report that the telegraph is down again. The man at the train station says Tarrington's story is true, but I think he's lying. Why? I can't put my finger on it just yet. It's making me uneasy that Holt wants to invest in the railroad before I can confirm Tarrington's position."

"I don't know," Hannah spoke up while she folded the newly cut cloth. "Lord Tarrington seems like a polished gentleman to me."

"Smoother than me?" Wallis wagged his dark brows.

Even Hannah's and Wallis's teasing banter didn't ease the tension rippling through Collin. "I want the sewing machine, too."

Wallis's lips twitched.

"Dinna look at me like that. I never bought my wife a weddin' present."

"Uh-huh?" Wallis laughed.

"I'll have Ethan pick it up the next time he comes to town. I dinna have enough room in my wagon today. I better check on my lassies," Collin muttered as he stalked off.

Wallis was right—Serenity had climbed under his skin. Considering what he knew about her, that was dangerous. He was certain she had more secrets. He prayed they were less dark than the one he'd discovered last night. No matter how he felt about her, Collin couldn't let her hurt his lassies. He just wondered where he would find the strength to send her away if it came to that.

* * * *

Serenity stared up at the bright, clear blue sky. Around her, the street was empty, except for the growing number of wagons down at the other end by the church. She should have felt relieved that Collin had let her handle this mission on her own, but strangely, she did not.

The meeting had not been as promising as she had hoped. Mr. Brown's investigator had discovered Myles had left the business in the hands of their manager and gone off on an extended trip. This news made her more determined than ever to gain back control of Springfield Textile Mills, since Myles did not seem to care about them. He was off gambling, no doubt.

That thought made her sad. She wanted Myles to grow up and take his responsibilities seriously. It would hurt him to know that she planned to take Father's business away from him. She wished there were some way to give him a part of it or train him. Mr. Brown did say Myles's financial decisions thus far were sound. He listened and heeded the advice of others. That surprised her. In the past, Myles had assumed

he knew all the answers, even when he did not. *Could there be a glimmer of hope on the horizon?*

Rounding the corner as she left the general store, she found their wagon in front of it. Serenity climbed on the wheel to retrieve her dolls for Hannah. Once they were sold, she could pay George Brown.

Suddenly, two hands came around her waist, lifting her down. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled at the familiar scent of bay rum. *No, it couldn't be.*

"Rennie, is that really you?"

She froze as she recognized the deep, velvet voice. Before she could speak, she was crushed against a hard chest.

"Myles!" Serenity gasped, backing away, torn between relief he was all right and fear of what he would do now he had found her.

"Don't look at me like that. I have come all the way from New York to settle things between us."

The fact he had come looking for her shocked Serenity. She'd never thought he cared that much. *He just wants you out of the way*, she told herself, to lessen the guilt ripping through her right now.

She turned her back on him. "There's nothing to settle."

Myles grabbed her arm, spinning her around. "How can you say that?"

"Because your plans failed. I'm married. And not to Rudgewick Tarrington. I know you thought to get me out of the way so you could squander Father's money, but I won't let you! I worked too hard to keep Springfield Textile Mills going to let you gamble them away."

Shock registered on his face. "Married? To whom?"

Serenity's hand flew over her mouth. How could she have yelled those things at her brother? Where were her manners? Merciful heaven, she sounded like shrew.

Confronting him was harder than she'd anticipated. The old feelings of love bubbled up inside her as she stared into his eyes so very like her own. Yet, in many ways, Myles resembled their father. That thought shocked her. Like their father, Myles always found a way to remain in control. If he knew what her plans were, he would attempt to convince her to stop trying to overturn the will. That was something she couldn't do. Not, and let down all those who had stood loyally by her during her father's long illness.

She took a deep, calming breath. "I married Collin MacClarron. He is a fine, upstanding man with children who need me. At last I have found a place where I'm wanted." Serenity touched Myles's arm. "It's best if you go now. I have made a life for myself here."

She jerked her hand away when she noticed Alisha and Anna going into Hannah's store. How much had Anna overheard from that distance? Merciful heaven, that was all she needed—another complication. Without a word, she stalked off.

* * * *

Even early in the morning this miserable town was hotter than blazes. Rudgewick swore under his breath as he tugged on his cravat.

"It is too bloody hot to even smoke." He tossed his cigar in the dusty street, grinding it under the heel of his boot.

"Been looking for you all over town, Tarrington," Joseph Holt hollered at him, waving from across the street by the general store.

Rudgewick smiled as he watched Holt, the widow Ralston and one of Serenity's brats making their way toward him. Things were falling into place. The money he had paid the man at the train station was proving a good investment. With a little extra incentive, the fool had even lied about the telegraph being down. Money always worked wonders. Never again would he go without it.

"Good morning, Mr. Holt." Rudgewick tipped his hat. "Mrs. Ralston, Miss MacClarron. I was just on my way to church."

"I got the note you sent Kyle," Holt said in his usual blunt fashion. "The amount for the trust fund sounds reasonable. I've gathered a few investors. If you are willing to wait until the end of next week, I should have everything all put together."

Next week. I need to be on a train long before then, Rudgewick thought. If Myles finds the MacClarron connection, he could be here at any time.

Rudgewick reached for his gold pocket watch. *Bloody hell, where has it gone?* "I would love to tarry here, but alas, I have other towns to contact. If you aren't interested, I'm sure there other towns that would love your prized spot. I suppose I could stay until Tuesday."

Holt stroked his white beard. "No need to bother other towns. I will have the money for you."

Anna beamed, batting her eyes. Just watching her made Rudgewick want to get her off alone. It had been a long time since he'd had a lady in bed. The little MacClarron girl smiled at him, too. He returned her smile, wondering why the child wasn't with her stepmother.

"Mr. Holt, I was hoping I could take Mrs. Ralston for a buggy ride?"

"I don't see why not," Holt replied, as Rudgewick winked at Anna.

This day was getting better all the time.

"It is beautiful weather for a drive." She smiled up at him, while Rudgewick imagined all the delicious things he could do with that mouth.

If you like roasting in your clothes, he thought.

As they headed across the street, Rudgewick caught a glimpse of a dark-headed lady. He had had seen her somewhere before, but where? He froze as a realization swept over him. She looked like the maid from Oliver Springfield's house—the one he could not intimidate into divulging Serenity's whereabouts. Why the hell would she be in Dry Gulch? He had to be mistaken about her identity.

"Is something the matter, Lord Tarrington?" Anna asked sweetly from beside him.

"No." He covered her hand with his. He sure as hell hoped nothing was the matter. For once, his schemes were working out. This was one opportunity he could not let slip through his fingers. He needed the money, and Serenity, in order to make his triumphant return to London.

* * * *

On the other side of the street, Fiona ran to catch up with Myles. Her face was pale as snow.

"Are you okay, Miss Cameron?" Myles asked.

"L-lord Tarrington is here in Dry Gulch. I just saw him."

Myles and Oliver exchanged glances.

"Was he with my sister?" Myles pressed.

Fiona shook her head. "She wasna with him."

"That's a good sign. Maybe he hasn't found her yet," Oliver replied in a hopeful tone.

Myles looked around at the one store, livery, saw mill and hotel that dotted the unpaved street. *Not find Serenity here? How could Rudgewick miss her?* A stranger would stand out. Finding Serenity would be no problem for Rudgewick. The question was, what would he do once he found her? Could his friend be so much in love with Serenity that he would travel cross-country to find her?

The venom in his sister's voice when she spoke of Rudgewick haunted him. There was still the matter of the bruises, too. *How could Rudgewick hurt her if he loved her as much as he claimed?*

Myles ran a hand over his tired face. "Let's check into the hotel. Eventually Rudgewick will be back, and when he returns, I want to be there to confront him," Myles said.

Fiona and Oliver began walking away without response. Myles grabbed Oliver's arm. "I need to speak to Rudgewick by myself."

"I don't think that is a good idea, son."

"He is—was—my best friend. I owe it to him to hear his side."

Oliver shook his head and strolled off, leaving Myles alone with a furious Fiona.

"His side?" she snapped, hands on hips. "What about your sister's side? Does she get to explain? Maybe that was why your sister left. She knew you'd trust Lord Tarrington's word over hers."

He flinched as her words hit home. It hurt that she, too, thought him capable of ignoring his sister. He would have helped, if he had only known. Serenity had made it very clear that she didn't trust him. That knowledge put a knot in his stomach.

Now Fiona had turned on him. She reminded him of a spitting kitten. He couldn't help himself; he reached out to soothe Fiona, but she back away. "Dinna even try."

Myles groaned impatiently. "I'm not going to believe him outright. I just have to give Rudgewick a chance to explain. He was there for me when I was alone and frightened at Oxford. If it hadn't been for him, I would have dropped out. The other boys made fun of my Yank accent. I—Bloody hell..." He threw up his hands. "I just don't know what to think anymore."

"Think on this. You are goin' to have to decide who you believe—Lord Tarrington or your sister."

Fiona was right, but whose word could he trust? Serenity had never lied to him, but, then again, neither had Rudgewick that he knew about. Bloody hell, how was he going to sort this situation out?

Chapter 16

Outside the church, Serenity stopped short at the sight of Emily stroking the nose of a black horse whose reins were held by Rudgewick Tarrington.

Serenity ground her teeth. Reverend Henderson had just preached to them all about forgiveness and turning the other cheek. But how could she forgive Rudgewick for so callously taking her innocence? She didn't want to be in the same place with him, let alone have to talk to him. Now she would be forced to or create a scene.

"Good morning, Lord Tarrington," she said with forced brightness.

"Good morning to you, Mrs. MacClarron." He tipped his derby. "Your stepdaughter was keeping me company while I waited for the widow Ralston. Nice day for a buggy ride, isn't it?"

Serenity felt that he spat the name MacClarron as though it were a swear word.

"Did you know Lord Tarrington's family raises horses in England?" Emily asked. "He even races them." Her eyes beamed at the smartly dressed Englishman.

"I didna know you were still interested in riding, Emily," Collin said from behind them. He slipped a possessive arm around Serenity's waist. "How are you feeling, sweetheart?"

"Fine." She worried when she thought she saw a flicker of knowing in Rudgewick's eyes. *Could he sense the truth?* Lord help her if he did.

"Grandma Rose took us riding in New York. I had a pony named Slowpoke," Emily chirped.

"I see. I didn't realize—" Collin started before Serenity flashed him a pointed look, cutting off whatever he was about to say. "I have just the pony for you," Collin said after Serenity gave his arm a reassuring pat.

Emily's eyes rounded. "Really! Oh, thanks. Can we ride this afternoon? Please!"

Collin chuckled. "Slow down, Em. We'll see."

His gaze fell on Rudgewick, who stood ramrod stiff.

"Morning, Tarrington." Collin extended a hand to him.

Serenity held her breath, wondering if Rudgewick would accept it.

"I was just talking to your wife. It seems we share a common background. Have family in England and all."

Serenity tensed. They had not discussed that here. *Would Emily comment?* No, Emily seemed too preoccupied with petting the horse. Serenity didn't like the gleam in Rudgewick's eyes. Her whole body stiffened, waiting for him to mention Myles. Or toss out some careless comment that would link his name with hers and make Collin suspicious. He didn't, though. Instead, he smiled indulgently.

"Collin, help me!" Rose shouted, chasing after a fleeing Greta, who was heading straight for the big horse water trough at livery.

"Excuse me." Collin raced off to intercept Greta.

"I better go help Grandma Rose." Emily spun on her heels and darted off after her father, leaving Serenity alone with Rudgewick.

Rudgewick caught Serenity's arm when she tried to leave.

"I think we have unfinished business," he said in a clipped tone.

"I thank you for not telling my husband about us, but that is all I have to say to you. Surely, you can see that staying on here is pointless. How long do you think it will take Sheriff Wallis to figure out your game?"

Surprise lit Rudgewick's eyes. "Well, well, so my timid lady has gathered courage. Now, why would a gentleman like me want to create a scandal? Tut, tut. I'm not the monster you seem to think I am."

He brushed a finger across her cheek. Her skin crawled at the contact.

"You should have been mine, love. But alas..." He lifted her chin. "When you are tired of playing farmer's wife, you'll come back to me. Maybe then, I can make you an offer."

"That will never happen!" She pushed his hand away.

Rudgewick shrugged. "We'll see. In the meantime, I have more pressing interests."

When Anna waved from in front of the church, Serenity could not help but notice the glimmer of excitement in the young widow's eyes.

"Anna Ralston isn't in your social circle. Don't toy with her."

Rudgewick arched a blond brow. "Jealous?" he sneered. "Unless you're willing to replace her, I think you have nothing more to say on the matter."

Fury coursed through Serenity as she watched Anna strolling down the street toward them, appearing all smug

and satisfied. He would crush her spirit and ruin Anna's reputation. How could she stop him? Would Anna listen to her?

She hurried forward to head off Anna before she reached Rudgewick. Right or wrong, Serenity knew she had to warn Anna about his dishonorable intentions. "Anna, stay away from Lord Tarrington."

"Why?" Anger sparked in the other woman's brown eyes.

How could Serenity explain without sharing her secret? "He will hurt you. I know his kind."

Anna shook her head. Her back stiffened. "You aren't happy with one man ... now you want three. That's right! I saw you with that fancy gentleman."

Serenity gasped.

"Now, get out of my way or I will tell Collin how you two were arguing in the middle of the street."

"Anna ... there is a logical explanation for what you saw. I just can't go into details right now."

Anna shot Serenity an arrogant smirk. "I wonder what Collin would think if he knew the truth about you."

Her words sent a shiver of dread up Serenity's spine. What would Collin do when he learned the whole truth about her circumstances? Serenity stepped back, letting Anna walk past her. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

The situation was fast spinning out of her control, Serenity realized as she headed off across the yard to where Collin was attempting to calm a struggling, bawling Greta. Rose stood to one side. Serenity sensed the older woman was wisely letting Collin handle Greta's display of temper.

"Did you two have words?" he shouted over Greta's sobs. He motioned with his head to where Anna was climbing in to the buggy with Tarrington.

"You could say that." Serenity reached out to stroke Greta's heaving back.

Collin frowned, shifting Greta to a more secure position in his arms. "Hush, baby. I know you're mad. But you canna play in the horse's water."

"I wanna," her little voice croaked. Greta held out her pudgy arms to Serenity. She took the teary child from a very relieved Collin.

"You can play in the bathtub tonight."

Greta's face brightened and she cuddled contentedly against Serenity's shoulder.

"Now that is settled, I better round up my other minxes. Lassies!" Collin bellowed. "Let's get started home."

"Hurrah!" Emily shouted, bouncing into the wagon. "Papa promised me a horse ride today."

Alisha rolled her eyes. "You're making that up."

"Am not."

"Are, too."

"Lassies!" Collin's voice held a thread of restraint close to breaking.

Both girls pouted, glaring at each other. Cherise waved good-bye to the girl she was talking to and headed toward them. "I didn't think anyone would remember me, but Mary Sue does."

Collin patted her head. "I'm glad you are getting back with your old friends." He lifted her up in the wagon, then climbed up himself and settled in beside Serenity.

"You never did tell me if you knew Tarrington in New York," he said as he flicked the reins. "He acts a might friendly if you ask me."

Serenity swallowed hard. *I hope you never will find out the awful truth about my relationship with Rudgewick.* She chewed on her lower lip. "I don't really know him. I just know his type. English noblemen have the unfounded idea that all women swoon over them. That their titles give them the right..." She stopped, realizing what she had almost said.

Collin's gaze held hers. "I protect what is mine, Serenity. If he dares anything, you let me know. I willna let anyone hurt you."

Serenity felt an odd sense of pleasure at his words. She knew he meant them. "Thank you. That means more than you'll ever know." She smiled at him.

In the distance, she saw Rudgewick drive his rented buggy down the street with Anna beside him. The man didn't give up anything without a fight. She had an uneasy feeling about what he might have planned. She considered telling Collin the whole truth, but couldn't bear the thought of him hating her. All she could do was pray Rudgewick would lose interest in the chase now she was married and beyond his reach and return to New York. *Not bloody likely, though, now that Rudgewick had upped the stakes and involved a new player.* Heaven help her, she must find a way to get rid of Myles and Rudgewick before her lies began unraveling.

* * * *

"Did you have a good time, dear?" Inga asked as Anna swept into the house after her buggy ride with Rudgewick.

Anna hesitated, unsure of how to respond. The Englishman was different from what she had expected. Once they were alone, he'd lost some of his polished manners. It was almost as if, because she was a widow, he had expected her to have loose morals. She shook those thoughts away.

"It was wonderful, Mama. I showed him all the scenic spots. We enjoyed the place in the shady grove by the river, and he couldn't believe the view from the top of the ridge."

Inga frowned, rolling out three piecrusts. Anna hated it when her mother gave her that look. It made her feel like a naughty child. Moving back home after Jamie died had been a mistake. Standing here in the warm, cinnamon-and-spice-filled kitchen, she felt the years roll back to when she was that awkward, little girl. Anna's jaw tightened.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm a grown woman and a widow. I can handle being alone with a man."

"Like what, dear? I don't know what you're talking about." She folded the crust over a pie tin without looking up. With the fluid ease of years of practice, she did two other as well, in moments. "I'm glad you had a good time. I've been worried about you since Collin brought home his new bride."

Pity—this was worse than she'd thought. Anna let out an exasperated sigh as she began filling the crusts with dried apples. "Ah, Mama, not you, too. I'm fine. Honestly, Collin is not the last man in this state." She shrugged. "Who knows,

maybe I'll marry Rudgewick and go off to live in his big house in New York."

Her mother looked as unconvinced as Anna felt.

They stood in silence filling the pies. Something about Rudgewick bothered her. His kisses were rough—unlike Jamie's tender ones. It was almost as if he didn't care whether she enjoyed them or not. Then again, maybe she was overreacting. After all, Jamie was the first and only man she had ever been intimate with. She could get used to Rudgewick's rough kisses. Actually, they excited her a little and made her feel slightly out of control.

"I need to check on Jimmy." Anna wiped her hands on a towel. She couldn't take her mother's concerned gaze any longer.

Heading into Jimmy's bedroom, she put a hand on the sleeping boy's head. The things her precious pumpkin could see in New York City! She closed her eyes, imagining everything. No more being the object of pity. She would show everyone that Anna Ralston didn't need Collin MacClarron.

* * * *

"Damn," Wallis swore as he slumped down in the hard desk chair. Rudgewick was getting ready to leave town, and the sheriff still had no proof he was a swindler. He just couldn't shake Tarrington's story. Everyone backed him up.

To make matters worse, Desiree had been avoiding him since the night they played checkers. How the hell could he help people who wouldn't help themselves?

* * * *

Serenity squared her shoulders, pushing her courage to the edge of its limits. When the girls had suggested a ride this morning, she had been amazed that Collin had agreed. Yesterday Ethan and Mr. Holt had brought over their horses that he'd been keeping for them ... Collin had been convinced that they forgotten how to ride. Much to his displeasure, Rose had confessed she had taken them riding in the park on many occasions. They did prove to be good riders, so Collin finally agreed to let them ride outside the corral.

They'd begged her to come along at dinner and again at breakfast.

She had avoided riding yesterday, claiming she needed another one of Rose's cooking lessons. Now, though, they all expected her to come along. Even Rose had offered her a riding habit, so she had no excuse to decline their offer.

She used to ride as a child. How hard could it be? This would give her a chance to see all of Collin's land. But as she stood, fists clenched at the gate to the corral, her courage faltered.

"Are you ready?"

She jumped as Collin's voice sounded behind her. He was holding the reins of a shiny black horse with white stockings. Alisha, Cherise, and Emily followed, leading their mounts. Even Greta looked excited.

Serenity swallowed hard. "I'm ready as I'll ever be." She tried to keep her body from shaking.

"Have you ever ridden with this type of saddle before?"

"Yes," Serenity lied. She had only been allowed to ride sidesaddle as befits a proper lady. She had watched her mother ride this way, though. "It has been a while."

"How long?" Collin asked as he hoisted Alisha onto her gray horse.

"My mother's family raised horses. She was an accomplished rider. One day, while trotting through the park, her horse shied and threw her. She broke her neck. Father shot the horse and never let me near one again." Serenity's jaw clamped shut. The wide-eyed expression on the girls' faces made her wish she had never told this story. An uncomfortable silence loomed around them until Alisha braved to ruin it.

"How awful," Alisha said.

Cherise's eyes rounded. "What did you do?"

"I locked myself in my room and cried."

All three of the older girls nodded in silent understanding.

Collin paled, but said nothing as he lifted Cherise onto her bay horse. But, she noticed, he hesitated before lifting Emily onto her small pony. Serenity felt a rush of compassion when she saw his hands tremble. Her story bothered him more than he dare let on in front of the children.

"How old were you?" he whispered as his strong hands encompassed her waist.

Never admit a weakness, her father had always said. "Eight." Serenity's gaze met Collin's worried one when he handed her the reins.

"Sorry seems inadequate, but that is all I have to say. Would you be more comfortable riding in the corral?"

Serenity looked at the disappointed faces around her. They had been so excited that they'd hardly eaten any of Rose's famous pancakes. She couldn't let them down.

"I have to learn if I'm going to live here. If we go slow, I'm certain I'll be all right."

"If you're sure." He studied her face for a long moment, before she leaned down and patted his shoulder. "I'll be fine. I promise."

"Me! Me!" Greta danced around. "I ride with Papa."

"Come here, little lassie." Collin lifted Greta up and climbed on behind her.

Serenity clenched her reins, watching Alisha knee her horse forward. When hers began to move, she was relieved. *So far, so good.*

As they rode through a field of wildflowers and yellowing grass, Serenity was awed by the vast expanse of open space. From the top of the ridge, she could see forever. The birds chirped a happy tone, making her spirits soar. The rush of breeze cooled her face. At last, she felt at home.

Suddenly, without warning, Serenity's horse lunged forward.

"Stop, please." She yanked back on the reins, but to no avail. The horse tore off across the pasture, while she tried to cling to anything she could get a grip on.

Behind her, she heard the girls scream, but she couldn't let go long enough to turn around. She could hear a thunder of hooves. Was Collin catching up with her? Merciful heaven, she hoped so. A tree blocked her path. Before she could duck, a

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

branch slapped her face. She felt herself falling, the ground rushing up to greet her. Her head hit something sharp.

Just like Mama, she thought, as everything went black.

Chapter 17

Collin's heart leapt into his throat when he saw Serenity fall off her horse. She hit the ground with a dull thud. How could he have been so stupid? Collin cursed himself a thousand times as he dismounted and lifted Greta down. Greta danced, all upset, beside him.

Fighting his fears, Collin knelt beside Serenity. Her face was pale, but her breathing was steady. Her eyes were closed.

"Will she be all right?" Alisha reined in her mount next to him.

"I dinna know," Collin replied in a hoarse voice. He wondered how the hell he could carry Greta and Serenity at the same time.

As if reading his mind, Alisha answered his unspoken question. "Let Greta ride with me."

He only hesitated a moment before handing Greta up to Alisha. His stomach knotted as he balanced Serenity's limp body on the saddle while he mounted. Collin held Serenity close during the ride, barely able to see the path through his own sheen of tears.

"Come on, sweetheart," he whispered into her hair. "Dinna leave me now. I need you." He brushed a kiss across the top of her head.

The ride back to the house was the longest of his entire life. Even the girls were quiet, except for their soft sniffing. *They fought their tears hard like brave little soldiers, who*

wanted to go exploring with the famous Uncle Oliver, Collin thought wryly.

This was his fault. He should have made them practice once more in the corral. He didn't even know how to contact her family if something went wrong and she ... Collin forced back those negative thoughts as he approached the house.

Rose rushed out of the house to greet them with her apron flapping. "I was so worried when Starlight came back without a rider."

He thanked God Ethan was there.

"Serenity's horse bolted and she hit a tree branch."

Without a word, Ethan reached up and took Serenity so Collin could dismount.

"I'll fetch Doc Hogan," Ethan said, "as soon as we get the girls down."

"Go now," pushed Rose. "I'll take care of the lassies and their horses. I'm not totally helpless."

In the hot bedroom, Collin laid Serenity on the bed. He checked her body over for broken bones. To his relief, he didn't think he found any. But why wouldn't she wake up? That terrified him. She could die without ever knowing how he felt about her.

"I'll loosen her clothes so Doc Hogan can check Serenity over," Rose said behind him. "Why dinna you wash her face."

As he leaned over Serenity, his hands braced on either side of her head, he could feel her soft breaths. Collin gently touched her pale cheek. "Serenity, can you hear me? Please open your eyes."

Her eyes flittered open.

"Sorry," she moaned.

Collin knelt down beside the bed. She looked so small and fragile. He prayed she would be all right. He would never forgive himself if another woman died because of his incompetence. Not when he was starting to fall in love with her.

Collin stood; his eyes met Rose's worried ones.

"It isna your fault," she said quietly.

"The hell it's not," Collin retorted.

* * * *

A couple of hours later, Collin paced back and forth in the parlor, running a trembling hand through his hair.

"Doc Hogan is taking too long. I should go in there," he grumbled.

Rose put a restraining hand on his arm. "Let the doctor finish examining her."

"I shouldna have talked her into riding. Hell's fire—she was so scared. To think her mother died like that."

"I know, but..." Rose's words died as Doc Hogan strode into the room.

Collin trusted the older man implicitly. Doc had delivered all of his children and fixed Emily's leg. He had even struggled with him through the hard, long night when Felicity and Katrina died. "How is she, Doc? I'll never forgive myself if something happens to her."

"Easy, son. Your wife should be just fine. No broken bones that I can see. A few bruised ribs. She hit her head and that concerns me most. Keep an eye on her, and let me know

when she wakes up." He paused, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "She had a small amount of bleeding, but I think she should keep the baby."

Collin's body stiffened. "Baby?" he repeated blankly.

"Ah, she hadn't told you about that yet. She might not know herself this first time. Women tend to want to be sure before they get their husbands all excited about being fathers. Something about bad luck." He patted Collin on the back.

Collin was thankful Doc hadn't questioned him about how his wife could be pregnant so soon.

"I better get going. I have a few more stops to make and let me know if there are any changes. I didn't give her anything for pain because of the head injury."

"Thanks, Doc." Collin shook his hand, his mind still numb from his new discovery.

"Is Serenity going to be all right?" Alisha asked as Doc Hogan passed her on his way out the door.

"I think so."

Rose slid her arm around Alisha. "Why dinna you take your sisters outside to play, so Serenity can rest in quiet."

Collin felt Rose behind him, rubbing his back.

"You knew," he said as much as asked.

"I guessed."

Collin didn't have an answer. The pieces were beginning to all fit together. He now knew the other part of Serenity's dark secret. Her constant need to please him made sense. Knowing what he knew now, Collin realized she'd had every reason to fear him. He held her life in his hands.

That thought disturbed him. He wouldn't send her away. He cared too much about her welfare to do that. At the same time, he couldn't trust her. Every time he thought she had told him all her secrets, he discovered that he had been lied to once again. How could they ever have a real marriage with all this distrust standing between them? Collin let out a harsh breath.

Rose pulled on his arm. "Collin, be gentle with her. She needs your compassion and understanding, not your anger."

"I'm not angry, Gran. I dinna know how I feel."

With that, he walked into their bedroom. She looked so fragile and pale in their big bed. He knelt down beside her, brushing back a strand of golden hair. "We have so much to discuss, little Ren. Why couldna you tell the whole story?"

He ached for the lonely woman who wouldn't—or couldn't—unburden herself. Yet, her silence stung. She didn't trust him to protect her. How could he blame her when he had done such a poor job of protecting Katrina and the girls? What hurt most was that, even after all the intimacy they had shared, she still saw him as the enemy.

We don't have a real marriage, he mused. It wasn't a partnership based on mutual trust because she would rather suffer in silence than face him with the truth about her situation.

He took her limp hand in his, giving in to the tears he didn't know he could still shed. How could this woman have come to mean so much to him in such a short time, without him realizing what was happening? She touched his heart

with her to-do lists, and the small ways she makes his house a home and them a family.

Why hadn't he realized sooner how much he was beginning to care for her? Maybe if he had she would have shared her burden with him.

Collin realized, with no satisfaction, that he had gotten the cold kind of marriage he'd thought he deserved. Boy, had he been wrong about what he wanted. Unfortunately, that knowledge was a little too late to ease the pain in his heart.

Oh, Gran, how could you offer me a chance for love and happiness knowing it might bring me only emptiness and longing?

* * * *

"Damn," Rudgewick swore under his breath when he spotted Myles Springfield leaning against his hotel room door. A night of losing high stakes poker at the Silver Spur and a pulsing hangover put him in no mood to face his old friend.

Myles straightened, his face taut. "Good morning, Rudgewick."

"Morning, Springfield. I don't need to ask why you're here in Dry Gulch. I suppose you're wondering what I am doing here?"

"Damn right. If you knew where my sister was hiding, why didn't you tell me?"

Rudgewick let out a long, exasperated breath as he unlocked the door. He motioned Myles inside. "Why don't we step out of the hallway? This is not a topic you want to discuss in such a public location."

Myles followed him into the small, sparsely decorated room. "Why? Are you worried people will find out you've been less than a gentleman?"

"No, but I doubt you want the good townspeople to learn how unstable your sister Serenity has become."

Myles's back stiffened. *Serenity unbalanced?* She did act a bit irrational when he found her on the street yesterday.

"What do you mean by that?" Myles asked, not sure he wanted an answer.

"While we were at Maxwell's soiree four months ago, your sister became overcome with grief when someone mentioned your father. I took her out to the garden to comfort her. Unfortunately, Serenity was inconsolable. She misread my intentions."

Myles stroked his chin. "You kissed my sister?"

"Yes, she was so sweet—it went a little further than I intended. I frightened her."

"I see," Myles replied, caught between outrage and understanding. He, too, had pressed for more than kisses with maidens. It wasn't something he was proud of, but he knew how fast impulses could take over when the right lady was involved.

"You do believe me, don't you, Myles? I would never intentionally hurt your sister."

Damn, Rudgewick was convincing. It took every ounce of willpower Myles possessed to keep him from believing Tarrington.

"I want to believe you, for the sake of our friendship, but you have to make me understand. I need to know what happened the night Serenity disappeared."

Rudgewick blanched. "I was afraid you were going to ask me. I'm not proud of my behavior that evening." Rudgewick began pacing the room.

"What did you do?" Myles strolled toward him. He wanted to vent his frustration on Rudgewick. Instead, he stood with his fist clenched, listening.

"I tried to convince her how right we were together."

"That doesn't explain the bruises."

"God! I left bruises?" Rudgewick raked a hand through his hair. "Sometimes I don't know my own strength. I think because the stress of grief was too much for her, she started fighting me. I couldn't let her run back into the ball all hysterical like that, so I tried to hold her until she calmed down. Instead, she hit me and fled."

"She gave you that scar?"

Rudgewick nodded.

Myles watched his friend for any signs of lying, but Rudgewick seemed sincere. How could his sister have hit him? It seemed out of character for her.

"I followed her. When I discovered she had left town, I felt so guilty. I knew I had to find and help her. It was my duty as your best friend to bring Serenity home safe."

Myles stood silently, contemplating the story Rudgewick had told him. His sister had always listened to reason in the past. Why not this time? Considering her irrational behavior

at their last meeting, Myles could see her being hysterical at the ball.

Maybe that was why your sister left. She knew you'd trust Lord Tarrington's word over hers. Bloody hell, could Fiona be right? Think on this—you are goin' to have to decide who you believe—Lord Tarrington or your sister. Fiona's dire prediction haunted him.

"She got married." Myles watched his friend for a reaction.

"I know." Rudgewick sighed. "Maybe getting away from the painful memories in New York was the best thing for her. I think she didn't know what to do with herself after your father passed away."

* * * *

Rudgewick relished the myriad of emotions racing across Myles's face. His plan was working. He could almost taste Myles's internal struggle of whether to believe him or not.

"I've come to discover she and I weren't suited after all," Rudgewick said, twisting the knife deeper. He needed Springfield off balance so he could finish his mission.

Myles ran a tired hand over his face.

"I'm sorry," Rudgewick said quietly.

"So am I."

Leaning back against the dark wood door, Rudgewick watched his friend leave. For the first time in ages, he felt remorse over his treatment of Serenity. But not enough to change his goals. He touched the scar. They hadn't been suited. She was too bold, too independent, to ever make him a good wife. Not like the widow Ralston, who needed a man in

her life. He smiled. The little widow came with land, a hefty dowry, and no dark secrets. Maybe fate hadn't rained on him after all.

* * * *

Hands braced on both sides of the bedroom window, Collin watched the Holts' wagon drive up.

He didn't need this right now. He groaned as he watched Joseph hand Inga down. The woman had brought food! He was definitely in trouble.

It took only a matter of minutes before their voices were heard in the hallway. Rose had answered the door.

"Ethan told us about Serenity's fall. How is she?" Concern laced Inga's tone.

"Restin'," Rose replied. "That's all Doc Hogan can do for her right now. She is just bruised up."

Collin stepped into the parlor, dreading this conversation. "My wife is fine." Collin smiled at Inga and Joseph. "I appreciate your concern, though."

"I brought bread and chicken with noodles. It will make the evening easier for Rose."

Rose hugged Inga. "Thanks. I hadna given thought to supper. Let's put it where it will stay warm."

Collin turned his attention to Joseph, who was idly playing with his hat.

"I'd like to talk to you about something, Collin. I ran into Lord Tarrington yesterday morning before church. He has done his calculations for how much the railroad needs."

Joseph pulled a paper out of his pocket. "Here's what I figure each man would owe."

Collin took the paper. The figure was slightly higher than he had anticipated, but not so high he would dismiss it outright. "I think I can come up with this amount. I vote, though, that we wait until Wallis gets a telegraph back about Lord Tarrington." Collin wasn't ready to share any of Wallis's other suspicions.

Joseph shuffled his feet. "Normally, I'd agree with you, but we don't know how long the telegraph will be down. I've convinced Lord Tarrington to stay an extra day, but that's all he'll promise. Then he plans to visit other towns. We don't want them to get the jump on us."

Collin frowned.

"I know you don't trust the man because he has been making eyes at Anna. Damn it, man, you're married. Anna can take care of herself. It isn't like the fella is staying around. She knows that."

"You think my objections are based solely on my jealousy of him and Anna? Come on, Holt, you know me better than that. I rarely make snap decisions." *My last one was a disaster.* He thought of his rash decision to marry Serenity and why he never rushed to judgment. He got burnt every time. Their problems wouldn't exist if he had taken the time to get to know her better.

"You have to let go of her, Collin. Seeing Lord Tarrington is one of the first signs of Anna putting her life back together. I was really worried when she moved back in with us and let Kyle take over her farm."

Collin sighed. Maybe Holt was right. Maybe he was judging Tarrington based on emotions. "I'm in, Holt. I'll have the money tomorrow. I have to stop by the saw mill, so I can visit the bank, too."

Holt shook his hand, while Collin fought back his nagging doubts.

* * * *

"And you believed Tarrington? My boy, I'm appalled at you." Oliver Springfield tapped his pipe against the arm of the chair. "Your sister has been secretly running your father's holdings for the last six years. You expect me to believe she suddenly crumbled now?"

Myles rose and stalked to the edge of the balcony overlooking the dusty street. He braced himself, arms spread against the white wooden rail. "Why couldn't she crumble? With Father gone, Serenity didn't need to be strong. She was so close to him. Grief does strange things to people. I remember well how Father behaved the day Mother died."

Myles cringed at the painful memories of his father storming through the house with his hunting rifle. "Bloody hell, I can still see them returning—my pale, frightened sister, wild-eyed, blood-splattered father and poor, broken Mother." Myles threw back his head. "He locked himself in the sunroom with her for three days! Only Charles was allowed in. If you hadn't arrived when you did, I think he might still be holed up in there."

Myles blinked back the tears burning in his eyes at the memories. "I've never seen anyone grieve like that. He even shot her horse."

Oliver stood, putting the pipe in his coat pocket. "Edward was devastated by Victoria's death. But it was a shock. Edward had been suffering for years. Serenity knew he would eventually pass away. Doctor Holmes never promised he would recover."

Myles opened his mouth, but Oliver raised a quieting hand. "What shocked your sister was all this business with the will. Serenity has acquired an independent streak. I fear she expected to continue running things. I tried to convince Edward to bring you back and put you in control, but he steadfastly refused."

"He didn't trust me," Myles said. His shoulders slumped. "My own father thought I was an irresponsible rake. It seems Serenity holds the same high opinion of me."

Oliver put a hand on Myles's shoulder. "Your father didn't want you to turn out like me. I inherited my title at sixteen, when my parents were killed in a carriage accident. Your father was four years old. I raised him and ran the family estates with an iron fist. Then, when my wife, Isabelle, died, I saw no sense in it all. I shut myself off from all those I loved and pursued my own interests. It wasn't until I met Rose that I realized how lonely I had become."

"I don't understand. What has this to do with the way Father handled Serenity and me?"

"Your father thought if I had done things in my youth instead of raising him that I would not have left my family

behind to seek my own pleasure. Edward was wrong. It wasn't grief or resentment that sent me away. It was a longing to seek out adventures in the far corners of the world that was eating at my soul. I would have left sooner if not for my responsibilities.

"I don't regret those years I spent raising Edward. We were closer than most brothers. I do, however, regret the last years. I should have stayed in New York and helped Edward and Serenity, instead of gallivanting off like a footloose child to parts unknown."

Myles frowned. It hurt to lose the illusion of Oliver as the happy world traveler. Maybe this all made sense in a twisted sort of way.

"If I had known, I would have helped my sister."

"I know. Your father wanted you to live life and enjoy your youth, not end up the cynical old man he thought I had become."

Oliver moved to the balcony and braced himself in a pose very similar to Myles. "Your father both regretted and cherished his relationship with Serenity. They were very much alike. Sometimes I think he forgot she was a girl. Then, when he remembered, he felt guilty for her not having a normal life with a family. I think he sought to change all that by reversing your roles after his death."

"Do you think she is angry with Father and me?"

Oliver nodded. "And hurt. Rudgewick took advantage of her confusion. He lies with ease. Myles, don't be taken in by him. Hear your sister out."

"I'm sorry to interrupt." Both men jumped as Fiona stepped out into the sunlight. "But I couldn't help but overhear. I agree with Lord Stratten."

"Serenity has everything Father wanted for her. Maybe it would be best if I left her alone."

Oliver turned to face him. "The question is, can you live with yourself? I think it's time I left you two youngsters alone. Remember, I will not be far away."

Myles felt suddenly tongue-tied as he stood face to face with Fiona. She knew more about him than any other woman he'd courted. She knew all his shameful secrets and deepest hurts. Being with her was like being naked. "Miss Cameron, can I ask you a question?"

She nodded.

"If a man say..." He shrugged. "A friend of the family, whom you didn't like, tried to kiss you—and maybe more—what would you do?"

"Slap him and get away from the scoundrel."

"Would you tell anyone?"

"No. I would be too embarrassed. Someone might think I had falsely encouraged him. If he was a friend of my family's, it would make it doubly awkward."

"Why is that?"

"On the one hand, I would have to be nice to this man, for the sake of family peace and appearances. On the other hand, I would have to keep reminding him I meant no. That I wasn't just being coy."

Myles pressed a palm against her flushed cheek. "Are you being coy with me?"

Fiona stepped back away from him. "No." She shook her head. "I'm being honest. There is no future between us."

"I wouldn't hurt you, Fiona."

"You might not mean to, but you have the power to break my heart."

"Why is that?"

"Because you make me hope for somethin' that could never be."

Myles framed her face with his hands. "What if I wanted it, too?"

She put her hands around his wrists. "You only think that right now because you are caught up in the moment. I am here and you need comfort."

His gaze probed hers. "What about love?"

"Dinna, Myles. Dinna make me say things that will come back to haunt both of us."

Myles saw the fear and uncertainty flickering in her eyes. He wanted to kiss her. To hold her slender body tight against his and shut out the doubts and fears, if only for one night. But would that make him like Rudgewick? Would pressing his advantage now be wrong? As much as he regretted the insight, Myles knew it would be unconscionable to take Fiona while she was vulnerable.

He brushed a soft kiss across her trembling lips and pressed his forehead to hers. Her sweet breath mingled with his as he stood savoring the moment.

"When everything is settled with my sister, we will talk, Fiona. Be forewarned. I mean to have you in my life. You have to decide what you want to do about it."

* * * *

Collin paused outside Serenity's door when he heard his daughter's pleading voice.

"Please don't die, Serenity," Alisha begged. "I promise to be good. No more telling you the wrong ingredients for food, or riling up the chickens, or making the pigs squeal."

From where Collin stood, he could see Alisha kneeling beside Serenity's bed. Serenity slept too hard to notice. He softly walked into the room, placing a hand on her trembling shoulder. Alisha stood up, throwing herself into his arms.

"Oh, Papa, I'm so sorry. I dinna mean to wish her away." Alisha's burr was thick through her sobs. "I'm cursed," she wailed. "I made Mama and Felicity die, and Serenity is going to, too. I changed my mind. I dinna want to her leave. I never meant to be mean to her. I was scared of staying. I had just made friends in New York."

Collin stroked Alisha's back. Then pushed her to arms' length. "Wait a minute, Lish. You had nothing to do with your mother's or sister's deaths any more than you caused Serenity's accident. There are many things that happen in life that are out of our control. These are a couple of them."

He pulled her back into his embrace. "Granted, you havena been as cooperative with Serenity as you could have been. But even you canna will people away."

"Really?" Her voice squeaked.

"Really. Doc Hogan said Serenity needed to rest. Soon she'll be good as new."

As he held his trembling daughter, Collin prayed that just this once, God didn't make a liar out of him.

* * * *

Serenity's eyes slowly opened. Her mouth felt like cotton. Around her were the anxious faces of the MacClarron girls.

"You're awake?" cried Alisha. "We've waited so long."

"Papa, come quick!" Cherise yelled, bouncing.

"Yes, hurry, Papa!" Emily hollered.

Collin strolled into the room, his eyes brightening when he saw her.

"Wh-what happened?" Serenity asked, trying to sit up, but the pain in her chest wouldn't let her.

"You ran into a tree branch," Collin said.

"Lassies, go tell Gran. She is fixin' supper."

He stood silently beside the bed. His expression was world-weary and taut.

"Is something wrong? Why are you looking at me like that? Did I break ribs or something?"

"No." He stroked his chin. "You're fine. In fact, Doc Hogan says you'll keep the baby."

Chapter 18

The blood drained from Serenity's face. "Keep the baby," she whispered. Her hand went over her mouth. Silent tears ran down her cheeks. "I d-didn't know how to tell you. Believe me, I have wanted to so much." She covered her face with her hands.

Collin couldn't stand watching her cry. He felt her pain as deeply as if it were his own. He cursed himself for blurting out his discovery like that. His only excuse was that it had been plaguing him all afternoon. With a sigh of regret, he climbed onto the bed, scooping her up in his arms, and pressed her hot face against his chest. He stroked her golden hair. "There, there. Let it all out."

She sucked in a sob. "I can't believe I'm crying," she moaned, her voiced muffled in his rough, plaid work shirt. "I didn't cry for Father. I've been so strong, and now I'm falling apart."

Her body shook. Collin tightened his grip on her as another gut-wrenching sob racked her body.

"I-I can't st-stop."

She continued crying for a few minutes, soaking his shirt. With a great measure of willpower, she took deep, gulping breaths as the tears stopped flowing. He continued stroking her back until her breathing slowed.

"Feel better?" he asked.

"Y-yes. Remarkably, I do." She pulled back away, accepting the handkerchief he offered from the nightstand. "I always thought bawling was for children. Father was never

one to show emotions. 'Keep a stiff upper lip,' he would always say. Sometimes I think he wanted me to be a man."

The tears began trickling down her cheeks. Her body trembled with the effort to keep herself under control.

"It is okay, sweetheart. Take a deep breath, and we can discuss this when you're ready."

"I'm sure you remember how things are right after a death. People feel compelled to bombard you with comments and words of sympathy. When I couldn't take the smiling and accepting condolences any more, I slipped out to the garden. He followed me out there." She looked down at her hands, crumpling the handkerchief. "It started off so innocently with me crying on his shoulder. He held me. We kissed."

Her voice broke. "Before I knew what was happening, I was on the ground, trying my best to make him stop..." Serenity closed her eyes at the shameful memories.

"When it was all over, he told me I now would have to marry him. I simply stared, knowing there was no way I would ever agree to spend the rest of my life with him. To do that." She shivered. "Every night."

Collin took her cold hands in his warmer ones. "Why didn't you tell anyone about this? Surely, you had some family member who would have helped you."

She tensed at the mention of her relatives. "Who would believe me? He was well thought of and I'm eccentric. After all, I went into the garden alone. Everyone would say that I asked for what happened."

* * * *

Collin stiffened, knowing she was right. This man had taken advantage of her, and she would endure the brunt of the blame, even if she rejected him.

"Besides, even three months later, my guardian continued to push this man on me. The night I fled—this man was enraged that I refused to marry him. He tried to choke me. I think he would have killed me if I had not hit him and run."

At that moment, she looked so small and frightened sitting there. Like one of his daughters. Fury coursed through Collin that someone could have taken such cruel advantage of her innocence.

"Were you goin' to try to make me believe the baby was mine?" He voiced the question that had been torturing him ever since he'd learned the truth.

She shook her head. "No. I wanted to tell you as soon as it occurred to me, but I was afraid you would send me back to New York. Every day I kept my secret, the harder it was for me to tell you. I knew that you'd see me differently. I hated being damaged in your eyes."

Damaged was hardly a word Collin would connect with Serenity. She had a remarkable inner strength. Regardless of how he felt about her lying, he admired her resilience. She'd stayed strong when others would have crumbled.

Her head dropped down. "Are you going to send me away?"

The question startled him. Did she truly think he would cast her out? He had made a pledge to protect her, and Collin MacClarron never went back on his word.

"I realize a fallen woman is hardly the sort of person your daughters need as a stepmother." She went on, each accusation searing like arrows through his heart.

"Once I overturn my father's will, I can manage on my own. Please, just give me a little more time to get my life in order."

"No," Collin replied slowly. "I'm not thinkin' of sendin' you away. At least not for the reasons you think. I just wonder if in your delicate condition that you might be better off in New York, where life is easier."

Serenity pulled away, looking at him with soft, watery eyes. "I don't understand. How can you just accept me?"

Collin squeezed her hand. "I'm hurt you dinna trust me with the truth. But I understand why you felt you couldna." He pulled her close, tucking her head protectively under his chin.

"Many years ago a shipmaster named Ian found a beautiful lass crying behind a fish barrel. This lass loved a verra wealthy man, who was already married. He told her about his wife only after he had gotten her with child."

Serenity sat up, covering her mouth with a hand. "What did Ian do?"

"Ian MacClarron married her. His mother, Rose, took the lass and a babe to her heart. Even when the lad's parents were killed, she cared for him. When he gave her nothing but hurt, she loved him anyway."

Ian MacClarron was not Collin's father.

"Surely Rose doesn't hold the circumstances of your birth against you. That doesn't sound like the Rose I know."

Collin shook his head. "She never even told me. I found a letter among my parents' things. A friend of father's confirmed it."

"Then what is the deal you made?"

"Gran gave me the money to start my farm. She pushed Gramps into letting me leave the shipping business. I hated the sea. I realized what a terrible sailor I was when my own weakness led to the death of my younger brother, Chris. I was so sick on every voyage that I couldn't think clearly. I confessed my fears of drowning to Gran, and she released from my obligations to Gramps."

"I see, and that is why you took on a second wife that you didn't want."

Collin's head whirled. He didn't want to want Serenity, but he did. The thought of losing her in childbirth terrified him. Having Greta almost killed Katrina and then there had been the miscarriage, so he knew all too well the dangers expecting a child could bring. Expressing his fear wouldn't help either of them now.

He brushed the tears off her cheeks with his thumbs. "Dinna say that, sweetheart. You brought sunshine back into my life."

He feared, though, that all too soon it would go out. How could he keep her at a distance when all he wanted was to pull her close?

"Now promise me this is all the secrets you have to share."

"I promise," she said softly.

"Good. I dinna like surprises. I can deal with problems if I know about them. I canna tolerate lies. Marriage is based on

trust." Collin took Serenity's chin in his hand. "You didna have regrets about marryin' me over your back-East beau?"

"No, I made the right choice."

"Good. I willna bring this up again. The baby is ours."

He leaned over and kissed Serenity's lips. He could still see a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. Did she still mistrust him? Collin didn't like the nagging fear that gnawed at his stomach when he strolled out of the room.

* * * *

The next morning, Collin looked up from mucking out stalls to find Wallis looming in the barn doorway.

"What brings you out here, Sheriff?"

"I heard from Doc Hogan that Mrs. MacClarron took a nasty spill. He told me when he was patching up a couple of boys who decided to argue over a soiled dove at Lilly's Lovenest. Both are doing fine, though. I made them repair the damage to Lilly's parlor instead of going to jail. They were none too happy."

"I bet." Collin chuckled.

"Doc Hogan said your wife wasn't hurt too bad, just mostly shaken up."

Collin opened a fresh straw bale, tossing its contents into the stall. The pregnant mare needed a clean bed for her soon-arriving foal.

"She could have been hurt much worse." Collin swiped a dirty arm across his damp forehead. "It took years off my life."

"I can imagine it would. You're starting to care for the little lady?" Wallis took a rake and began spreading the loose straw.

"Don't look at me like that, Wallis. I'm married to the lass. Of course I'm concerned for her welfare."

"Uh-hum."

Collin set down the bale he was going to use next.

"She is expecting," he said tonelessly, waiting for Wallis's smart-ass reply. Instead, he saw concern on his friend's face.

"How do you feel about that?"

"When I see her look so fragile and small—it scares the hell out of me. Remember what a time Katrina had birthing Greta and she had done it before."

"I didn't mean that. I mean about the baby not..."

Collin had his duster in his fists before Wallis could finish. He slammed Wallis hard against the stall wall.

"Dinna even say it or think it. The baby is mine. I am her husband. Anyone who says differently will answer to me," Collin growled.

Wallis's powerful shoulders tensed with restraint as he brushed off Collin's hands and stared at him in stony silence. "I'm not saying anything the rest of the town won't be thinking and whispering behind your back. They can all count, you know."

Collin stiffened at Wallis's heat-charged words. Wallis was right. This wasn't the end of the speculation. The subject would never drop. Maybe not to his face, but behind his back, people would count the months and make predictions. Damn

Rose for putting them all in this position. He hoped he was strong enough to handle the gossip that would soon occur.

"I'm sorry," Collin said gruffly, stepping back.

"Me, too, but I can't change the cold, hard facts. You'd better learn to get a grip on yourself, Collin, or you'll never survive this scandal."

Despite his brave words, it bothered the hell out of Collin that some other man had prior claim to Serenity. It seared his soul that she had been hurt. Heaven help the bastard if he ever caught up with him.

* * * *

It was a slow night at the Silver Spur now that most of the cowboys had gone back to work. Only a light haze of smoke filled the air. There were a few regulars trying their luck at two poker tables. The sound of the tinny piano muffled their conversations. Wallis rubbed the gold watch as he took another swallow of root beer. He noticed Desiree stroll through the Silver Spur. It must be even slower over at Lilly's Lovenest, if Miss Lilly was sending her girls over to flirt with the cowpokes at the Silver Spur.

She had only passed one of the poker tables, when Rudgewick reached out and grabbed her.

Wallis wished he could hear the conversation, but he could tell from the frightened look on her face that Desiree found the thought of spending the evening with Tarrington terrifying. Desiree was one of the few of Miss Lilly's girls who was nice to everyone. The thought of someone mistreating her brought out every protective instinct in him.

He stalked over to where she was struggling against Rudgewick's firm grip.

"There you are, darlin'. Sorry, I got busy talking to the bartender. You ready, honey?"

Rudgewick rose from his chair almost, knocking it over in his haste. "I have first call."

"Oh really?" Wallis said with deadly menace. He used his extra few inches of height to try to intimidate the Englishman. "I thought we had a deal, Desi?"

Relief flashed across her eyes. "Sheriff Wallis is right, I promised to meet him here." She smiled appreciatively and linked her arm with his.

Rudgewick scowled as he released her other arm. "Maybe next time."

"There won't be a next time," Wallis heard her mutter under her breath.

As they left the Silver Spur, Wallis felt her relax beside him. Her face was so pale and eyes wide with shock, he feared she might faint on him. Hoping to keep that from happening, he scooped her up in his arms. Heading down the boardwalk, he bumped into Bridget's mother and Mrs. Richardson. Damn, now he would be the talk of the quilting bee tomorrow. Only Desiree snuggling close made the embarrassment worthwhile.

He carried her around to the Lovenest's back door to avoid Lilly's sharp tongue. They climbed the fancy red-carpeted staircase. Desiree's pink door was opened, so Wallis carried her inside and slammed it shut with his foot.

Much to his dismay, she turned her back on him and began silently undressing as soon as her feet touched the ground. Damn, he hadn't thought past getting her away from Rudgewick. Not that he couldn't enjoy bedding her. They always had hot, steamy sex together. Whenever he received a bounty or reward, they often spent the night celebrating.

But not tonight. Her stiff movements told him that she still hadn't recovered from whatever had happened the other night. He didn't want her sleeping with him out of gratitude.

When she slid off the gown, he saw the fading bruises on her back. They angered him beyond belief. It hit him then that he had seen her with Rudgewick before. Now he had his proof that Tarrington was no gentleman.

"Did Tarrington do this to you?" He turned her around and, taking hold of her wrists, he brushed a thumb over the red handprint. She had marks on her chest, too. He hadn't noticed those the other night either because of her high collared dress.

"I told you I can't discuss that. Lilly would kick me out. Now do you want a tumble or not?" With a flourish, she pulled the comb out of her hair, sending the blonde curls cascading around her shoulders.

It struck him at that moment how much she resembled Collin's new wife. Staring at her, Wallis wished he could shake loose his nagging suspicions. The fact that Collin's wife was carrying and the English gent had showed up at the same time was too much of a coincidence. He hoped, for Collin's sake, that his suspicions were unfounded. Being a father to a nameless man's child was very different from having the man

stalking your wife. Tarrington could be dangerous. Damn, he needed his buddy's lawman's skills. But if his hunches were correct, then Collin would have too much of a personal stake in this situation to be able to take any objective actions. Reacting out of passion could get Collin killed.

Desiree began slowly pulling up her dress, her face tight with the shame of rejection. "You don't want me, do you?"

Wallis frowned. How could he explain this to her? He hadn't meant to hurt her. He pulled the money out of his pocket and handed it Desiree.

"No offense, Desi, darlin', but I'd rather wait until you feel up to loving. You know how rowdy I can get. Besides, I still have to make rounds tonight."

She grimaced. "If you leave now, Lilly will put me back on the floor. Rudgewick may come."

Wallis winked at her. "Then how about a game of checkers? Winner owes the loser a night to remember."

* * * *

Your sister is unstable. The words had been haunting Myles's thoughts and dreams for the last two days. He dreaded seeing his sister again. What would he say to Serenity?

He glanced at Fiona sitting so stiffly beside him. Despite the fact she was crushed between himself and Uncle Oliver, she had somehow managed to not let any part of her touch him. That annoyed him to no end. He wanted to have the security of her nearness. It hurt that, despite her words of encouragement, she had pushed him away, too.

Uncle Oliver slowed the horses on their rented buggy. "If my directions are correct, this must be it." He pointed. "There's a white house with a fancy porch."

Myles squinted in the bright afternoon sunlight. Sure enough, off in the distance was a small white house with a big barn. Several horses grazed in the pasture. All around them was wide-open space.

"What a wondrous spot!" Fiona exclaimed, her eyes wide.

"I agree," Oliver put in. "Always did like the open spaces. If I had my way, I would stay permanently at my country estate."

Myles couldn't comment. All he could think about was that his sister was here. How could he face her again?

"I have to do this alone," Myles said, hoping his tone sounded more resolute than he felt.

Fiona surprised him, by reaching over and squeezing his hand. Very softly, under her breath, she whispered, "I know you'll do the right thing."

Myles looked full into her innocent blue eyes, wondering if her trust in him was misplaced. He didn't even know what was the right thing to do. He was caught between believing the twin sister that he had grown apart from and the friend he had spent the last five years with. *Which person was telling the truth? Could Rudgewick actually be the monster Serenity feared him to be? Or was it all a grave misunderstanding?* Had his sister given up her place in New York society and married a stranger out of a misguided sense of fear?

Oliver caught his arm. "You need me, boy. Trust me. She won't slam the door in both of our faces."

Myles shrugged, knowing it was pointless to argue, because once Uncle Oliver set a course of action, there was no dissuading him. Besides, he didn't relish the thought of facing his sister alone. Uncle Oliver was right, she might not talk to him, but she'd never turn away their uncle. So, without further comments, Myles climbed out of the buggy. His steps felt sluggish, weighted down with the hands of dread. What would he say to Serenity when she opened the door? Was showing up unannounced a mistake? He prayed with each step that by coming here he wouldn't be hurting her any more than he already had. If she slammed the door on him, he would leave without creating a scene and somehow would learn to live with himself. He just prayed it wouldn't come to that.

* * * *

Serenity's heart constricted when she pulled open the door to find Uncle Oliver and Myles standing on the porch with a familiar, dark-headed young woman. She was glad to see Uncle Oliver, but not Myles. When her eyes met the woman's, Serenity recognized her as Fiona Cameron. It surprised her to see Fiona. Then again, maybe not. She had always sensed that Fiona liked Myles, but kept her distance out of fear of losing her job. Fiona waved at her, and she lifted her hand in greeting.

"Are you going to ask us in, Rennie?" Myles asked as his gaze searched hers.

Her hand squeezed the doorknob so hard she could feel the design imprint pressing into her palm. She could slam the door on Myles, but not Fiona and Uncle Oliver. Merciful heaven, she was in trouble now.

"Have we rendered you speechless, my dear?" Oliver asked, his gray eyes twinkling with mirth. "A sight, I must say, that I never thought to see."

"What are you doing here?"

Myles's gaze continued to probe hers. "How could you think we wouldn't look for you? Once I found you, did you honestly believe that I would go back to New York without at least attempting to set things right between us? I'm asking you again, are you going to invite us in?"

Serenity hesitated. How could she explain their sudden appearance to Collin?

"Who is it?" Cherise yelled.

Serenity froze. The girls would ask questions—embarrassing questions.

"Is it Uncle Ethan?" Emily hollered.

"No," Myles replied with a twitch of his lips. "It's a ... ahum ... Uncle Myles."

Now he had done it. Within seconds, a thunder of small feet could be heard as they came clattering down the loft steps.

Emily burst into the room first. "The brother who always gets stuck in the tree?"

"Humph, you told them about that." Myles put his hands on his hips in mock annoyance. "Rennie always did tell stories on me."

Serenity's mouth dropped open. Before her stood the teasing young man from their youth.

The girls bounced up and down, firing questions at him.

"Why did you bring Lord Stratten with you?" Alisha asked.

Lord Stratten— Serenity's insides chilled. How did they know Uncle Oliver?

"Who's the lady?"

"Fiona Cameron," Myles replied.

Fiona waved at the girls, while Uncle Oliver stood with folded arms, taking in the whole scene with his usual amused, relaxed stance.

"Where do you live, Uncle Myles?" Cherise wanted to know.

"I lived in England, but now I'm back home."

"Are you really brother and sister?" Alisha asked, tapping her finger against her chin, as she walked around Myles, taking in every part of him. "You don't look alike, except for the color of your hair and eyes."

"We are more than mere sister and brother. We're twins."

The girls' eyes widened.

"Did you bring us anythin'?" Greta pulled on Myles's coat. A surprising reaction, considering how she was usually shy with strangers.

Myles ruffled Greta's hair. "Now what kind of an uncle would I be if I showed up empty-handed?"

He pulled some lemon drops out of his pocket. "These are a bit sour, but they're my favorite."

All the girls except Greta each put one in their mouth.

"Mmm!" Emily smacked her lips.

Alisha and Cherise nodded in agreement.

Fear gripped Serenity's stomach. They liked him. That meant they would believe whatever he said. Her mind raced with the implications of this new wrinkle.

"This doesn't change anything," she blurted out.

Myles froze in the process of lifting a giggling Greta high above his head. "I didn't think it would. But I had hoped..."

"What? That I would simply forget everything that has happened? You have no right to interfere in my life, Myles. I'm—"

"Surprised to meet the elusive Myles," Collin's deep voice rumbled from the doorway. "Serenity has told me next to nothing about you."

Chapter 19

"I can explain," Serenity said.

"I certainly hope so, but I have my doubts," Collin replied, his arms folded uncompromisingly across his broad chest. "It would be interesting to hear why the man whose name you cry out in the night has shown up here. If he isn't your boyfriend, then who is he?"

"My brother." Her head dropped.

"I just wonder if I can believe this new version. You have changed your story so many times I am beginning to wonder if you're even capable of telling the complete truth."

"Now see here, my good man, are you calling my niece a liar?" Oliver snapped. The older man marched toward Collin.

"Who the hell are you?" Collin thundered, irate that another man was protecting his wife from him.

"Oliver Springfield, the Earl of Stratten."

Collin was rendered speechless by this man's announcement. This was the famed Uncle Oliver, who charmed snakes, ran from cannibals, and saved ladies from sultans. He wanted to laugh. The man before him was at least as old as Rose. Somehow, despite his somewhat robust appearance, Collin couldn't picture him scaling any palace walls.

"Now, Ollie, let's not start a fight," Rose pleaded from the doorway. Emily was tugging her into the room.

"See, Grandma Rose, I told you that your earl is here."

Ollie. Your earl. The words hit Collin like a bolt of lightning. *Rose knows this man.* From the familiar way she laid her

hand on his arm, Collin would guess they knew other very well.

Sweet Saint Margaret. The situation was becoming crystal clear. Rose did not just *want* him to have a new wife, she *needed* him to have one. He could understand now why his daughters couldn't stay in New York. Funny, Gran didn't look so small and fragile anymore.

"Gran," Collin said. "I canna believe it. You, of all people, lied to me. You didna want my lassies to interfere with your new life, so you fixed things."

Rose's eyes clouded over with tears, and Collin instantly regretted using such a harsh tone.

Serenity flew to Rose's rescue. "How can you be so cruel to her?"

"Dinna let the tears fool you, lass. My grandmother and your uncle have been seeing each other. Ask my lassies if you dinna believe me. I just want to know, did you know about them, too? Were you a part of Gran's grand plan?"

"No, Papa," Alisha said. "We did not know until just now that Grandma Rose's earl was Uncle Oliver."

"The one with all the adventures?" Emily asked, her eyes rounding at the very idea. "How come you never told us your stories?"

"He did," Cherise put in. "We just didn't recognize them. Remember at the circus, when he told us about riding an elephant in India?"

"That's right." Alisha clicked her fingers. "He told us about hunting buffalo at the Wild West Show. He even knew Wild Bill Hickock."

Serenity's gaze met Rose's. It was all true. The lady Uncle Oliver had been singing ditties over before he went to Africa was Rose. Now she understood all the Scottish collectibles, tartans, and the sudden interest in William Wallace. Why he wanted to buy some land in Scotland. Dear heaven, it all made terrible sense now.

Serenity tilted her chin. She gave Collin a glare. "No, I didn't know. But now I understand why she so willingly took me into her home."

Rose grabbed her arm. "I would have taken you in regardless." The pain in her expression tugged at Serenity's heart, but did nothing to lessen the feelings of betrayal.

"Stop making this all sound so tawdry." Oliver put an arm around Rose's trembling shoulders. "This is the woman I plan to marry."

"What?" Collin exploded. "You are not going off to the ends of the earth with this man. I forbid it. Grandfather would roll over in his grave. He'd haunt me forever for not taking better care of you."

Rose opened her mouth and then closed it. Her eyes filled with tears, but she blinked them back.

"Wait a minute, Mrs. MacClarron." Myles stepped forward to confront Rose. "If you knew our family, then why did you hide Serenity from me?"

Rose waved a finger at Myles. "I wouldna leave a dog in the care of a rake like you."

Collin raised his hands to silence the outpouring of heated words. He pinned Myles with a harsh glare. "You have a hell of a lot of explaining to do, Springfield. How could you leave a

poor lass unprotected and at the mercy of others? What kind of brother are you?"

Serenity flinched at the undisguised anger in Collin's voice. He was protecting her, she realized.

She glanced over at Myles, who'd stiffened at Collin's gruff tone. Although not as tall or as brawny as her husband, Myles held himself with an air of English nobility. Years away at boarding school had taught him confidence. They faced off—her aristocratic brother and rugged husband.

"And marrying my sister when she was needy is the mark of a gentleman?"

"Someone damn well had to do something. Do you know what happens to unprotected women left alone on the street?"

"She wasn't alone. Serenity has a bloody family."

"Is bloody a bad word?" Emily asked Serenity. "It sure sounds like one."

"Emmie," Rose chimed, "this is not the time to ask questions."

The two men snarling at each other didn't even glance in Emily's direction. Instead, their eyes stayed pinned on each other.

"Then where the hell were you?" Collin snapped.

"It wasna like that," Fiona put in. "Myles has been searching everywhere for Miss Serenity. He is not a rake, honest, Mr. MacClarron. He hasna touched me in the whole time we've been together."

"He took me in when no one else would. He even let me wear your clothes, Miss Serenity. I hope you dinna mind."

* * * *

For the first time, Serenity really looked at the young woman defending her brother so valiantly. She was, indeed, wearing a traveling dress of hers. It was funny, with the differences in their coloring, Serenity wouldn't have recognized the dress as being her own if the young woman hadn't brought it to her attention. In fact, the gown looked better on Fiona. Serenity realized, with a jolt, how little the things she had left behind meant, now that her life had changed. It was up to her to keep Collin from killing her brother.

Greta wrapped her arms around Serenity's waist. The girls covered their ears.

"Make Papa stop yelling," Greta wailed.

The two men stood nose to nose in stunned muteness.

"This is not a discussion to be having in front of the children," Serenity said sternly.

"I quite agree," Rose said, pushing between the two angry men. She pinned Myles with a withering look. "I think it is time for you to leave, sir."

Myles didn't budge. Determination the likes of which Serenity had never seen was etched on his face.

"Serenity is my sister and therefore my responsibility. I have no intention of leaving her here for your pleasure."

"Jolly well put," Oliver boomed, pounding Myles on the back. "About time, too. Always knew you had the makings of a man. Just needed some backbone."

Rose stepped forward. "No, he hasna acted like a man. You should have seen the condition she was in the night I found her. Her dress..." Rose glanced around at the wide-eyed girls.

"Lassies, if your arena going to leave, then cover your ears. Grandma Rose is going to turn the air blue."

Emily giggled, poking Myles. "That means she is gonna use inappropriate language. You are gonna get it now. Somebody is always in big trouble when we have to cover our ears."

"Enough, Emily," Rose chimed. "Dinna talk about it. Just do it!"

Rose took a deep breath as the girls all dutifully covered their ears. Her hand went into a fist at her hip and she waved the infamous finger at Myles. "Her dress was torn. Her neck was all red and forming bruises. How could you even think of letting her marry that animal? Why, if I were a man, I would have called you both out myself."

Serenity's face flamed and she put a hand over her mouth. One arm hugged herself, while her body trembled from the effort to hold back tears.

Myles blanched.

The urge to strangle him left Collin as soon as he could see that the boy was visibly shaken by Gran's heated accusations.

"Rudgewick did that to you?" Myles placed a shaky hand on his sister's shoulder, but she shrugged it off.

"Rennie, I had no idea. Honestly." The words were torn from him in a harsh whisper.

In a raspy, tear-strained voice, Serenity replied, "Why did you think I didn't want to go the Billings' ball with him? I tried to tell you that I wanted to stop seeing him, but you insisted."

Myles threw his hands up in the air. "I thought he would look out for your interests with Father gone."

"I wouldn't need anyone to look after my interests, if you hadn't stolen Father's business from me."

"How could you expect to run our textile mills, Rennie? You're a woman. You need a husband and a family."

"She has one now," Emily put in, uncovering her ears.

Myles froze when all eyes were upon him.

"You don't understand," Serenity spat. "No one does."

"No, I don't. Why couldn't you have come to me about Rudgewick's rude behavior?"

"You would have believed me? I think not. I was ruined. You would have forced me to marry Rudgewick Tarrington. That kind of help I didn't need. I'd rather try my luck on the streets than live as Rudgewick's wife."

Collin stiffened as though he had been punched. *Rudgewick Tarrington*. The name burned like hot oil through his veins.

His gaze met Serenity's. Hers widened with shock and fear, as she realized what she had blurted out.

"Why didn't you tell us that you knew Lord Tarrington?" Cherise asked.

"Yes, why didna you?" Collin parroted.

"I think you know the answer to that question."

"Unfortunately, I do, and that's what is scarin' the hell out of me," Collin said as he stalked from the room.

* * * *

"What a bloody mess!" Oliver blustered as Serenity followed Collin out the door.

"Uncle Myles"—Emily tugged on his hand—"you still haven't told me if 'bloody' is a bad word. It sounds like one."

Myles ran a hand through his hair, staring down at the pixie, who demanded an answer. "Yes, sort of." Myles paced. "Do you think I should go after them?"

"I think you have done enough," Oliver thundered. "And you..." He pointed at Rose. "Have done more than enough."

"She certainly did," Alisha put in. "We saved Serenity."

Oliver groaned.

"Which is more than I can say for you," Rose spat back at Oliver.

Myles continued pacing nervously in front of the big bay window. His gaze roamed over the room. It wasn't as fancy as their home in New York. No, it was warm—more filled with love and family. Myles cringed at the thought of taking this all away from Serenity. Had he ruined his sister's marriage by coming here? Behind him, he was only vaguely aware of Mrs. MacClarron and Uncle Oliver arguing.

"Rosie," Oliver protested, "what the bloody hell could I have done? I was an ocean away. If it makes you feel any better, I would have thrashed Tarrington for you. Or better yet, held him down so you could pummel him yourself."

Rose shook her head. Her lips twitched. "I could never stay mad at you, Ollie."

"Does that mean I'm forgiven?"

"I'll think about it. You have much to answer for, Lord Stratten."

"Uh-oh—does that mean your wee lassies need to cover their ears again?"

Rose rolled her eyes. Her face became a somber mask. "I may be too angry to express myself properly."

"Why is that, my lady? We've always been able to talk."

"I thought I was your lady, but your staff knew the truth. I was a mere diversion on your journey to seek never-ending adventure. Someone to trifle with while you settled your affairs."

Oliver's face turned beet red. "Then they were wrong in their assumptions about our situation. You were never a mere diversion—there is nothing mere about you, Rosie. I love you. I want us to be married."

"Married?" Alisha's eyes rounded.

"You'll be our grandfather?" Cherise asked hopefully.

"Marry." Emily groaned.

"That means you are leaving us?" Alisha protested.

"No!" Greta burst into tears.

Rose picked up Greta. "No, darlings, I'm not leaving you." She glared at Oliver. "Nothing has been decided yet."

"Now who's putting things off? You're the one running from your feelings, not me. I laid my cards on the table. I'm not getting any younger. A long engagement is out of the question. I have to get my book finished and be back in London for the social season."

"London!" Alisha gasped. "That's a long ways away."

Rose threw up her hands. "What makes you think I want to go to England?"

"To be with me," Oliver said. "I plan to show you the whole world."

Myles coughed, hiding a smile behind his hand. Fiona shot him a silencing look.

"You can show me the world," Cherise piped up. "I know all your adventures by heart. I want to hunt tigers in Africa and fight pirates and..."

Oliver's mouth fell open. "Who told you all that?"

"Serenity," the girls said in unison.

"Seems I'm not the only one Rennie talked about," Myles put in.

Oliver looked helplessly at Rose. "Do these stories change your feelings for me?"

"I dinna know, Ollie. Oops! The tea kettle is whistling." She stalked off, with the girls following close behind.

"Rose, be reasonable," Oliver said to the dead space.

Myles snorted behind him.

"Ah, the course of true love is never smooth," Myles teased, despite Oliver's glower.

"You're a rogue, Myles Springfield," Fiona said, "for teasing your uncle like that."

"I know," Myles replied despondently, as he watched his sister and brother-in-law outside. He could feel Fiona standing beside him. He longed to take her hand.

Serenity and Collin were having a heated debate from the looks of it. He could see the tense restraint in Collin's

shoulders. Despite his anger, Myles knew in his gut that the man would never hurt his sister.

Fury coiled in Myles that he couldn't say the same thing about Rudgewick.

"She made a wise choice of husbands," Fiona said, patting his arm.

"I can see that. I just feel cut off from her decision. I always thought I would be friends with the man Serenity married."

"You will be someday." Fiona patted his shoulder.

"Not bloody likely," Myles muttered. "Not damn bloody likely."

* * * *

Collin braced himself against the fence rails. He struggled to cool the fire raging inside him. He could sense Serenity behind him. Her soft perfume gave her away.

"You weren't even going to tell me about Rudgewick, were you? The man kissed your hand..."

Serenity leaned on the fence beside him. "I couldn't tell you, Collin." The wind whipped the hair around her face. "How could I?"

"Answer me one thing, Mrs. MacClarron. If you hadn't fallen from the horse, would you have ever told me the truth?"

Serenity squeezed the rough fence rail. "I don't know. I feared I was increasing, but I didn't know for sure until Doc Hogan confirmed it."

Collin's shoulders slumped as he released a long, slow breath. "I'm sorry. I promised to never bring up the baby's father and here I am throwing it in your face. I guess I'm just shocked to learn about Tarrington is all."

Serenity slid her small hand over his work-roughened one. "I know." She gave him a sad smile. "I was afraid if you knew it was Rudgewick that you might call him out."

"I damn well ought to. He should be horsewhipped." Collin turned to look at his wife. He savored her hand in his. He could see the savage torment in her eyes and longed to comfort her, but his pride wouldn't let him. "Do you know all about Rudgewick's schemes?"

"Some. Enough to know he is probably lying about being with the railroad."

Collin tipped his head back, staring at the light blue sky. The warm breeze burned his face. "I need go tell Holt before he gives the man money. How the hell am I going to explain this?"

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"So am I," Collin replied hoarsely. "So am I." He stood in silence for a moment. "I asked you if there were any more secrets, and you lied. How can I trust you, Ren, when you lie or omit information at every turn? We canna have a marriage like this."

"I know. Do you want me to leave?"

"I dinna know what I want. It just hurts too much to think at the moment." His heart felt heavy when he turned to leave his wife. What the hell was he going to do?

Chapter 20

Lies. Serenity had told him more lies. The words echoed over and over in Collin's ears, pounding with the rhythm of his horse's gait.

He had forgiven her when he learned about the baby. That gesture had been simple. Ian MacClarron had taught him the power of unconditional acceptance. His parents had loved him. That he'd never doubted.

Yes, he owed them a big debt. Sensing what his mother must have gone through, he wanted to give something back by helping Serenity. He owed his mother's memory that much. He slowed his horse to a walk. When had his feelings about the situation changed? Collin sighed. When he discovered he knew the man Serenity had been involved with.

Handling an anonymous suitor was one thing, but dealing with it being someone he knew and disliked was definitely another. Not only that, but he had a bad feeling she wasn't ever planning to tell him the truth. He had confessed his suspicions about Rudgewick and Serenity had just sat there listening. The lass would have covered for the man, while Rudgewick was going to steal the town blind.

Anger coursed through Collin as he dreaded explaining the situation to Joseph. Holt would no doubt ask how he came by his sudden insightful knowledge. How could he face his former in-laws again if he confessed the truth about his wife? Collin cringed, thinking about all the pitiful looks he would receive. Hell, this tidbit of gossip would be hotter than a prairie fire.

Up ahead, Collin noticed a buggy parked off beside the river. As he neared it, he could hear Anna's high-pitched giggle.

Collin's blood pounded. There was Rudgewick with Anna on his lap. They were kissing and cuddling.

Serenity's words echoed in his mind—*The next thing I knew, I was on the hard ground...*

Rage seized Collin as he bolted from his horse. He stalked over to the buggy and ripped Anna off a surprised Rudgewick.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," Collin roared, "kissing out here in broad daylight—where anyone..."

He stopped his tirade when he realized Anna's eyes were filled with tears.

Before he could comfort Anna, Rudgewick lunged at him and sucker-punched him in the stomach. In a blind rage, Collin struck back. Fists flew, along with heated words.

"That's no way to treat a lady, MacClarron," Rudgewick snarled.

"You're a fine one to talk about treating ladies after what you did to Serenity."

Anna's back stiffened. She whirled around to face Rudgewick with her eyes blazing. "Serenity! You were involved with her? That's why you came here?"

"Now, dear heart," Rudgewick pleaded, trying to reach out for her, but she kept slipping away.

Anna slapped back Rudgewick's attempts at comfort. "You stay away from me." She held her hands up to ward him off. "You-you pole cat. I don't want anything to do with you, heartless vermin."

Collin forced his way between Rudgewick and Anna. "Leave her alone. Havena you done enough damage?"

"Me?" Rudgewick shoved Collin away. "What have I done? I'm the innocent party in this. Serenity seduced me."

"You lying son of a bitch!" Collin exploded.

Rudgewick dodged Collin's fists. "It's true. Seems her father's will stated that she needed a husband in order to gain control of her inheritance."

Her father's will. Collin's fists stopped in mid-air. The same will she had seen George Brown about overturning. Come to think of it, she never did tell him what those changes were she wanted.

Anna, who had been pouting by a tree, came sauntering back. "Looks like your wife had ulterior motives for marrying you after all."

Collin froze. He couldn't refute her words, and it hurt like hell. Yet, if Serenity needed a husband so badly, why didn't just she marry Rudgewick? Because the bastard had mistreated her. Watching Rudgewick's righteous indignation, Collin wondered if Serenity's new version was exaggerated. *Did she just want a husband she could control?* If so, she had married the wrong man.

Tarrington dusted off his jacket. "I followed her here because she has been unstable since her father's death. Bloody hell, she even ran from her own brother."

Myles. Damn, he had almost forgotten about him. He had even asked her about the Myles she dreamed about almost nightly and she'd lied. Would she ever tell him the whole truth?

"Marry in haste, regret at your leisure," Anna taunted, linking arms with Rudgewick.

Without a word, Collin climbed back on his horse. The burning need to confide in Joseph waned. Serenity had lied before. Could he believe her now? So many doubts still plagued him. He didn't trust Rudgewick, but could he trust his wife?

Collin turned his horse around. He had too many questions to approach Joseph Holt with only vague suspicions. Maybe he should talk to Wallis? The thought of sharing this humiliating story with him made Collin's blood run cold. No, the only person who knew the whole sordid truth was Serenity. The big question was: Did he dare confront her? Could he live with her answers?

* * * *

No sooner had MacClarron disappeared from sight than Anna released Rudgewick's arm. "We don't have to pretend any longer. I know the real reason you are courting me. To make her jealous."

"You're wrong, dear heart," Rudgewick cooed, but Anna flinched away from his touch.

Damn Serenity. Never in his wildest dreams had he ever thought she would tell anyone about what had happened between them. He thought it would always just be their scandalous little secret; one he could pull out and use whenever he needed a hold over her. But she had let it out. The chit had ruined everything. Now, Collin would destroy his

plan with the Holts. Not only would he lose the railroad money, but...

He could see Anna, arms folded, off in the distance. She had soft, pleasing curves with nice, full breasts. Her face wasn't bad either, heart-shaped, with full, rosy lips. She was a bit obstinate, but he could deal with that. He would show her who was boss once they were married.

Stroking his mustache, he thought out all the possibilities. Holt would be less likely to turn an in-law in for fraud. He could sell her land or keep it and be partners with her brother. Kyle Holt could do all the work, and he would reap the rewards.

Besides, his parents would like Anna. Well, maybe not like, but they would at least tolerate her. She wasn't divorced, which was a big plus. His mind was made up. Wooing Mrs. Ralston would solve all his problems.

Rudgewick cleared his throat and made his way towards a sulking Anna. "Mrs. Ralston," he said smoothly, "why are we letting those two win?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Don't you?" He arched a golden brow. "MacClarron and his new wife will make us both look like fools. You will be painted as the desperate widow chasing after me—the smooth-talking scoundrel. Fodder for gossip for years to come. What do you think?"

Anna's hands balled into fists at her side as she turned to give him her back. Rudgewick slid up behind, pulling her to him. With the evidence of his desire pressed firmly against her round bottom, his hand began caressing her full breasts.

She moaned, her rigid body relaxing to mold with his. Excitement surged through him. All was not lost.

"You melted in my arms a moment ago," he whispered huskily in her ear. "Don't tell me that your feelings have changed."

"No, they haven't." Her voice was rough with need. "That's what frightens me."

"It shouldn't, love. I can make you happy."

Her body shuddered. "No!"

"Oh, yes. I can take you away from here. I have several estates in England. Your little boy could attend the best schools and have private tutors."

"I don't believe you." Her voice cracked when his hands continued their calculated pursuit.

"That I have estates in England?" He nibbled on her earlobe.

"No." She groaned. "That you want to marry me. I've seen the way you look at Serenity. You want her."

Rudgewick laughed harshly. He wiggled even closer, so she could feel the full impact of his desire. "Does this feel like I want Serenity instead of you?" he asked, with just enough inflection to make him sound sincere.

"No."

"To be honest, I did want her once. She has made her choice, though. I'm too much a realist to fret over what I can't change. What do you say?"

She pulled away from his insistent hands. Her chest heaved with the effort to put herself back in control. "Just don't embarrass me, Tarrington. Chasing after one man who

didn't want me was humiliation enough for one lifetime. I don't think I could live through any more."

Rudgewick grabbed and kissed her hard and deep. Relief coursed through him at her eager response. He would take her, dress her up and, with the money he gained from Anna's land, he would show his father that he had settled down. With any luck, his old man would put him back in the will. Then, once he had inherited the title, he would leave Anna and her brat in the country, so she wouldn't embarrass him in front of his sophisticated friends.

"You won't be sorry." He gave her another quick kiss to seal their deal. "I'll dress you like a queen."

What more could she expect from this marriage? She would have security, money, and the privilege of his title. He would have a dutiful wife and a mistress in town.

Now, if he could only get even with Serenity, his life would be perfect.

* * * *

Wallis stood when Desiree waltzed into Miss Lilly's gaudily decorated parlor. "Howdy, Miss Desiree."

"Howdy, Sheriff." Her expression held a note of uncertainty.

He sensed it was confusing to have him visit her in the light of day. "I want to ask you some questions about Rudgewick Tarrington."

"I'm sorry." Her gaze dropped. "You know I can't talk about that."

As she started to walk off, panic set in. He had to find a way to crack her shell. He needed answers that he felt only she could give.

"Does the name Serenity mean anything to you?"

She froze.

Ah, a flicker of hope. He pressed his advantage. "The woman looks just like you."

Desiree turned and stared open-mouthed at him.

"I have a sinking feeling that Tarrington hurt her, too. Think about it. When you're ready to talk, I'll listen."

He gave her a quick kiss as he strolled out the door. The emotions racing across her face told him his words had hit their intended mark. Now all he had to do was wait.

* * * *

Fiona slammed her fork down and glared at Myles. "I thought you were many things, Myles Springfield, but a coward wasna one of them."

Oliver coughed, but it didn't daunt Fiona.

"You've come this far and now you're going to leave without fixin' things."

"I believe this is my cue to go outside for a smoke." Oliver rose, putting his napkin on the table.

"Oh, thanks for the support. Since you can't get anywhere with your woman, you're going to let me bumble with mine."

"Learn from me—it is always best to hear our ladies out." Oliver patted his shoulder. "Makes for more comfortable meals."

He winked. "I think you have it easier, my boy. My Rosie has a few more years of stubborn under her belt than Fiona does."

As he walked off whistling a waltz, Myles slumped down in his chair.

"We can discuss this now or later, but it won't go away," Fiona said.

Myles straightened up. "For your information, I don't want to just leave, but I don't see that I have a whole lot of choice. My sister needs to get settled with her family."

"Uh-huh." Fiona sat back in her chair with her arms folded.

"What good will going back out there do?" Myles shrugged. "I should have never gone in the first place. Now Collin is mad at Serenity. I have not done one bloody thing right since I stepped off the boat in America."

Fiona tossed her napkin down on the table and began stalking out of the empty hotel restaurant.

"Where the bloody hell do you think you're going?" Myles called after her.

"Outside, where I can bluster."

"Fiona, wait." Myles stood, tipping over his chair. Setting it right, he pulled money out and flung it on the table. Muttering an oath, he followed Fiona outside. He grabbed her arm as she stalked up the boardwalk and smiled politely as they walked by two of the town's women. Once they passed the livery at the end of the street, Myles paused beneath a huge oak tree.

He whirled her around to face him. "Let's hear it. I can feel the tension vibrating through you. Tell me what a scoundrel I am." He threw up his hands. "I deserve all of your scorn."

Fiona touched his cheek. The softness of her warm gloves soothed his flushed face.

"You aren't a scoundrel. That's why you need to talk to your sister again. There are so many things that should've been left unsaid."

"What makes you think my sister wants to talk to me? She has made it abundantly clear how she feels. Serenity has found a new life here, and I ruined it."

"No, you allowed her to let out the secrets that would eventually have torn her world apart. You are, deep down, a kind and caring man."

Myles snorted. "If you knew what I was thinking, you would take back those compliments." He slid an arm around her small waist, pulling her into a dark, secluded spot behind the livery. Fiona gasped with surprise.

"I want you, Fiona." His lips brushed hers. "I need you. I love the way you view life with fresh eyes. When I'm with you, I feel less cynical and more complete. I—"

His mouth closed over hers, claiming it with all his pent-up passion. Her arms slid up around his neck. Sweet heaven, her body felt so right, so perfect pressed against his.

"Fiona, I—"

She covered his mouth with her hand. "I will be your mistress under one condition—that we wait to begin our affair until we return to New York. I'd rather not lose the respect I have gained here."

She gave him another quick kiss before leaving him alone in the dark.

Myles raked a trembling hand through his hair. His lips burned and his body was on fire. How the bloody hell had she come to that conclusion? Nothing he'd said had indicated that he wanted to have merely an affair with her, or did it?

Bloody hell, why did all the women in his life think the worst of him?

* * * *

The air was stiflingly hot in the bedroom where Serenity sat on the bed. Heavens, she was tired. The cold silence looming between her and Collin was taking its toll on her. The stress of not knowing what her husband would do next was eating her up inside. She had to find a way to break down the wall, but how?

"Serenity, this bow won't stay tied. Can you help me?" Emily darted into the room, holding a blue ribbon. The mate was fastened around her other dark braid.

Serenity patted the bed. "Sit, so I can get a better angle on it." The bed creaked as Emily plunked down. "There, I think it will stay this time."

Emily grinned, pulled herself up, and trotted out the door, bumping into Collin. "What do you say, Em?"

"Thanks, Serenity." She scampered off.

Collin leaned, arms folded, in the doorway. "Your brother is outside playing Lord Bountiful to my children. He wanted me to give this to you."

He held out one of the last dolls she had made before she fled New York. The Happily-ever-after doll, her favorite. It startled her to see it in Collin's big hands. She had always imagined this fancy lady lying on some little girl's bed or having a tea party or being played with. *How did Myles get it?*

"Myles told me to tell you that Miss Sabrina sent it. She is worried about you, too."

Serenity swallowed hard at the mention of her dear friend's name.

"Who is Sabrina?"

"She was my dressmaker, and more important, my best friend."

"Myles doesn't strike me as the vile type that would hurt his sister."

Serenity stared at the doll in her hands as Collin's words lanced through her. Her husband had chosen to believe Myles over her. She knew that would be the case, but that didn't make it hurt any less when it happened.

Serenity rose with quiet resignation and put the doll on her vanity as she started to leave the room. Collin caught her arm in a gentle but firm grip. Her pulse raced from the contact. The heat of his skin next to hers was almost unbearable. She cursed herself for still being so vulnerable to him. Why did she have to fall in love with a man she could never have?

They had hardly spoken last night when Collin returned from the Holts'. They'd undressed like strangers and gone to bed.

She raised her eyes to meet his probing gaze. The sprinkles of tenderness she once saw there were gone, replaced by hurt and anger.

"Let me leave. Nothing can be resolved by saying a lot of things we'll later regret."

She held her breath, hoping he would let her go without an argument. Instead, he turned her to face him straight on. He placed a hand on her other shoulder, thus securing his hold on her.

"I canna let you go. That is what is tearing me apart." His voice was hoarse with raw emotion. "I dinna want to, but I need you."

"You may not believe this, but I never meant to hurt you."

"Then why did you really marry me? Did you need a marriage to gain control of your inheritance? I canna go to Holt about Rudgewick until I'm sure you are telling me the whole story."

* * * *

Pain flashed across her face, sending a rush of guilt through Collin. He'd never meant to hurt her. Yet, he knew he was doing just that. He was holding her too tight. As if by doing so it would keep all their problems at bay.

Collin abruptly released her. The mounting tension between them was tearing at his soul. Cold politeness had begun settling over them like new falling snow. He should let go of his doubts and trust her, but he had no idea how to do that any more than he knew how to begin soothing his feelings of anger and betrayal.

"I told you everything, but since you can't believe me, there is nothing more I can say. I can't make you feel something you don't."

Her words landed like a gauntlet that had been thrown down. Sweet Saint Margaret, how he wanted to pick it up, but couldn't make himself. As much as he knew what words she needed to hear, he couldn't bring himself to say them.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Myles said from the doorway. "But there—"

"Goddammit, I should have known." Holt's voice rang out. "I can't believe I was so blind. Inga said if it was a snake it would have bit me."

"What?" prodded Collin as Holt barged into the room. He never remembered seeing the man this upset.

"Anna sold her farm house and ran off with Lord Tarrington."

Chapter 21

"Sweet Saint Margaret," Collin swore.

Serenity added her own, "Bloody hell." Anna hadn't listened to her, and now she would pay the price.

"It calls for a hell of a lot stronger language than that," Joseph blustered. "The bastard didn't even wait for the railroad money. Said he changed his mind about us. Thinks Great Bend might be a better site."

Serenity felt a small twinge of relief that at least Rudgewick didn't take the railroad money.

Collin pulled out his pocket watch. "How long have they been gone?"

"About twenty minutes. The next train leaves in three hours," Holt grumbled. "Inga says I should just let her go, but I can't. She sold the house that I homesteaded in and gave her and Jamie as a wedding present to Kyle. She kept the land, though. Tarrington and Kyle will have joint ownership of that if she marries the bastard. I can't believe she would let an outsider have a hold on that land. Most of my water rights are on it. She knows how hard I worked to get that plot."

He shook his head. "How could she just leave her home and family?" Holt ran a hand over his white beard. "Anna is still my baby. Hell, how do I know if the charmer will actually marry her?"

Not marry his golden goose? Highly unlikely. Serenity chewed on her lower lip. She had to stop Anna from sliding down the same slippery slope she once had.

Serenity stepped forward to place a comforting hand on the older man's arm. "Rudgewick will marry her, but it would be a big mistake."

She turned to face a frowning Collin. She didn't need to ask what it was he was thinking; the regret in his eyes spoke for itself. If anything happened to Anna, Collin would never forgive himself for not confronting Holt with his suspicions about Rudgewick. Even if it meant sharing her secrets, she had to help Anna.

"I'll go with you and try to talk her out of it," Serenity said with quiet determination.

"Like hell you will," Collin blustered.

She put a hand on his tense back. "This is something I have to do."

Collin stiffened at the steel edge to her tone. Convincing her to stay home would be an uphill battle. However, it would be a long, hard ride that he wasn't sure his wife was healed enough to endure. He opened his mouth to protest, but Gran cut him off.

"Go on," Rose said. "I promised to make cookies with the lassies. We'll be fine."

"But..." protested Alisha.

Rose glared her into silence.

"We always miss the fun!" Cherise sulked, arms folded over her chest.

"Is Aunt Anna going to get a spanking?" Emily asked.

"Good idea," Holt muttered under his breath. He blushed deep red at the giggles that followed. "Enough of this shilly-shallying. Let's get going." Holt slammed the hat back on his

head. "Girls are a hell of a lot harder to raise. Don't envy you none having four of them. My boys never gave me half the trouble Anna did," he muttered, storming out the door.

Myles caught Serenity's arm as they stepped on the porch, pulling her aside. The others walked toward the buggy. "Do you really think you should interfere? If Rudgewick marries this other woman, he will leave you alone. Maybe he cares about her."

Serenity jerked free. She could read the torment in her brother's expression. He was still defending Rudgewick.

"He wants Anna's money just like he wanted mine. And I know what lengths he will go to get it. You still don't understand, Myles, do you? Rudgewick..." The whole terrible story stuck her throat. How could she say those unspeakable words and sully herself in his eyes?

Fiona stepped forward. "Sometimes, Myles, you have to listen with your heart and not your head."

Serenity's gaze met the younger woman's and understanding flickered there. Fiona knew what Myles had failed to comprehend.

"Come with us, Myles," Serenity said. "Rudgewick might need you, too."

"Hurry," Collin shouted across the lawn. "We willna be able to make much time with the buggy so full."

Serenity prayed they would be in time as she climbed in beside Myles. Her spine prickled at the thought of the confession she knew she must make.

* * * *

"You get your damn hands off my daughter!" Holt shouted at the couple tugging a small, struggling boy across the crowded train platform. "Or I'll break them off. That includes my grandson, too. Looks like Jimmy has better sense than his mother."

Collin could feel the raw fury vibrating through Joseph Holt. He experienced much the same sensation when he saw Rudgewick holding Anna's and Jimmy's hands, but for different reasons. He noticed Serenity tense beside him and wondered how he could protect both the women he cared about without either of them getting hurt.

"Holt." Collin grabbed Joseph's arm. "Now might not be the time for harsh words you will later regret."

Holt ripped his arm free. "Enough, MacClarron. I can handle my own daughter, damn it."

Rudgewick put a possessive arm around Anna, who held a wiggling Jimmy in front of her. Collin wanted to punch him.

Anna gave a defiant tilt of her chin, flashing her father a determined glare, and said firmly, "I can't believe you would embarrass me like this, Papa. I'm a grown woman."

"Selling your house behind our backs. Taking your boy away from his roots without letting him say goodbye—are these the acts of rational adult?"

"Grandpa Jo." Jimmy squirmed free of his mother's hold and raced toward him, almost knocking the older man over. "I knew you wouldn't let us go," he sobbed. "I tried to wait for you."

The white-haired man swung the little boy up in his arms and held him in a fierce embrace. The movement brought

tears to Serenity's eyes. She couldn't let Rudgewick hurt another person. She slipped over beside Anna and whispered, "Mrs. Ralston, I need to talk to you."

Anna's eyes grew hard. "You will not change my mind. Rudgewick told me all about how you threw yourself at him. It was your choice to marry Collin. It isn't my fault that my fiancé didn't make you a countess."

Serenity's spine stiffened. "I didn't throw myself at Rudgewick. He courted me."

Disbelief flickered in Anna's eyes.

Myles tugged on Serenity's arm. "Don't, Rennie."

Serenity brushed his hand off.

"Well then, why aren't you the Countess of Norcliff?" Anna folded her arms across her chest.

"Anna..." Collin's tone was threatening. His look told Serenity to keep quiet. She knew, no matter how much she wanted to, she couldn't obey. "You dinna have to tell her this, Serenity."

Anger drove Serenity forward.

"Do you really want to know what kind of man you're marrying?" She spun Anna around to face her.

"I already know." Anna shoved her backwards.

"Do you? I doubt it. Your charming nobleman forced himself on me in a garden during a party."

Myles's face lost all color. Serenity slapped a hand over her mouth. She was uncomfortably aware that everyone on the train platform was staring since she had blurted out her painful confession.

Myles lunged forward at Rudgewick, but Collin restrained him.

"He's mine," Collin growled, walking purposely toward Rudgewick, who was backing away.

Anna pushed between the two angry men. "She's lying," Anna wailed, holding onto Collin's arm. "Tell everyone the truth, Lord Tarrington."

"Of course she's lying," Rudgewick protested, dodging Collin's attempts to grab him.

"Then how do you explain the bruises?" Myles pushed aside Collin and grabbed Rudgewick's lapels. "According to her maid, she had them on her neck and rib cage."

"She ... she got upset." Rudgewick knocked Myles's hands off. His face was cold and impassive. "I had to calm her down."

Serenity felt her blood boil. "Calm me down. I cried that night over my father. You took me outside for a breath of air. You ... you raped—" A sob choked off her words.

Collin pulled her into his stiff arms. His heart beat a frantic rhythm under her ear. She could feel the coiled tension in his body.

"My God, sweetheart, why didn't you tell me?" His voice was rough with emotion.

"I couldn't—" His tight hug cut off her words.

"Oh, Ren, I'm sorry. You told me in many subtle ways, but I failed to listen. I'm sorry. So sorry," he murmured against her hair as he continued to rock her.

"I thought you were my friend," Myles said from behind them. "How could you hurt her like that?"

"I didn't," Rudgewick sputtered.

"Dinna lie. I know the truth." Collin's deep voice rumbled.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she sensed what awful words were coming next. She squeezed her arms tight around Collin's waist.

"Collin, don't say it," Serenity pleaded against his shirt.

"She isna lying, miss," Fiona spoke up. "He hurt me as well the day he questioned me about Miss Springfield's whereabouts."

"You never told me that," Myles said, glaring at Rudgewick.

"It wasna somethin' I was proud of. I went outside alone with him and he shook me until my teeth rattled. Henry came to my rescue, but he told me I was a tramp for goin' out alone with a man like that."

"He hurt me, too." Desiree pushed through the crowd. "I still have the bruises to prove it."

"She's a soiled dove. Anyone could have done that," Rudgewick spat.

Undaunted, Desiree replied, "Lord Tarrington kept pretending I was someone he needed to punish. He called me Serenity."

Serenity pulled away from Collin's comforting embrace to stare open-mouthed. "We *do* look alike."

Myles spat a foul oath.

Muffled whispers broke out from the crowd.

"So this is the kind of man you want for the father of my grandson?" Holt demanded.

Anna's face turned dark red and she fled, pushing her way through the crowd, taking Jimmy with her.

Rudgewick started to go after her, but Wallis caught up with him. He waved a telegram in Rudgewick's face. "You aren't going anywhere, Tarrington, until I get some answers. Cyprus Holiday just wired me, and you are no employee of his."

"He must have forgotten. I was only recently hired on."

Rudgewick's protests didn't daunt Wallis.

"Recognize this?" Wallis dangled a gold watch in the air. "It has the initials W.R.T. on it. I found it near Simon Layne's body. Any ideas how it got there?"

"It belongs to his father," Myles said after looking it over.

"He showed it to me, too," Serenity agreed.

"I know how it got there. I saw him kill that man behind the Silver Spur," Desiree said.

"You're taking the word of a whore?" Rudgewick spat.

"I saw him, too." Bridget pushed her way through the crowd to stand beside her best friend.

"What have I told you about lying, daughter?" Hannah jerked her daughter back toward the store.

"I'm not lying, Mama, honest. I saw him kill that man." Bridget pointed at Rudgewick. "I was going home from giving Desiree reading lessons."

The people around them gasped and whispered among themselves. An awkward hush fell over the group surrounding Rudgewick.

Rudgewick's face lost all color. "Tell the sheriff he's wrong. Tell him I wouldn't kill anybody." He grabbed Myles's coat.

"I don't believe you're innocent. You killed Layne, didn't you?"

Rudgewick abruptly let go of Myles's coat and began pacing. "I didn't mean to. He just made me so angry. I had to get back to England with a large portion of money so I could prove to my father that I'm worthy of being his heir." He pointed at Serenity. "The slut ruined it all, and now she'll pay."

Rudgewick grabbed Serenity and held a gun he jerked from his pocket against her temple. "Back off, everyone. I'm not hanging. And I'm not afraid to use violence. I may have failed with Oliver Springfield, but I won't go down without a fight and won't go down alone."

"You son of a bitch. We were friends." Myles lunged for Rudgewick's gun, knocking Serenity to the ground.

Tarrington's gun exploded, hitting Myles in the shoulder. As Rudgewick aimed to finish Myles off, another shot was fired. Blood splattered Serenity and Fiona as Rudgewick's body hit the ground beside Myles.

All other sounds were off in a dream-like state. Serenity stared up at her husband, who was holstering his revolver. His face was devoid of emotion.

"Tarrington is dead," Wallis said as he knelt down beside him.

Myles tried to sit up, holding his wounded shoulder. His eyes met Fiona's as she dropped down beside him and began probing his wound.

"I'm sorry," Myles cried as he touched Fiona's cheek. "So bloody sorry. This mess ... my..." His body went limp.

"No!" Serenity screamed.

* * * *

"Do you really think Aunt Anna will marry that stuffy Lord Tarrington?" Emily asked, crinkling her nose. "Och, poked myself." She stuck the bloody finger in her mouth.

"Papa and Serenity will catch up with them in time," Cherise put in, holding up the doll's dress she was sewing.

Rose smiled at her girls all working away. The smell of baked cookies wafted from the kitchen where they were cooling. She had distracted them with sewing projects until the cookies were cool enough to frost.

Cherise and Emily were making dresses for the rag dolls out of leftover material from their mother's dresses. Serenity had helped each girl cut a dress out and pin it. Then she had planned to let them sew it together.

Greta slept all curled up on the settee with her thumb in her mouth. Alisha was piecing together a quilt with the remaining scraps.

The front door slammed and heavy footsteps sounded.

"Lord Stratten," the girls shouted as Oliver stalked into the room. "Did they stop Aunt Anna?"

Although pleased to see him, Rose hoped this didn't bode ill that he came alone.

"Uncle Oliver, please." Oliver ruffled Emily's hair. "You little ladies are my family now. Maybe soon I'll be Grandpa Oliver." He winked at Rose.

"Hello, Lord Stratten." Rose stood. Blast the man for making her heart race like a schoolgirl's. She was too old for such nonsense.

"Little ladies, I need to speak to your Grandma Rose alone. Can you take these peppermints outside for a moment?"

"You won't make her cry, will you?" Cherise stood solemnly before him, hands laced behind her.

Rose knew that was to keep from accepting her beloved peppermints until she was sure Grandma Rose was safe.

"Last time she cried."

Oliver placed a comforting hand on the little girl's shoulder. Rose choked up. "I'll be fine, lassies."

Oliver crossed his heart. "On my honor as a gentleman, I'll take good care of your grandmother."

Alisha slowly stood. "Come on. Let's give them some privacy."

Now what will I do? Rose worried her lower lip as the girls left the room. She had no answers for Oliver.

He crossed the room to take her hands in his. "I just came from the doctor's. Myles has been shot. The doctor is working on him now."

Tears filled Rose's eyes. She didn't always like Myles, but she had never wanted to see him dead. "Will he be all right?"

"It's too soon to say. Myles took a bullet in his shoulder. That scoundrel Rudgewick is dead. Myles and Collin saved Serenity and Anna from him."

Oliver pulled her into his comforting embrace. He felt so solid and warm that she clung on for dear life.

"Oh, Rosie..." Oliver brushed a kiss in her hair. "It's so good to hold you again."

Rose stiffened at his words. This was the man who had wooed her before with his smooth words. She swiped her wet eyes. "Didna be sweet Rosie'ing me, Ollie. I willna be swooning over your flattery." She slipped out of his arms.

Oliver grinned. "That's what I love about you, dear heart. You don't want my money or my title. Just me. You cannot know how long I have waited for someone to want me for myself. You have to come back to England with me, my love."

"How can you ask that of me? Collin doesna approve of us. The lassies need me here."

"And the world will blow away if you leave for England, Rosie, is that it?" He folded his arms across his chest. "You have to live for yourself. Collin and Serenity will work out their problems."

"I didna know. England is verra far away."

"We can come back and visit. Marry me, Rosie. Make my life sparkle again."

"I'll give you my answer tomorrow."

"I will not take no for an answer."

Rose turned away, wondering if she dare give him the answer he was wishing for.

* * * *

Myles's vision was bleary when he opened his eyes. All he could make out was dark maroon curtains. Good God, was he laid out in a funeral parlor? He closed his eyes. He had really mucked things up royally this time.

Soft hands touched his face. His eyes drifted open. Like an angel, Serenity hovered over him. The light from the window glistened in her hair. The blood splattering her pale blue dress brought him back to reality. *Rudgewick's blood*. His own blood. Myles closed his eyes, blocking out the images those thoughts invoked.

Off in the distance, he could hear the rumble of voices. His sister's warm sunny one, followed by MacClarron's deep-timbered burr. The sheriff's twang ended the conversation, but it was all a distant whirl. Where was Fiona? Had she deserted him?

It seemed like long minutes before he sensed Serenity's presence next to him. Her face was pale and drawn.

"Where ... uh ... am I?" His voice sounded rusty.

"Doc Hogan's surgery in back of the funeral parlor," Serenity replied.

"My fault, Rennie." Myles paused, taking a tortured breath. Even breathing hurt. "How can I tell Lord Norcliff?"

Myles swallowed hard, remembering the stern gray-headed man who had lectured the two of them in his study. Despite Lord Norcliff's intimidating manner, Myles liked and respected him. He knew the old earl loved his eldest son, but did not know how to control him. Myles felt that he somehow had let the man down.

"Rudgewick did this to himself," Serenity protested, breaking him out of his morose thoughts.

"I should have seen it all coming. I was there the night Lord Norcliff disowned him. I watched Rudgewick gamble away all his money in a vain attempt to win more. I knew

how hurt and angry he was about losing his father's favor. Why didn't I see how obsessed he was with getting it all back? Good God, Rennie, he tried to kill you and Uncle Oliver. He forced..." Myles couldn't form the words in his hoarse throat.

Serenity placed a hand on his uninjured shoulder. She could feel her brother tremble beneath her gentle touch. "Ah, Myles. We let each other down. I should have confided in you."

"You tried."

"Not very hard. It was all pressing in on me—Father's death, the reading of the will, and Rudgewick's amorous pursuit."

"About the will. I'll break it. I didn't realize ... Why did you want to?"

* * * *

She stared at her brother, lying there so pale. Blood stained the bandage on his bare shoulder. He had taken a bullet to save her life. This was the brother she loved. Tears filled Serenity's eyes. She could have lost him without ever knowing him.

"I thought you would gamble it all away." Her voice was quivering with uncertain emotions. "Whenever you came home, you spent the night carousing."

Myles gave a harsh laugh. "I didn't belong at home. Father always pushed me to experience life before settling down."

"I never knew that."

"Rennie. There is something else..." His voice faltered, then grew stronger. "Father left me a private letter along with the will. It contained some cryptic remarks about your growing old before your time. In it, he asked me to find you a husband."

"That's why you pushed Rudgewick on me?"

Myles nodded. "You seemed well suited on the surface. I guess I liked the thought of having my best friend as part of our family. I honestly never thought he would hurt you."

Serenity shivered at his softly spoken words. "I believe you. There's something you should know." She paused, working up the courage to say it. Her face flushed as the words came out. "I'm carrying Rudgewick's baby."

Myles opened and then shut his mouth. His throat worked.

"Collin claims it, but it isn't his. After tonight, everyone will know the truth. Collin is a proud man. It's not fair to him or the girls that I shame them by staying around to cause speculation."

Myles groaned as he shifted up in bed. "Come home."

Serenity smiled without mirth. "Thank you."

"For what?" Collin's deep voice rumbled behind them.

"Myles is taking me back to New York with him."

Chapter 22

"How can you even consider going back to New York with Myles after everything that has happened?"

The idea of Serenity leaving made Collin's gut burn. He couldn't imagine his life without her.

"Maybe it is because of everything that has happened that my sister feels she needs to leave," Myles replied. His eyes dared Collin to fight him as he rose gingerly from the bed. He stepped protectively in front of his sister.

Collin had to admit a grudging admiration for the younger man's courage. It took guts to stand up to a man who towers over you and outweighs you by at least fifty pounds. He had to give Myles credit for defending her today. They had more in common than Collin wanted to admit. Both of them loved Serenity. Both of them had let Rudgewick convince them to turn their backs on her when she needed them most.

"I won't let anyone hurt her," Myles said.

Collin sensed the wealth of meaning behind that simple statement. It stung to be lumped in the same category with Rudgewick Tarrington.

"I know," Collin replied with regret lacing his tone. "I never intended to hurt her either. Rudgewick manipulated all of us. Now I have to put the broken pieces back together."

Myles studied him in stony silence. "Do you want to talk to him, Serenity?"

"Yes."

Collin could feel Myles's threatening glower burning through him as he led Serenity off to a far corner of the room. He turned her to face him.

She took a deep breath. "As much as you would like to, you can't fix this situation."

"Why not?" Collin's gaze searched hers for some sign of her feelings.

"You know why. Besides, you said yourself that you could never trust me."

Collin shook his head. "I was hurtin'! I wanted you to feel my pain. You have told me everything, right?"

She nodded.

"Then we can start over?"

"I can't put you through the scandal that will result from my staying."

"And having the wife I just recently married leave me willna cause talk?"

Serenity's groaned. "I'm sorry. I know this puts you in a difficult position, but I have to do what is best for everyone."

"Everyone or yourself?"

Serenity backed away, hugging herself. "Can you honestly say you don't feel differently about me now that you know the whole story? Do you want Rudgewick's baby between us for the rest of our lives? You suggested I return to New York for my own protection—or was that a pretense?"

Was it a pretense? "You would be better off in New York. As you can see, life is hard here..."

The words sounded hollow, even to his ears. Of course, she would have a better life in New York. Obviously, her

family had money. *But would she be happy? Would her brother really treat her right this time?*

She touched his arm, sending shockwaves up it.

"I don't want to leave. I have grown to like it here. I will miss the girls. But I can't make them the topic of gossip. Once my belly begins rounding, people will speculate. Anna could very well tell everyone what she has learned. I can't risk that."

Collin tilted her chin up. "Is it only the lassies you will miss?"

"Don't ask me that." Her voice was rough with desperate need. "You know the answer. Don't make me admit it."

Her eyes brimmed with tears. He pulled her close, savoring the feeling of her soft body pressed against his. How could he let her go? How could he not, if that was what she wanted?

"Please give me few moments to compose myself."

Collin's body shook from the restraint it took to back away.

"Ren, I..." The words died in his throat when he looked at her pain-filled face. This time he would not make a rash decision. His impetuous judgment had put him into this mess. Now he needed to give careful consideration to how to get them out of it as unscathed as possible. "I need to talk to Wallis. We'll discuss this later."

"There is nothing more to talk about."

"Yes, well, we'll see."

Serenity held back her tears as she watched her Collin—no, he wasn't her Collin any more—walk off. Behind her, she could sense her brother's presence. His bay rum scent wafted toward her. He placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"You love MacClarron, don't you?" Myles asked softly.

"Very much. But he deserves better."

"I know how you feel."

She turned, looking at her solemn-faced brother. "Are you referring to Fiona?"

Myles cleared his throat. "I want to marry her, Rennie. Only I'm afraid to ask. I have not done right by women in the past. Working for Uncle Oliver, she no doubt knows my reputation for being a rake. What if she refuses my offer?"

"She won't."

"I don't know, Rennie. Sometimes I think she sees down into my very soul. She sees me, flaws and all. That's an unnerving thought, considering how many imperfections there are."

"I rather think Fiona has accepted those imperfections. She sees the man you have become in spite of them."

Myles snorted. "A man who lets his best friend hurt his twin sister. How can you forgive me for that, when I can't even forgive myself?"

"Because it wasn't you who did the hurting. Besides, I am partly to blame. I let foolish pride stand in the way of our relationship."

"Did it occur to you that you might be making the same mistake with MacClarron?"

"Yes, but I try not to think about it."

* * * *

"Wait, Desiree. We need to talk."

Desiree pulled the straps on her gear bag tighter. She patted the flank of the gray mare she had just bought.

"There's nothing to talk about. Lilly told me to pack up after I embarrassed her in front of the entire town."

"I thought you were very brave."

Desiree swallowed hard. She could feel Wallis's heat radiating behind her.

"A lot of good it did me. I broke Miss Lilly's cardinal rule. Now I got no job and just barely enough money to get me out of town."

Wallis turned her around. "What if I asked you to stay?"

Desiree shook her head. "I can't." Tears blurred her vision. "I'd never be accepted. Do you love me enough to face down the talk about us?"

"I don't know, Desi. You're mighty special, but..."

"You don't have to make excuses. I know how it is between us."

Wallis caught her chin in his hand. "Desi, you've been my best friend. I know you wouldn't accept my help in the past. I'm begging you now."

"How can you help me? You can't change my past."

"No, but I can open up the future. I think I know someone who might need you. Come back to my office with me while I work out the details."

Desiree sighed. "Only for a while. I still have a ways to go today. I don't want to spend the night on the trail."

Wallis hugged her. "You won't be sorry."

Desiree fought back her tears. She hated to tell him, but she was already sorry.

* * * *

I can't help it, Fiona thought as she crept over and peered down at Myles. She needed to touch him just one more time to assure herself that he was going to live. Her hand brushed his cool cheek. It was a good sign that he didn't have fever.

His hand snaked out and captured her wrist. "My own wee fairy. I wondered where you were."

"I didna want to interrupt."

Myles stared at her, making her wonder what went on behind those deep blue eyes of his. What did he see when he looked at her? A poor, uneducated lass?

"Sorry," Myles said.

"For what?"

"For everything. I—"

Fiona tapped a finger over his lips. "'Tis in the past. Serenity has forgiven you."

"Yes, but can I forgive myself?"

"In time you will."

"How did you get to be so wise?"

Fiona shrugged.

"Have you made plans for the future now that Serenity is staying?"

"I thought she was going back with you."

Myles shook his head. "She thinks so, but the possessive gleam in MacClarron's eyes tells me differently. He loves her."

"How do you know that?"

Myles grinned. "I recognize the signs. Being in love myself, that is. Besides, he accepts her, secrets and all, just like you do me."

Fiona's gaze met his. "You believed in me when I didn't even believe in myself."

She tried to pull away, but Myles pulled her down onto the bed.

"Marry me, Fiona."

Her eyes widened with shock. She wanted to believe his words, but couldn't. Once this adventure was over, would he still feel that way about her?

"I canna." Her head dropped. She couldn't meet his gaze.

"I love you."

"Please dinna say..." Her voice choked off with tears. "I must be strong."

Myles's thumb caressed the back of her hand, sending a shiver of awareness up her arm.

"Fiona, denying your feelings doesn't make them go away. I know that I'm no one's choice of a perfect husband, but I do love you. I'll try to make you happy."

Fiona covered his hand with her other one. "I may not make you happy. Did you ever think of that, Myles?"

"Why wouldn't you make me happy, darling? You already do. You bring out the best in me."

She frowned. "What will your friends say when you marry an uneducated lass like me?"

"That he was damn lucky a good woman like you will have him," a deep voice interrupted.

Fiona gasped at Lord Stratten standing in the doorway.

Oliver shook his head. "Women. You think we're fools that don't know our own minds."

Myles laughed. "He's right. I've never told a woman that I loved her before or, for that matter, proposed. I may be new at this emotion, but I know what it feels like."

Fiona rose, straightening her skirt. Myles caught her hand again. "Marry me, Fiona."

She looked back and forth between the two men and sighed. How could she turn Myles away? She loved him. "I'll marry you."

Myles shifted, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He winced as he stood.

"Tell me, Fiona," he said, leaning against her. "Say those three words I need to hear."

Fiona slid her arm around him, touching his warm back. "I love you, Myles."

Myles pulled her close. "You love *me* and not all the trappings. That's why we'll be happy."

Oliver threw up his hands. "One stubborn lass down. Two more to go."

* * * *

Under a dark, cloudy sky, Collin leaned back against the bark of the huge oak tree, staring at the two graves. Instead of being bare, they were both covered with wildflowers that had grown in the back pasture. Just like his life, he mused, they had been brightened up.

"Serenity planted those," Alisha said beside him. "We dug up the ones we liked and moved them here. She even cut the grass."

When had she found the time?

"Papa, I was wrong about her. Serenity didna want to take over our lives, just be a part of them. I think she is lonely, too." Alisha placed a hand over his.

"I think so, too."

"I was wrong about many things." Alisha paused, taking a deep breath. "I do need a mother. Grandma Rose is great, but she doesna always understand me. Serenity told us about losing her mother the day we planted the flowers. I will miss her when she leaves."

Alisha's voice cracked with the last words and Collin realized she was crying. He pulled her into his arms, stroking her back.

He would miss Serenity, too, far more than he'd ever thought possible. She'd brought hope and happiness back into his life. He wondered if he could ever go back to living without it.

"There, there, Lish. We'll find a way to work everything out."

But could he? He realized that, unless he did something, Serenity would walk out of their lives and take all the sunshine with her.

* * * *

"Might I have a word with you, young man?"

Collin paused with the slop bucket in his hand. He stared at Serenity's uncle. The man was as big a mystery as his niece was. He should have been out of place in his stylish clothes, but instead he seemed totally in control. He cleared his throat.

"I'm not used to explaining myself to anyone, but this once I will make an exception."

"Uh-huh." Collin sat down the heavy bucket and folded his arms across his chest. He enjoyed watching the old earl squirm.

"The truth is that I love Rose."

"I do, too. That's the problem, Lord Stratten. I promised my grandfather I would look after her interests. I canna think gallivanting off with you was what he had in mind."

Oliver straightened, pulling himself up to his full height. He crossed his arms, his jaw set in determination. Considering the disparity in their sizes, Oliver Springfield still was an imposing sight. There was no doubt the man was used to being obeyed.

After a long, tense silence, Oliver began rubbing his clean-shaved chin. "So, you think I'm a rascal, rake and thrill seeker?"

"That about sums it up."

"I see." Oliver began pacing. "What if I was to let you in on a well-guarded secret?"

"I'm listening."

Oliver got really close to him. "Take a good look at me. I mean a good, hard look at me. What do you see?"

Collin shrugged.

"Come on. Do I look like I could have accomplished all the feats I expound upon? You want to know where most of my adventures really happen?" Oliver tapped his head with his index finger. "Right here. Sure, I travel. Been all the around the world. I visit some exciting spots—decide what adventures can occur there and then retreat to my country estate to amaze the world with my exploits."

Collin fought the urge to smile. He didn't want to like the man.

"The Eccentric Earl is a character." Oliver threw up his hands. "I made him up and made a bloody fortune in process. Rose will want for nothing."

Collin let out a slow breath. "You're saying that you willna take my grandmother into any dangerous situations?"

"I can't say that, but I can promise to keep her as safe as possible. I travel with a bodyguard. I wouldn't let anything happen to her. Rose is my life."

He could hear the sincerity in the older man's voice. How could he deny Rose what he had just found—and hoped he could keep, even though it appeared he was losing it—a second chance at life?

Collin extended his hand. "I'll give you my blessing, under one condition."

"Anything."

"You bring her back to visit us sometimes."

"You have my word on that. Anytime you and the wee lassies want to visit England, I have plenty of room. We'll keep Rose's house in New York, so there will be room for all of you to stay there, too."

Oliver put his hand in Collin's. The deal was sealed. He just hoped Rose knew what she was getting herself into.

* * * *

The next morning, Serenity went through the motions of her morning routine. After rinsing off the last of the breakfast dishes, she decided to finish packing. They had a noon train to catch. With a heavy heart, she watched the girls help her fold her clothes. She would miss them more than she could have ever imagined.

"I wish you'd stay," Emily said. "Who's going to help me finish Dolly's dress?"

"Or teach me how finish Mama's pillows?" Cherise put in.

Alisha stood, frowning, in the doorway. "I knew she would leave. She never wanted to be our mother in the first place."

"That's not true. I love all of you. There are just things that I can't explain. Things you aren't old enough to understand. Someday when you are older you'll—"

"Thank you for leaving?" Alisha blurted out. "Never." She fled the room, running right into Anna.

"Excuse me girls, but I need to speak to Serenity alone."

Cherise tugged on Anna's arm, pulling her down to a child's level. "Make her stay," Cherise whispered in a voice Serenity heard as clearly as if she had shouted. "We need her!"

Anna hugged Cherise and Emily. "I'll do my best."

Serenity tossed the last of her garments into the satchel.

"Save your breath, Mrs. Ralston. You and I both know you've won. There is no way I can stay. Someday the girls

will understand the harm my being here would have caused them. People will talk. I can't put Collin and them through that. The scandal involving Rudgewick will die down, but this won't."

"You're wrong, Serenity. The scandal will not die down. Imagine what people will say. I can hear them now saying that Collin's city wife used him to escape a cruel lover and then fled with her brother. Will those comments be easier for him and the girls to endure?"

"Why are you pushing me to stay? I would have thought you'd be happy now that Collin will be free?"

"Will he? I doubt it. He—"

"Anna," Collin's deep burr interrupted, "that is for me to say."

Anna threw up her hands. "Then do it! For heaven's sake, quit mourning and open your heart. Trina would have given you a kick right now."

"Eloquently put, Anna. I think you have interfered enough for one day."

Anna shook her head as she left the room. Collin closed the door and leaned back against it."

"I'm sorry." Serenity's voice cracked. "I never meant to embarrass you."

"Then stay."

"How can I? Everyone knows now, even my brother. I don't want this baby to live under that cloud, or you, for that matter." Unable to look at him, she busied herself securing the straps on her carpetbag.

Collin spun her around to face him. He caught her chin in his palm and forced her to meet his intense gaze. His other hand closed over hers, effectively stilling her movements. "I willna let you leave. The girls need you. I need you. They have already lost one mother—I refuse to let them lose another."

"I..."

"Ren, despite all my objections, you've thrived here. Farm work has added color to your cheeks. I've seen your confidence grow. You are no longer the scared little wren Rose hauled off the train."

"You helped me. I owe you that. That's why I can't inflict any more pain on you and the girls."

Collin's thumb began caressing her cheek. "How can you believe that? We handled the gossip when you first arrived and we will face this down, too. Dinna revert back to the mouse. I know you can be a tiger."

His hand slipped to her stomach and she let out a gasp of surprise.

"I will love this baby because it brought you to me. You made sunshine in my otherwise cloudy world. I love you, Serenity. Didna walk away from me."

His softly spoken words touched Serenity to her very core.

"I love you, too, Collin. I think I have from the moment I got off the train. If you are sure you want me to stay, then I will. Being a part of your family is the best thing that has ever happened to me."

A loud hurrah erupted from the hallway outside the door.

Collin's lips twitched into a smile. "Nothing is private here."

He pulled the door open and the girls burst into the small bedroom.

The three of them flung themselves at Serenity, but Alisha held herself back.

"Everything is working out. It even started raining," Cherise said.

"We are so glad you decided to stay!" Emily put in.

Alisha cleared her throat. "Ahem ... I have one question."

The others blinked in surprise.

"If you are staying, we can't continue to call you Serenity. I mean—well—you are our new mother, so to speak. Can we call you Mother?"

Cherise spoke up. "We talked it over and we called our real mother Mama, so we thought—"

"We should call you something special," Emily interrupted.

"Mama," Greta said, pulling her thumb out of her mouth.

"Mother?" Alisha confirmed.

Serenity's heart overflowed with happiness. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

"Are you ready?" Myles paused in the crowded doorway. A smile cracked his lips. "I see you changed your mind."

"About damn time." Joseph stomped in. "I brought the sewing machine for Serenity. I had hoped you still wanted it. Inga wants Serenity to show her how to use it. The lass is the best damn thing that has happened to this family in a coon's age."

"Sewing machine?" Serenity's mouth fell open.

Collin flushed. "I bought it for you as a wedding present. I know how much your sewing means to you."

Serenity's eyes twinkled. "I've always wanted one, but never had the nerve to get it for myself. It seemed too extravagant."

Rose pushed through the crowd. "Everyone out. Give these two some breathing space."

Collin caught Rose's arm. "Before you go, I want to say something. I was wrong to forbid you to marry Oliver Springfield. Not many people get two chances at love in one lifetime. I should know. You've given me one. If Lord Stratten makes you happy, then that makes me happy."

"You didn't know how much your words mean to me."

"You can say yes now, Rosie," Oliver spoke up from behind them.

"Yes!" Rose shouted, grinning.

Oliver let out a whoop. Then he kissed her soundly.

"I'm never goin' to get used to him kissing her like that," Collin muttered as Serenity playfully punched him.

"You don't have to worry. I got her a companion who can help her keep me in line," Oliver teased.

Collin's eyes widened at the sight of Desiree standing there in a calico dress. He chuckled to himself. Between his grandmother and the spunky Desiree, Oliver would have his hands full. Serenity had taught him about love, forgiveness, and second chances. He hoped Desiree could find hers in England. No doubt, Rose would see to it. The woman had her own brand of magic.

Rose pulled Collin into a tearful embrace. "Thank you."

"No. Thank you for seeing what I failed to see. That I was lonely." He slid his arm around his wife's shoulders. "Thank

Sweet Serenity
by Catherine Stang

you for bringing me my sweet Serenity."

EPILOGUE

Six months later

Serenity's moan echoed through the house, sending Collin's heart racing. Being in the parlor while she was delivering their baby was driving him mad.

"I have to go in there." Collin bolted from the chair.

Myles stepped in front of him before he could open the bedroom door. "I promised Fiona and Doc Hogan that I would keep you calm."

"How the hell can I keep calm when my wife is having my baby?" Collin raked his fingers through his hair. "How long can this take?"

Myles's lips twitched. "How the bloody hell should I know? You're the one with all the children."

The door burst open and his wet, snowy girls tumbled into the house.

"Has Mother had our baby yet?"

"No." Collin shook his head.

The girls turned expectantly to Oliver, who came in, dusting the snow off his clothes. "I haven't driven a sleigh in years. Grandpa is tuckered out."

Collin laughed. He was glad Rose, Oliver, Myles, Fiona, and Desiree had decided to come out for Christmas. Myles had brought things for Serenity to sign. He had kept control of the textile mills, but turned to Serenity on a regular basis for advice.

"All right, Papa..." Rose poked her head out of the bedroom. "Come see your bundle of joy."

"What did we have?"

Rose patted his shoulder. "My lips are sealed. Serenity did all the work, so now she gets to show off."

Collin brushed past Rose, Fiona, and Desiree. In the large bed, Serenity lay, looking exhausted but proud, with a small bundle in her arms.

"Hi there, little one." Collin peeked in the wrapped blanket at the small, rumpled face. "Can I hold..."

"Him." Serenity finished.

"A boy?"

Serenity nodded. "Do you mind?"

He winced at the deeper meaning of her question. The uncertainty in her gaze ripped his heart apart. Didn't she know that this issue was long settled? He hoped she hadn't worried about this moment the whole time she carried the baby, but knowing her, she had.

After kissing his wife, Collin took the sweet baby into his arms. "He brought us together. I will treasure him for that. We resolved this issue, I thought. I love him as much as I do my girls."

Before she could reply, the door flew open and his girls bounced in.

"I couldna stop them." Rose shrugged.

Collin laughed. "Come, see your new brother."

"We could call him Noel—like Christmas," Cherise said.

Collin cast Serenity a questioning gaze.

She had tears of joy in her eyes. "Noel would be a good name. It will remind us of this special first Christmas together."

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"May we always be as happy as we are right now." Collin smiled at his family all gathered around the bed.

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by Catherine Stang

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine is a hopeless romantic, who has been reading and writing romances for as long as she can remember. She lives in a small town in Kansas with her husband, teenage son and three very active Papillons, who are therapy dogs. She, her husband and the dogs enjoy their weekly visits to the nursing home. She loves to hear from readers:

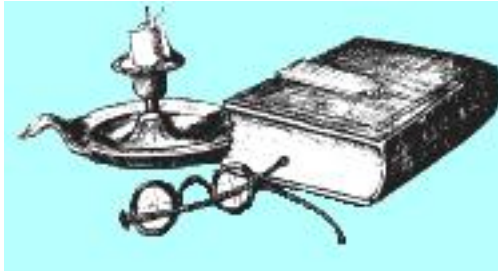
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