

To Picture the Past

By Paige Mallory

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Chapter One

The picture gave me chills, but I wasn't about to admit to that. Not with my brother-in-law/boss looking at me so intently. He wouldn't let it be, however. "Well, Gill? What do you think? You know your sister as well as I do, so you know this isn't some bit of trick photography." I could see that. And, Gail didn't even play practical jokes, unlike me.

"I think there must be some defect in the camera," I stated, but it was a lie, and I was shaking so badly that I could barely form the words. I looked around his tastefully decorated, but cluttered office, seeking an avenue of escape. How could I possibly tell the esteemed Dr. Jason Winters the truth?

"Gill, don't you dare insult my intelligence by lying to me. Gail is very upset over this photograph, and since you know better than anyone that her views on the afterlife are shocking to say the least, you need to tell me how you pulled this off." Jason was using his best "call the student on the carpet" voice, and it still made me squirm, in spite of the fact that I was twenty-four years old now. Gail and Jason took me in when our parents became ill at the same time and died within weeks of each other, Dad from lung cancer and Mom from ovarian cancer. I was only fourteen at the time, and Gail was twelve years older than me. She was already married to Jason, and in spite of the fact they were expecting their first child, Jason welcomed me into their home. I knew he loved me like a pesky kid sister, but he could be very firm when he thought it in my best interests.

"Jason, I am not lying to you," I said quietly. This wasn't the time for my temper to flare. Jason still thought of me as his responsibility, and if I wanted him to believe me, I needed to conduct myself as an adult.

"But, what could this possibly mean if you weren't in on this prank?" he asked, thoroughly confused.

I sank into the chair he'd offered me earlier. "I wish I knew, Jason," I whispered, allowing my fear to show. We were alone in the building, and, in fact, I was on my way out the door when Jason caught me and called me into his office. He was the principal of the large high school, and in less than five years, he'd turned the school into one to be proud of instead of jeered at. Test grades were up, teacher morale was high, and somehow Jason had given the students a sense of pride and the promise that a good education would take them far. He was a firm believer in building a good foundation of learning, and he put his experience to work when it came to finding jobs for students, and scholarships and grants for other students. People loved Jason... but they also respected him and knew that he was not to be trifled with. Jason didn't take guff from the students, or from the teachers. I fit into the latter category, and of course, it was Jason who got the job for me. I was hired to fill in as a temporary substitute for a teacher who was having surgery. Jason told me that he'd given me the opportunity to prove myself, but it was up to me to win the position for the following school year. I worked hard, probably harder

than my history students, and was excited when I was offered a contract for the next school year. I was the youngest teacher ever hired by the Brookshire school board, and I am pretty sure they hired me because they knew that Jason would ride hard on me if I didn't measure up.

"Gail is beside herself. She is convinced you are going to disappear off the face of this earth and take up residence in the past. You know she believes in time travel; that somehow people from this century are whisked backwards to live out their days. Gill, you can't deny the woman in the background of this photo looks exactly like you!" He glared at me accusingly.

"I know, Jason." I had to agree. "She looks exactly like me, even to Mom's necklace," I pointed out, putting my finger on the heart shaped pendant that I'd worn around my neck since Mom handed it to me before she died, saying she wanted me to know she loved me and would always be with me in my heart.

"This is just plain spooky," he muttered darkly, clearly unhappy.

"It is very spooky. And Gail took this photo?" I asked again, my mind in a whirl. I had so many unanswered questions. "Is Gail positive there wasn't some enactment going on behind Scott and Liz? Or perhaps, some actors were getting ready to perform some scene?"

"No, Gill, there was nothing going on that day. I clearly recall Gail telling me that she and the kids got there two days before the enactment tours were to begin. The house was open for visitors, but there were no formal tours scheduled. Gail is worried sick about you. I think you need to stop by the house on your way home tonight," he bossed, his tone of voice brooking no argument.

"I have some questions for Gail, so I'll gladly stop by," I replied, getting to my feet. I then asked, "Did you give James Fredericks a detention?"

"Yes, for all the good it will do. I am beginning to think I am going to have to pull him from your class, Gill. He has no respect for you, and I am afraid he's going to harm you."

"He's just a boy, Jason."

"That boy outweighs you by at least eighty pounds, and he is a foot taller than you. I don't think this is a safe situation."

"I don't know why he hates me so much. It has been pure belligerence on his part since school started this year. I didn't have time to do one thing before he confronted me with his list of complaints about me."

"Don't take it personally, Gill. It isn't your fault. I told his Mother today that if there was one more incident, she would have to enroll him in a night school, or pay for an

online class. She told me she didn't have the money for such foolishness. I told her if that was the case she'd better have a serious talk with James and tell him to shape up. When they left here they were fighting. I don't have much hope that he is going to turn into a model student."

"At this point I would settle for one who simply kept his mouth shut. He's making it impossible for the rest of his class to learn. Kathy Kaufmann started crying today at the way he was carrying on."

"Just remember to keep within reaching distance of the emergency button in your classroom, Gill. I don't trust that boy."

I gave my brother-in-law a smile and a nod of reassurance. "I'm going to go on over and see Gail. There has to be a logical explanation for this picture."

Jason waited until I reached the doorway of his office before calling to me. "Gill, if you are fibbing to me and pulling some prank, I promise I'll turn you over my knee and give you a spanking to rival the one I gave you when you thought you could stay out all night and worry your sister nearly to death. And, if I find out that Gail is in on this with you, she'll get the same damn thing."

I looked at him in shock. "Gail wouldn't pull a trick like this on you, Jason. She's too superstitious! She'd be afraid of bringing bad karma on all of us. This is probably some defect in the camera. Maybe Gail bought one that was refurbished instead of brand new...?"

The worry returned to Jason's dark eyes. "Gill, you know I don't believe in half the stuff your sister thinks is real, but, just in case I'm wrong, will you please be careful with yourself? Gail and I couldn't bear for anything to happen to you. We love you, kiddo."

"I love you, too, Mr. Tough Guy!" I gave him a wave, hurrying from his office so he couldn't see the tears stinging my eyes.

The small city of Brookshire could easily have supported two high schools, and it was my opinion that the students would have received a better education if two schools did exist. It would have created a bit of rivalry in the town, but the parents would have given more support if they thought their school 'lacking'. As it was, the school system in Brookshire seemed to come last with the ones holding the purse strings. The school board tried to spread the money evenly among the three grade schools, the two middle schools, and the high school. All of the buildings needed a face lift, and the parking lots were not in good shape. Jason said he wasn't as concerned with the outside of the building as he was with what went on inside. He had hopes that the next proposed tax levy would pass, and I hoped it would, too. I was aware of all the teachers across the country who were being cut from their jobs, and it worried me. I did not see how we could afford to lose any teachers at the high school since most of us carried at least one extra class per day to insure all the students got the education required by the state. I finally shook my head

and gave myself a mental shake. It was Friday, and I was done with school for the week. I was going to go and see Gail and her kids and hope she was planning something great for dinner. I hadn't been to the grocery for several weeks now, and my cupboards were bare! Even if they weren't, I wouldn't cook for just myself. I existed on canned soup and crackers for dinner most evenings.

I heard loud music when I pulled in the driveway at the lovely home Jason and Gail provided for their kids. I grinned to myself, deciding to have some fun with Scott and Liz. I unlocked the front door with the key Gail insisted I keep, and when Gail spotted me I covered my lips with my finger, indicating she was to keep quiet, and I then pointed upstairs, giving her a hint. Gail shook her head, resigned to the fact that I would probably never grow up when it came to playing practical jokes on people. I waited until I was sure which bedroom was providing the house with enough racket to wake the dead, and then I reached high above my head and pounded so hard on the door it's a wonder I didn't put my fist through the wood! I heard a rush of scrambling in Scott's room and the music was abruptly turned off. The door opened then.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I forgot the ear...! Aunt Gill!" Scott sputtered. "That was a rotten, dirty trick!"

"I think it was funny!" Liz exclaimed, giving me a hug. "Hi, Aunt Gill!"

"Hello yourself!" I squeezed her back, and then I stepped forward to give Scott a big hug. "I couldn't resist, honey. Do you have any idea how often your Dad busted me for the same thing when I was your age?"

"A *lot*!" they said together, and then laughed at my expression.

"Dad said you always played your music loud," Scott said, nodding. "But, not as loud as mine, huh?"

"Oh, I don't know. I could hear you outside, though."

"You'd better turn it down, brother. Dad will ground you if he catches you again."

"I accidentally pulled out the earphone plug," he admitted. "You staying for dinner, Aunt Gill?"

"I'm not sure. What's your Mom fixing?" I asked. "If it's one of her health nut meals, I'll drive through McDonald's and think of the two of you as I enjoy my Big Mac and vanilla milkshake."

"We're having pizza and sodas, but knowing Mom, there will be a big bowl of salad, too," Liz confided in her Aunt.

"I can handle that," I said decisively. "I'll see you later; I want to talk to your Mom about something important."

“That picture?” Scott asked, looking at me. “Is it a prank, Aunt Gill?”

“No, it isn’t. But, don’t you worry. There has to be some sort of explanation.”

“Mom thinks you are going to disappear from our lives,” Liz announced, tears filling her eyes. “I wouldn’t like that.”

“I wouldn’t either,” I reassured her as best I could. “I love you both, and I don’t want you to worry, okay? There has to be a reasonable explanation for that picture.”

“You were wearing your necklace!” Scott pointed out, his eyes as serious as Jason’s could be.

“I saw that,” I agreed. “I’ll see if your Mom and I can figure it out.”

“I wish it was a practical joke, Aunt Gill. Dad would be mad, but I’d rather that than what Mom is thinking.”

I nodded, gave each of them another hug and reminded Scott to plug in his earphones and turn down his volume so he wouldn’t go deaf. Then I hurried downstairs to find Gail and see if we could find an explanation that made sense.

Gail was even more upset than I expected her to be. She was indulging in a glass of wine and had poured another glass for me. “Jason will scold, but I don’t care,” she said. “I’m scared, Gill. Please, if this is a prank, tell me. I swear I won’t get mad.”

“It isn’t a prank that I am involved in, honey. I have never seen that dress before. You know me, if it isn’t a funeral or a wedding, I wear pants. My hair is too short to pin up like that, but I can’t explain Mom’s necklace.”

“I am so afraid I’m going to lose you, Gill,” Gail whispered, and then started crying. “You at least look happy in the picture...” she added, trying to convince herself.

“Honey, you have to stop this. Jason is ready to tan my backside because you are so upset, and I swear, I have no explanation. Are you sure you didn’t put your camera down for just a moment and then accidentally picked up one belonging to someone else?”

“You know how Jason is, sis. I know better than to put something like an expensive camera down where someone else could grab it. Let me show you...” She jumped up and ran to get the case she kept her camera in. “See...?” She took it out and held it so I could see. “When I brought it home from the store I put my initials on it. This is my camera.”

“Did you perhaps buy a refurbished one?”

“No. It is brand new, sis. I bought it for the sightseeing trip the kids and I went on when Jason was in those meetings. If there was a problem with the camera, all of the pictures would have been affected. I promise you, when I took this picture, Liz was standing right at the corner in front of the desk. I thought the desk absolutely beautiful, and I focused on it more than on Liz. No one was sitting there. No one. Then, when we went back to the hotel, I downloaded the pictures on Jason’s laptop so we could see them better, and so we could show Jason where we’d been all day... And, there you were... seated at the desk.” She had another sip of wine. “The house belonged to a Robert and Gillian Stanhope.”

“Oh, that is spooky!” I shivered in spite of the fact the house was well heated.

“Gill, what do you think it means?” she asked of me.

“I honestly have no idea, Gail.” The next thing I knew she was hugging me tightly and sobbing hysterically. And that is how Jason found us. The frown he leveled on me gave me to know he thought it was my fault, but he was gentle as he pried Gail’s arms from around me.

“Sweetheart, stop this. You can see that Gill is fine.”

“I looked at the brochures today, Jason. The woman who lived there was named Gillian! That cannot be a coincidence!”

“You cannot know that, Gail. Now, you need to pull yourself together. Both Liz and Scott are worried about you, and Gill is shaking, too. You can see that she is safe, sitting right here with you.” Jason kept on talking, his words calm and reassuring, and eventually my sister stopped crying. Jason ordered the pizza, telling Gail that it sounded like a great treat after a hard week at school.

I stayed later than normal, but it wasn’t often the entire family started a game of Monopoly. The teens were old enough to be great competition for all of us, and whether or not it was Jason’s idea for them to spend a Friday night at home, we all had a good time. Liz made popcorn, and we laughed and enjoyed ourselves immensely. It came down to Scott and me as the last two players in the game, and all it took was for me to land on Boardwalk three times straight to end the game... in Scott’s favor.

Jason suggested I spend the night, but I told him I had to be up early to take care of that grocery shopping I’d put off as long as possible. He saw me to my car and insisted I call when I got inside my apartment to let them know I was safe. I promised I would.

I let myself inside my little apartment, still smiling over the fun family time. At first I didn’t realize I wasn’t alone, and when I did sense someone, they were right behind me. I felt a splitting pain in my head, and then the world went black.

Chapter Two

When I woke up the pain in my head was unbearable. I tried to slide into blackness again, but I heard a soft voice urging me to wake up. There was a pungent odor right under my nose, and I turned my head to escape it, but couldn't. "No!" I ordered.

"I think she is waking up, brother."

"Good. She has had a nasty blow to her head, and I feared for her life," a man's voice declared, still in soft tones. I was thankful he was being considerate of my headache.

I felt myself being lifted into strong arms. "What are you doing, brother?" I heard the same female voice as earlier.

"I am taking this lady inside so I can properly look after her injury, Nellie. Will you run ahead and turn down the bed in the guest room, please...?"

"I can walk," I heard myself say, but my voice sounded strange and it echoed within my head.

"I think I had best carry you, Miss."

I did not feel like arguing, but wondered where I was. I couldn't even recall what happened to me. "Call my sister, Gail Winters." I managed to get the words out.

"Gail Winters...? I don't know anyone of that name, Miss. We'll figure it out once you've had some rest."

He carried me inside, and I must have lost consciousness again. When I woke the next time I was lying in a soft, cozy bed, and I was covered by the warmest of quilts. I only knew that I was very comfortable and I didn't really want to risk setting off the head pounding again by opening my eyes.

"Are you with us again, Miss?" I heard the same man as before and it did not occur to me to be frightened, and that was saying something for his voice. I had a frightening experience while in college; a male student broke into my dorm room and attempted to sexually assault me. I fought him with everything I had in me, and I made so much noise that I woke some of the other girls and they came running. The man who attacked me was found guilty of raping several girls on campus, and a few women in the town who had the misfortune of living within walking distance of the school. Ever since that night, I have to really trust a man before I will permit myself to be alone with him. Jason did his best to get me to move back home and commute after the incident, but I told him I had to learn to live on my own right then or he would be stuck with me for life. He assured me that he wouldn't mind that, but Gail was firm and told him that he had to

allow me the freedom to make my own decisions. Of course she called me quite often after that incident, and let me know it was natural to be afraid. I eventually was able to sleep with just a nightlight burning at night, but I never went to bed without making sure the window was locked and the door to my room locked, too. I came back to the moment when he asked again if I was awake.

“Yes, I am. Is my sister here?” I asked of him.

“Miss, if you tell me where I can find your sister, I will send someone to bring her here immediately,” he promised, and I finally risked opening my eyes to look at him. What I saw filled me with shock. The man sitting on a chair beside the bed, looking at me with such concern in his dark eyes, was very handsome. He was also not of the twenty-first or the twentieth century. His clothing placed him in the late 1800’s! I quickly decided I had to be dreaming and I closed my eyes, willing myself to sleep again.

“You need to try and stay awake, Miss. I fear you have a concussion, and my sister thinks it best to keep you awake until the Doctor arrives to have a look at you. Now, don’t be afraid,” he said, smiling. “Nellie is coming right back to sit with you. I sent her for a pitcher of water.”

Nellie picked that moment to return, and I took note of her hairstyle and the length of her dress. Yes, I was actually in the late 1800’s, and Gail’s photo had been a warning of what was to come. I tried not to panic, but when I thought of how Gail would react when she realized I was gone from her life my eyes filled with tears.

“You are safe here, Miss. Please don’t cry. Robert and I will take care of you. Do you recall what happened to you?” She poured water into the pretty basin, and then dipped a cloth into the water before wringing it out and gently wiping what appeared to be blood from my head. “You’ve had a nasty injury, you poor dear.”

“Nellie, our guest must have a terrible headache. She probably doesn’t feel like answering a bunch of questions.”

“No, of course not,” Nellie agreed, continuing to clean the blood from my hair and from what was a very sore spot on my head.

“Ouch!” I winced at one point.

“Oh, I am sorry. I am trying to ascertain whether or not you need stitches, and I fear you might.” She dabbed, a bit more gently. “Why do you wear your hair so short? Does your father permit this?” she asked curiously.

“Nellie, enough with the questions.” I heard the firmness in Robert’s voice and I suddenly realized that he sounded as stern as Jason. I was drawn to that tone, and knew that it was missing from most of the men I’d gone out with during college and since I began teaching. Not that I’ve done all that much dating. The guys were looking for sex, and I was pretty old fashioned in that department. I wanted to know that I was truly in

love before I experienced that particular pleasure. Gail told me that the right man was worth waiting for, and she also told me I would know when the time was right. She confessed that she waited for her marriage night to make love with Jason, and she wanted me to have the same wonderful experience.

“Nellie...? Robert...?” a male voice called loudly. “I’m comin’ up.”

Robert went to the doorway and stepped out. “We are in here, Doctor Strand. Please come in.”

“Now what have we here?” The short, frumpy Doctor asked cordially as he entered the bedroom. “I don’t believe I’ve met you before, young lady. What’s your name?” he asked as he leaned over me to peer at my head.

When he touched the skin around the cut I said, “Owwww!”

“Now, I know that a girl as purty as you is not named ‘Ow!’” he teased me.

“My name is Gill Mason.”

“Gill? I’m sure your name is Gillian, now isn’t it? Gill is a boy’s name, and I know your parents wouldn’t give you a boy’s name,” he said, positive.

“I prefer Gill,” I told him, telling the simple truth. No one called me Gillian.

“Nonsense. You are too pretty to use a boy’s name, and you’ll not convince me to call you Gill.” He held up two fingers and said, how many fingers do you see?

“Two,” I dutifully replied.

“Now,” he asked, and I tried to concentrate, but he kept moving his hand and I couldn’t. “It’s all right, little lady. You have a concussion, and you need to take it easy for a while.”

“Does she need stitches, Doc?” Nellie asked in concern.

“No. She’ll heal over and if there is a scar, her hair will hide it. No need to put her through the pain of holding still for stitches.”

He took something out of his black bag and applied it to my scalp and I jumped. It burned like hell!” “Fucking hell!” The expletive burst from my lips and I was powerless to swallow the words, and I could immediately see that I’d shocked the three people in the room. “I beg your pardon!” I immediately apologized. “I wasn’t expecting the sting or the burn.”

“That isn’t the only thing that will burn if I hear any more of that language in my home,” Robert stated in disapproval.

"I am sorry," I apologized once again, feeling embarrassed.

"Robert, Gillian has been injured, and she is not herself at present," Nellie said quietly. "She *did* apologize," she added, defending me.

"There is no excuse for using that particular word, ever, and if I should hear it from your mouth, little sister, I will soap your mouth and then spank you soundly while the soap is still in your mouth. Do you hear me?" he demanded.

"Yes, Robert," Nellie whispered, her cheeks a mottled red she was so mortified.

"Please don't scold Nellie, Robert. She has done nothing wrong." I hoped to direct his ire back where it belonged.

"No, it was my fault," the good doctor said calmly. "I should have warned you the medicine was going to sting plenty. Robert, I think our patient is going to be just fine. She needs to stay in bed until I say otherwise. Let her sleep if she wants; I know there's them what thinks a person should be kept awake with a concussion, but as long as you check on her every couple of hours and she can tell you her name, let her sleep in between. Now, Miss Gillian, you stay in this bed. I'll get word to your folks if you tell me where to find them...?"

"My folks are all dead," I said sadly, realizing it was true. None of my family was alive at present. I was alone... and very much afraid.

"I'm right sorry to hear that," Doc said. "Do you recall how you got that bump on your noggin?"

"I came home and someone was hiding in my apartment. I didn't see anything. I felt a sharp pain explode inside my head, and then I woke up when Robert spoke to me. I don't know how I got here."

"You poor child." Doc made a clucking sound with his tongue. "Well, I know you're in good hands with Robert and Nellie. You just don't worry now, and I'll send the Sheriff out in a day or two to talk to you and see if he can find out who hit you like this. Do you suppose they were stealing from you?"

"I really don't know, Doctor." It was the simple truth. I didn't know.

"I'll walk you out, Doc," Robert offered. I felt myself relax once the men left the bedroom.

"You close your eyes and rest, Miss Gillian. If you need anything at all, you just ring the bell on the table, and I'll come running."

“Thank you, Nellie. You are very sweet.”

She smiled, and then hurried from the room, closing the door softly. I felt my answering smile fade as tears filled my eyes. *How on earth had this happened?* The room itself would have told me I was in another century. There was no closet, but instead an attractive armoire in which to hang clothing. There was a dresser, and a vanity with a mirror and a stool. All of the furniture, in this mint condition, would cost a small fortune in the time period I just came from. There was a screen in the corner, and I knew that the commode was back there, too. What I couldn't figure out was why I was here. I didn't expect death to be like this, and I was positive I was dead to the year I came from. I didn't expect Heaven to be like this, but then, perhaps this was hell....? I was alone, and very, very frightened.

I somehow fell asleep, and when I woke the next time it was dark outside. I was thankful that someone left a lantern turned down low on the small table next to the bed. I didn't know what I would do if there was nothing but darkness to spook me even further. I nearly jumped out of my skin when the door opened, slightly at first, then all the way once it was ascertained I was awake.

“How are you feeling, Miss Gillian?” I heard Robert ask quietly as he stuck his head into the room.

“I'm feeling better,” I said, telling him the truth.

“Good. I want to know how you got here...”

“I told you what I know,” I answered.

“Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“No.”

“I don't believe you, young lady, and one of the rules of this house is to tell the truth at all times.”

“I haven't lied to you!” If there was one thing I couldn't stand, it was to be called a liar!

“Maybe you haven't lied, but you certainly have not told the truth. There is a difference, you know.” He waited and when I said nothing, he nodded as if to himself. “Very well, then. I will give you until morning and until after the good Doctor sees you again. If he proclaims you well, then I will ask you once again. You will either tell me the complete truth, or you will quickly learn that I mean what I say. Perhaps if your bottom is on fire you will decide it is in your best interests to tell me the truth.”

I opened my mouth, ready to tell him what he could do with himself, but then remembered that I had nowhere else to go. I was alone in this world, and dependent on

Robert to help me until I could help myself. I was dead to my world, and I needed his help. That knowledge helped me control my temper and my sassy mouth.

“Nothing to say...? Perhaps you do not think I would dare take you in hand...? I assure you that is precisely what I will do if you do not give me a satisfactory answer come morning, young lady.”

He turned then and left the room, and I promptly burst into tears. I felt I was much too old to be treated like a child! I also held a masters in history... and I knew full well that in this time period many women were spanked when they misbehaved. I also knew that my brother-in-law wasn't adverse to taking Gail over his knee when he felt the need. My sister said that it was an expression of his love when he did so. I felt that love a few times when I was younger and decided to act out. Jason was never cruel to me, but he let it be known that I would obey the house rules, and any rules that Gail made for my protection and safety. He and Gail gave me lots of love, and the discipline I needed. Still, they were family, and I didn't even know this Robert person. I thought he was being presumptuous to even consider such a thing!

But, what could I tell him that wouldn't have him thinking I was completely crazy? I didn't want to spend what time I had left to live in an insane asylum. But, if I told Robert the truth, I was sure he would have me locked away. The hours passed slowly, and I was unable to go back to sleep. At one point I got up and made use of the commode, which was indeed behind the screen. I also poured water into the basin and bathed the best I could. At some point Nellie must have taken off my shoes, and the slacks as well as sweater I wore to teach school; I was clad in a flannel cotton nightgown that covered me from just underneath my chin all the way to the floor. My toes weren't even peeking out from under the long gown, and I found it amusing. It might be old-fashioned, but it was exactly the sort of gown I wore to sleep in during the winter. I felt comfortable in the gown.

Morning arrived and sunlight streamed in the window, filling the room with cheer. There was a tap on my door and Nellie cautiously peeked inside. She smiled when she saw I was sitting up. “Good morning, Miss Gillian. How are you feeling today?”

“My headache is a dull ache now, and I managed to get up for a bit without tripping over my feet,” I answered her, smiling. “I feel as though I could get dressed and move about.”

“Oh no!” she answered. “You stay right there in that bed until Doc comes by and examines you! Why, if I permitted you to get up, my brother would...” She suddenly stopped talking, her face turning an embarrassed red.

“Your brother would be upset?” I asked of her.

She nodded her head, and whispered, “He would think it necessary to punish me. And, I do not wish that.”

“It wouldn’t be your fault if I decided to rise.” I immediately defended her. “In fact, the only reason I am in this bed is because I couldn’t find my clothing. Do you know where...?” I stopped speaking when I saw the look of guilt in her pretty eyes.

“Robert told me to throw them in the fire. He said he would provide you with suitable clothing. Neither of us know how you came to be wearing boy’s clothing, but it won’t do for you to walk about town dressed in that manner. The Sheriff would put you in jail for indecency. And the women...! Why, I can just hear them saying all sorts of rude things.”

“I see.”

“You aren’t angry with me?”

“Oh, heavens no, Nellie. I know how women can be, and I think it very nice of you and Robert to look out for me in this way.”

The door opened again and this time it was Robert.

Chapter Three

“Good morning,” he greeted both of us. “Do you think you could handle some breakfast this morning, Miss Gillian?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “I am famished.”

“That is a good sign,” he said, then turned to Nellie. “Would you go and ask Ursula to make a tray for Miss Gillian?”

“Of course,” Nellie replied, and then hurried off to do his bidding.

“Nellie is a nice young lady,” I told him with a smile.

“She is that,” he agreed. “Are you ready to tell me how you got here?” he asked, reminding me of our conversation the evening before.

“It isn’t a case of my being ready to tell you so much as a case of wondering if you are ready to hear the truth. I warn you that it won’t be easy to listen to, and you probably won’t believe me.”

“I see.”

“No, you don’t, Robert. You think I am being difficult. I assure you that I’m not trying to be; I want to tell you, but if you don’t believe me I will be heartbroken.”

“We’ll discuss this after breakfast when I can be sure we won’t be interrupted. I have a strong feeling that you are going to end up over my knee once the good Doctor has been here.”

“I won’t permit that.” I spoke up for myself. I was used to fighting my battles, and I hadn’t done anything to earn a spanking.

“You might not permit it, young lady, but if I decide a spanking is necessary, I promise you will get one.”

“You aren’t being fair!” I wanted to jump out of bed and smack him a good one. “You sound like my brother-in-law when he gets all pompous!”

“I thought you said you have no family?” The expression on his face told her that he was positive he’d caught her in a lie.

“I don’t. They are all dead at this time.”

He opened his mouth to say more but Nellie entered, carrying a tray that was laden with food, and he hurried to help her. “You should have called me and asked for help instead of carrying this all the way from the kitchen.”

“I did just fine until I reached the landing and then it grew heavy,” she admitted with a little giggle, following him to the bed and helping him settle the tray where I could easily reach everything. “I wasn’t sure what you liked, Miss Gillian, so there is probably more here than you will want. Don’t feel you have to eat something you don’t care for.”

“Thank you, Nellie. I think you are very sweet to go to so much trouble for a complete stranger.” I felt tears sting my eyes once again, and wondered why I was so emotional. Then I had to chuckle at myself. Why *wouldn’t* I be emotional? I was dead to my world, and now living in another time period, and dependent on the kindness of strangers, and one of those wanted to spank me silly because I didn’t want to confide in him. I was in quite a fix.

“We’ll leave you to eat your breakfast, Miss Gillian. If you should need anything at all, ring your bell and someone will come right away.”

“Thank you, Robert. You are very kind.”

Once they left the room, I took away the large linen napkin covering the tray and gasped at the amount of food resting there. I never ate a large breakfast, and what was on the tray would have fed me for a week... or longer. There were pancakes swimming in butter and syrup, scrambled eggs and bacon, sausage gravy and biscuits, and a bowl of berries that were covered with cream. I also had a big glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, toast, and a pot of coffee. How Nellie carried all of that was beyond me! She must be stronger than she appeared to be. I had to have a taste or two of everything because it all looked good, but I would have to watch myself or I would be round as could be in no time at all!

“You didn’t eat very much, Miss Gillian,” Nellie said in disappointment.

“Please, Nellie, it isn’t necessary to refer to me as ‘miss’. Gill or Gillian will do just fine. And, I did so eat a lot! I took some of everything, and it was all so good I couldn’t decide what I liked best! Seriously, do you eat like this every morning?” I just had to ask.

She giggled and then admitted, “We don’t eat as much variety on a daily basis, but Ursula makes large meals. She will be happy that you thought her food was really good.” Nellie picked up the tray that was still heavy and hurriedly left the room. I sank back into the bed, suddenly very tired and sleepy.

“Still sleeping?” I heard a male voice growl and I opened my eyes, startled to learn the doctor was already there to check on me. “How are you today?”

“Fine, and ready to get out of this bed.”

“You let me be the judge of that,” he said, and just when I was sure he was going to refuse to let me get up he nodded.

“You can get up for a while and sit in a chair, young lady, but the second you feel tired I want you to get back in bed and rest. If today goes well, you can get up tomorrow and take it real easy. If you start feeling bad you have Nellie or Robert send for me.” He didn’t stay to visit, but picked up his black bag and hurried out of the room. Once he was gone I got up to use the commode once again, and then I decided to have a seat in the wooden rocking chair. I needed to sit up for a while and do some serious thinking.

What was I going to do? How could I support myself? I could teach school, but how did one look for a position in this day and age? I had nothing to tide me over until I found a job, and I knew very little about taking care of myself in this world. And that brought up the next problem, what was I going to tell Robert when he asked me again where I came from? I honestly had no idea what I should say, but I wasn’t used to lying, and something told me that Robert would know if I attempted to give him anything less than the truth. I was so lost in thought that I didn’t hear Robert come into the room and stand beside the dresser.

“It’s time for us to have that talk, Miss Gillian.” I simply looked at him in dismay. “You are going to answer me,” he declared.

“I want to answer you, but I am afraid you won’t believe me. If the situation were reversed and you told me what I am about to tell you I’m not sure I would believe it at all.”

“I’ll do my best, Miss Gillian. I’m pretty good at knowing when I’m being lied to.”

“Somehow I knew you’d say that, Robert.” I closed my eyes, trying to gather my thoughts. “What year is this?” I asked of him.

“How could you not know the answer to that question?” he demanded.

“Because I come from the year 2011,” I answered him, and then waited for the predictable explosion. Robert did not keep me waiting long. I could read the expression of disgust on his face in the split second I had before he turned me over his knee and started spanking my sit upon! “Owwwww!” I immediately fussed and complained. His hand was hard and it hurt like crazy. “See, I knew you wouldn’t believe me if I told the truth.”

“I won’t be made sport of, little girl,” he warned, continuing the spanking with slaps meant to sting like crazy.

“I am not doing that!” I promptly burst into tears, and then I was sobbing.

“Oh, come on... I’m not spanking you that hard!” he protested, lifting me up to sit on his lap. “Don’t cry, Gillian. I’ll stop.”

I did not wish to cry in front of him, but it took me several minutes to stop. I finally accepted his handkerchief, wiped my face and blew my nose. “Will you at least listen to me, Robert? I’m really scared, and I don’t deserve your anger. In fact, I can’t deal with anger right now.”

He nodded, and I slowly started talking. “I taught history at the school where my brother-in-law was principal. He called me into his office to scold me for what he hoped was a practical joke, but it wasn’t. My sister believes in time travel. That is when you are born to another time period, and somehow you die in that time, and you end up elsewhere. She and her children were visiting a historical home that was preserved and opened for tours, and she took a picture of her daughter standing to the side of a beautiful, old desk. When she looked at the pictures later, she was shocked to see me in it! I was dressed in clothing from this time period and seated at the desk. It shook her up because she was so afraid of losing me, too. We’d already lost our parents, and she saw the photo as a premonition of what was to come. She was beside herself with worry, and my brother-in-law insisted that I go and reassure Gail. I went to see my sister, but neither of us could make sense of the photo. She asked me to stay for dinner and once Jason was home we ordered pizza and played a long game of Monopoly. I went home afterwards, and there was someone hiding in my apartment. One minute I was fine, and in the next there was this blinding pain and the world went black. I woke up here, Robert. I think that God knew I wasn’t finished living and he gave me the opportunity to come here.”

Robert looked at me in disbelief, and I didn’t blame him. I wouldn’t believe it either if it hadn’t happened to me. “Everything I knew and that is familiar to me is in the future. I have no money, no job, and I am terrified you will think me insane and want to have me committed. I also know that you are enough like Jason that telling you anything less than the truth would be unacceptable.”

“I beg your pardon for spanking you, Gillian,” he said the last thing I expected to come from his mouth. “You certainly didn’t deserve a punishment, not after what happened to you.”

I started crying again, but this time my tears were ones of relief. “Thank you for believing me, Robert. Oh, thank you!”

“I think you need to keep it secret, however. Just because I believe you is no sign that anyone else would.”

"I understand." I gave him time to accept what I'd told him, and it was easy to see that he was having trouble. He looked at me and shook his head.

"How does it feel?"

"My body feels and looks normal, but nothing is the same. Clothing is a lot different; furniture is, too. You don't have bathrooms and indoor plumbing, not to mention appliances. I'm going to have to learn a lot of things."

"Are we really so different from what is in the future?" His curiosity demanded answers.

"Yes, Robert. In so many ways. One tiny example... The way I swore yesterday when the doctor put the antiseptic on my cut; no one where I came from would have batted an eye at my reaction. I wasn't raised that way, however, and I was taught to use words that weren't so caustic to make my point. Just so you know, my brother-in-law is probably one of the few men alive who would still spank for swearing in that manner."

Robert nodded, but looked at me in warning before he stated, "If I ever hear those words from your sweet lips again I will soap your mouth and set your posterior on fire. Swearing in that manner is not acceptable in this time or in this home."

"I am not likely to do so again." I couldn't help but smile at him. "I do not wish to upset you, Robert."

"I wish there was more time for us to discuss your situation, Gillian, but there isn't, and I think we should be married as soon as possible."

"What?" I thought my hearing was playing tricks on me. "You cannot be serious, Robert! Why should we be married?" I demanded of him.

"I must be able to offer you legal protection should the need arise. You are all alone, and you have no means of support. If you accidentally make a comment of the future in front of the wrong person, you could be forcibly removed from my home and made a mockery of. I will not permit this to happen, and the only means of protection that I can offer that is absolute is marriage. Then, as long as you commit no crimes, you will be safe in my care."

"That is a poor reason to marry someone, Robert!" I was torn between thankfulness that he wanted to keep me safe and insult that he thought me so foolish I would draw attention to myself in such a silly way.

"Are you in love with another?" he asked.

"No," I had to admit.

"I am recently home from a year abroad; there is no one special in my life, either. We shall marry at once and others will assume I met you while traveling."

"I can't permit you to do that, Robert," I argued with him. "Surely I can get a job teaching school somewhere...? I should be able to support myself."

"It is not a life for someone such as you, Miss Gillian. Teaching in these parts is a sentence to poverty unless your students' families take a liking to you and bring you food, or you are able to tend a small garden in addition to your duties. Your home is one room behind the school, and you would have to make sure that firewood was chopped each day. Hard work for a small female your size."

"I'm not a weakling," I argued, but had to admit that I was a bit disillusioned at the idea of living in poverty in order to teach school. I was sure that not all schools were like that. I would just have to find one of those in a large city somewhere. But where was I? And what year was it?

"Robert, you still haven't told me the date... or where I am..." I asked.

"This is March 16, 1870, and you are in Milbourne, Missouri," he answered.

"Yes," I agreed, nodding. "You are close to St. Joseph. It is a few years after the Civil War, and people are heading west by wagon train to live in California and Oregon, and places in between, in spite of the plains Indians."

"This is true." Robert agreed with me. "And that is why you and Nellie are not to venture away from here alone. It simply isn't safe. Too many drifters coming here to catch a wagon train. When you have good people trying to make a new life, you are going to have others who want to fleece them and take advantage. At first Nellie and I thought that is what had happened to you."

"I want you to know how much I appreciate your kindness, Robert. You and Nellie have been wonderful to me." Nellie chose that moment to tap on the door and walk inside.

"Robert, Doc told you not to tire Miss Gillian, and you have been in here for hours now!"

"Are you scolding me, little sister?" Robert asked with a smile on his handsome face.

"Why, yes I am!" she replied, and then shook a finger at him in a playful manner.

"Nellie, Gillian and I have been discussing a serious matter. I have asked her to marry me so that I can offer her my protection."

"Robert, I won't permit you to make a sacrifice of this sort," I stated, shocked to learn that he was still considering his foolish idea of marriage. "I am hardly helpless."

“Nellie, what I am going to share with you now is confidential and must never be spoken of with anyone else, and that includes your David. Do you agree? Or must I treat you like a child and withhold the truth?”

“This sounds very serious, Robert,” Nellie answered, frowning.

“It is serious. I am sure you will understand once I explain, but first, I must have your promise. This matter must not be spoken of again.”

“Very well,” Nellie agreed, giving me a sympathetic look. “Are you hiding from someone who wishes you ill, Gillian?” she asked, her concern reflected in her eyes. “You need not worry if that is the case. Robert and I will keep you safe. We certainly wouldn’t permit anyone to hurt you.”

“Oh, I know that, Nellie. Both you and Robert have been so kind to me. I don’t feel, however, that Robert needs to go so far as to marry me!”

“But, Gillian, you are so beautiful. Why wouldn’t my brother wish to marry you? At least you are open and honest and you aren’t resorting to deceit like someone I could mention...” Nellie gave her brother a meaningful look.

“You are somewhat biased, little sister.” Robert smiled indulgently.

“With good reason,” she agreed. “So, then, I am ready to listen to whatever it is that I cannot share with my fiancé...”

Chapter Four

The last reaction that Robert expected of his sister was for her to sit there and giggle, but that is precisely what she did. "I do not find this situation amusing in the least," he finally stated, thoroughly insulted.

"That is because you are a man, brother, and everything is always black and white to you."

"I don't know what you mean by that."

"Robert, I am sure that you see nothing at all wrong in wanting to protect Gillian, and I am sure she is grateful, but, dear brother, no woman wishes to feel she is being asked to wed out of a sense of duty. Gillian is a woman, and she needs to know that the man she plans to marry loves her. If David proposed marriage to me in the manner you did to Gillian, I would not be planning to wed him. You have insulted Gillian."

"I did no such thing!" he quickly denied, and then he looked at me in consternation, "Did I, Gillian?" he wanted to know.

"I know it was not intentional, Robert, but it was certainly not the stuff that proposals are made of."

His face turned red, but he clearly wasn't through with me. "What of your safety?"

"I guess it will be up to me to make sure I stay safe," I replied. But, that was before a man and woman showed up at Robert's door a few days later claiming I belonged to them!

"Oh, Gillian, there is a man and woman in the parlor, claiming that you are his wife and her sister. They are demanding that Robert turn you over immediately."

"What?" I was shocked, to say the least. "That is not true. They must have me confused with someone else."

"The woman says that you were abducted from their wagon in Saint Joe, and she is wringing her hands and crying. The man is quite belligerent."

"We shall see about this," I declared. "Do you think that Ursula would loan me some clothing suitable for a servant?" Nellie looked at me and then giggled as she realized what I planned to do.

It was just a few minutes later when I approached the parlor carrying a tray laden with coffee and cakes. I carried it into the room and sat the tray on a side table, and then served the cakes while my supposed husband and sister looked right at me. Robert met my gaze but he gave nothing away.

“I am tired of waiting. I demand to be shown to my wife!”

“Yes, Carson is quite right! We need to see Shirley immediately so that we can get back to the wagon train before it pulls out.” I handed the woman a cup and saucer, and she looked at me in annoyance.

“What makes you so certain that the woman I found is your sister, Miss Griffin?” Robert asked.

“It has to be Shirley. You are the only one who has reported finding a female.”

“And you say that Shirley is to inherit her father’s estate?” he questioned.

“Yes. My stepfather passed away recently, and now that Shirley is so wealthy, she just has to be able to enjoy the fortune he has left her. He treated her so poorly, and now it simply wouldn’t be fair if...”

“I think you mean that it wouldn’t be fair if you couldn’t get your hands on Shirley’s inheritance,” Robert stated matter-of-factly.

“I am sure you know that we are willing to offer a substantial reward,” Carson Smith said slyly.

“How much?” Robert demanded.

“Ten thousand.” The man didn’t bat an eye.

“I want double that amount.”

“Very well. Cut the crap and get the girl down here. I’ll see you get the money this afternoon.”

“Don’t you want to make sure the woman is Shirley?” Robert asked.

“I think we both know that she is Shirley.”

“I think you both should be arrested and thrown in jail.” I finally decided to speak up.

“Shut your insolent mouth!” Miss Griffin snapped at me.

“That is a fine way to speak to your sister, Miss Griffin,” Robert stated.

“Robert, I have never seen either of these two fools before,” I assured him.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Shirley! Why, I only saw that deplorable dress and it never occurred to me that he would make a servant of you!”

“Get out of my home,” Robert said, getting to his feet. “I wouldn’t send any defenseless woman with the two of you.”

“You cannot keep my wife from me.”

“I am not your wife,” Gillian said quietly, and then watched as Robert showed them to the door. She could hear their threats to return with the law, and she knew they were just stupid enough and mean enough to try something like that. She had no proof that she was who she claimed to be.

A few minutes later Robert returned. “I have sent for Judge Hendricks, Gillian. Go and find Nellie and ask to borrow a dress to be married in.”

“What? I told you this would not work,” I insisted.

“Those two will return, Gillian, and they will each lie and claim you are Shirley. The law will take their word, and you will be forced to go with them. We need to get married as soon as possible and I do not wish to hear any arguments. Now, do as you are told.”

“I will not! I am not your child, and I do not have to obey you!” I lost my temper, even though I knew full well that the real target of my anger wasn’t in the room. “I will be gone before they return.” I turned to leave the room, but Robert snagged my wrist with his strong fingers, and then he pulled me over his lap and started spanking quite hard. “Stop it!” I ordered sharply.

“I will stop when you are being reasonable. You and I are going to be married, and you are going to stop giving me an argument.”

“I don’t have any desire to be married to a man who does not love me!” I kicked my legs, trying to free myself from the hold he had on me.

“Would you rather be married to a man who only wants you for monetary reasons? As soon as that guy gets his hands on Shirley’s inheritance, she will disappear again... permanently. But, I guarantee that man will use you over and over until he does kill you.” He spanked me several more times. “Is that what you want?” Robert demanded.

I was shocked. “No! Let me go, damn it!” As soon as the swear word left my mouth I knew I was in trouble. I’d been warned and I still went ahead and used bad language. What was wrong with me? “I’m sorry!” I cried out immediately, but the damage was done. Robert was going to have my hide, and that is precisely what he did. He put some

real strength into spanking my backside, in spite of all my ‘sorries’ and promises not to do it again. He made sure that I would remember this spanking the next time I was tempted to curse. It didn’t take long for me to be reduced to tears, and it was hard to say who was most embarrassed when Nellie came into the parlor... her or me!

“Robert! Stop!” Nellie rushed forward to grab his hand and stop him. “Poor Gillian has been through so much already!”

“Help her find something suitable to wear to be married in, Nellie. I’m not about to have those two fortune hunters come back here and cart Gillian away.”

“I can’t permit you to marry me!” I couldn’t stop crying.

“You cannot stop me, and if you try, I will paddle you in front of the Judge. Now go along with Nellie, and Nellie, see if you can repair her face so she doesn’t appear she has been forced to speak her vows. The Judge knows me well, but I don’t want to put him in a tight spot.”

“Come with me, Gillian. There is no reasoning with Robert when he sets his mind on something.”

“Nellie, I don’t need any of your sass, either.”

“You are not always right, Robert, and it is high time you realize that. If Gillian does not agree to marry you I will not stand by and see her forced into it.”

Robert moved in her direction and I quickly slipped in the middle, preventing him from reaching for her. “Stop this at once! If you are so set on marriage to me, then I will marry you, Robert. Just realize that this whole thing is your idea and if it doesn’t end well, you have no one to blame but yourself.” I gave Nellie a little push and followed her from the parlor. Robert was right about one thing... I would rather find myself married to him than to that weasel who came here looking for any woman that he could pretend was his. Robert was right; the man was the type to force himself on me over and over until he had money in his hands, and then he would see me dead, or left behind to fend for myself. It wasn’t a good option, and at least I knew I would be safe here with Robert. However, I didn’t want a loveless marriage. Why would God send me all the way back in time to be miserable? It didn’t seem fair.

“My brother doesn’t realize just how bossy he is,” Nellie exclaimed, her temper showing. “No matter what he says, he won’t force you, Gillian.”

“I know that, Nellie,” I reassured her the best I could. “Robert is afraid for me because he knows that man and woman will be back and bring the law with them. I have no proof of who I say I am, and since I had that horrible head injury, they can claim that I don’t know who I am. We both know that isn’t so, but if the law made me go with those two...

Well, it doesn't bear thinking about. I'd rather marry Robert, even though I don't think this is a bit fair to him."

"Robert wouldn't offer if he wasn't sure of himself," she shocked me by stating. "I think he is fascinated by you, Gillian. You do not wish to marry him simply because he is very wealthy, like most of the other girls around here. In fact, he is probably quite stung because you told him 'no' when he asked the first time."

"I would think that marrying for money a good way to be bored and unhappy for the rest of your life," I commented.

Nellie giggled. "Tell that to Connie Eastwood and to Wilma Nixon! Why, they will hate you on sight... mostly because you are so beautiful, but also because my brother wouldn't give either of them a second glance in spite of their attempts to land him for their own."

"Your brother is a good man, and he really does wish to help me, but I worry that he will meet someone else someday and then wish he was free to offer marriage."

"I don't think that will happen. Robert has been all over this country and all over Europe. He looks at you with a certain light in his eyes that is missing when he looks at others. He will be a good husband to you, Gillian, I promise."

"I do not doubt you, but..."

"... You would rather have the romantic proposal in the moonlit garden with Robert on bent knee offering his undying love...?"

"Is it so wrong to desire love?"

When I glanced in the mirror some time later I was most surprised by my appearance. I looked truly happy... and pretty! Still, I did not want Robert to have second thoughts; that would hurt me, too. But, when he sent for us and stated that Judge Hendricks was waiting, I went down to the parlor, repeated the words that would make me Robert's legal wife, and I signed the document that was our wedding certificate. Robert placed a pretty ring on my finger during the ceremony and I recognized it from my sister's photo.

Judge Hendricks stayed and celebrated with us and since David had returned from his trip to Chicago, it was a rather festive gathering. I enjoyed David's company and could see that he was as enamored of Nellie as she was of him. We were settling in the parlor with our coffee when there was a loud pounding on the front door. Ursula answered, and it was exactly the people we were expecting.

"I hope this matter is important, Sheriff?" Judge Hendricks asked. "We are celebrating Robert and Gillian's wedding."

"What?" Miss Griffin screeched, looking at me angrily.

"Give it a rest, lady. You know that you are not related to me, and neither is he. We proved that earlier when you didn't even know who I was when I was in the same room with you."

"Judge, these people claim that Mr. Stanhope is keeping their relative from them." The Sheriff didn't appear to have much of a sense of humor.

"Are you related to them in any way, Mrs. Stanhope?" the good Judge asked.

"No, your honor."

"That is a lie! You are my wife, Shirley! We've been married for three years now."

The man's gray eyes were full of rage. It was the same look I'd seen in the eyes of the man who attacked me years before, and in the eyes of my student... the one that Jason warned me about. I gathered my courage and looked at him. "I am married to Robert, and you, sir, are a liar."

"It is that head injury that is making you talk all crazy!" he accused, his hands balled into fists at his side.

Another knock at the door, and Ursula announced the Doctor. "I didn't know you would have guests, Robert. I was out this way and thought I should check on Miss Gillian."

"I am doing well, Doctor," I announced. "You are just in time. This man claims I was married to him, and that my injury keeps me from knowing who he is. Have I, even once, acted one bit confused about who I am?" I demanded.

"No, you have not, Miss Gillian," he said, his eyes full of good humor. "You introduced yourself as Gill Mason, and I told you that you were far too pretty to use a man's name." "You are a sweet man, Doctor. Thank you," I smiled at him, thinking he could have played the part of Doc on *Gunsmoke*. "And, you are in time to celebrate with us. Robert and I were married a short while ago," I announced.

"You can't marry him when you are already my wife!"

"I am not, nor have I ever been, your wife." I wanted to smack the man.

Doctor Strand looked at the man, his stare hard and assessing. "You say that you were married to this young woman?"

“Yes!” the aggravating man answered immediately. “For over three years! This here is Shirley’s sister, and she can swear to it!” He gave Robert a gloating look and I was shocked by the look of anger in Robert’s dark eyes.

“I see. Well, excuse me, ladies, for the indelicacy of this question, but do you have an injury, young man?”

“An injury?”

“Yes; to your manhood?” Doctor Strand was blunt and my sister-in-law gasped in shocked embarrassment.

“Well, of course not!” The cocky little man wasn’t about to admit to any such thing, and I knew where Doc was going with the conversation, and I was smiling... in spite of my own embarrassment.

“Then you weren’t married to this girl, mister. She’s a virgin. When Robert and Nellie called on me to treat her injury I had to make sure she wasn’t assaulted, and she is as innocent as can be. There is no way this girl was married before today.”

“You fool!” Miss Griffin declared angrily. She picked up her skirts and headed for the door.

“Just a minute. If this lady ain’t Shirley Smith, then suppose you tell me just where she is?” the sheriff demanded.

“My guess is that these two talked her into moving west and then disposed of her on the way here. If you check with the wagon train they’re registered with I’m sure you’ll discover that these two are signed on as Mr. and Mrs. Smith. The only reason they are looking for someone to play the part of Shirley is to claim an inheritance that was left to her by her father.”

“Shirley always did ruin everything. Conner was interested in me until he saw her!” the bitter woman remarked. “Her Pa was supposed to be dead, and now that she’s gone, he turns up, wealthy as can be. It just ain’t fair.”

“Neither is trying to use another human being to commit fraud,” I stated.

“Sheriff, please get them out of this house. We are celebrating our wedding,” Robert said, draping his arm around my shoulders and giving me a squeeze.

“Congratulations, Mr. Standhope. There sure are gonna be a lot of sad ladies around these parts,” he teased on his way out the doors.

“I think I am ready for some wedding cake,” I said with a smile, more thankful than Robert would ever know for his protection. Now, if only he could learn to love me some day.

Chapter Five

I continued to use the guest room for the next several months. Robert and I did not argue often, and when we did, he had a sure-fire way of settling things in a way that left me reluctant to sit down to eat my meals. I hated the fact that Robert felt he had the right to spank me, but it was better than fighting and being angry with each other for days on end like the wives of some of my husband's friends. Helene Lambert caught me rubbing my posterior one day, and teased me about the cause. I found her crying a few minutes later and she told me she was jealous of me. She said the only reason a man spanked his wife was because he loved her, and she wished that her Matthew would take his hand to her... at least once. I gave her a hug, but her words stayed with me.

It was approaching my birthday, and while I'd mentioned the date to Nellie right after I married Robert, I saw no reason to bring it up again. I missed Gail, Jason, and the two kids so much, and I knew that Robert couldn't give me what I wanted most, some way to let them know I was fine. The desk in the picture that Gail took was nowhere to be found in the beautiful home, and I knew of no way to communicate.

My birthday arrived, and I knew I wasn't fit company for anyone. I went to the barn and was pleased that it was so early that none of the hands were around. I quickly saddled my horse, mounted by myself and took off, completely ignoring Robert's rule about riding alone. Being alone was exactly what I wanted. It wasn't what I got, however. My mind was on my family, and I was feeling sorry for myself. I wasn't paying a bit of attention to what was happening around me, and the next thing I knew three men surrounded me, asking me what I was doing out there all alone.

"Have you seen Gillian this morning?" Robert asked of his sister when she hurried into the dining room for breakfast.

"No. I was going to ask her to go riding with me, but she isn't upstairs. I waited around for her for a while, and then decided I was starving!" Nellie grinned. "Maybe she asked one of the men to go riding?"

"Perhaps. I'll go and check with them. I want to make today special for Gillian," he said, smiling.

"If you intend to do that, then best you tell her you love her."

"Well, of course I love her!" Robert stated, giving his little sister an exasperated look.

"She doesn't know that you do," Nellie informed him.

“How could she not know?”

“Maybe because you haven’t told her yet!” She sighed. “Robert, a woman needs the words. I’ve seen the way Gillian looks at you. She thinks the sun rises and sets in you, and she keeps waiting and hoping for some kind of acknowledgement.”

“I married her. I gave her Mother’s wedding ring.”

“She doesn’t know that it was Mother’s wedding ring. You haven’t told her that, either.”

Robert got to his feet and headed for the doorway before turning to face his giggling sister, “I hope that David sets your bottom on fire every day and twice on Sundays, brat!”

“He won’t have to; he has already told me that he loves me. He is just waiting for you to decide I am old enough to get married.”

“Not one day before you are twenty,” he stated firmly.

“That is almost two more years!” she wailed, and this time it was his turn to smile.

He headed for the barn, and talked to two of the hands, asking if they’d seen Mrs. Gillian. One of the men looked at the other, shifted from foot to foot, and then blurted, “I saw Mrs. Stanhope ride out real early, Boss.”

“Who was she with?” Robert asked.

“She wasn’t with no one, Boss. I thought it was strange, but then I thought maybe you rode on ahead and was waiting for her up yonder.”

“Which way did she go?” Robert asked, mounting in one graceful, fluid movement. When he found his errant little redhead, he was going to give her a birthday spanking to remember for the rest of her life. Shorty pointed him in the right direction and Robert took off at a fast pace, anxious to find Gillian before something happened to her.

“I am minding my own business, and I suggest you do the same,” I told the oldest of the men. He was obviously the leader.

“Miss, please don’t take that tone,” the man beseeched me. “We need help, and real fast.”

“What is wrong?” I asked.

“My sister is havin’ a babe, and she’s got no one to help her,” the youngest of the three answered. “Can you help?” he practically begged me.

“I will try, but you must go for the Doctor,” I told him.

“I sure will if you can’ tell me where to find him.”

I quickly gave directions and then rode along with the other two men to find their wagon camped a couple of miles away. I could hear a woman’s moans, and I climbed inside the wagon to see if there was anything I could do. An even younger boy was with her, his freckles standing out clear as could be on his white face. “Are you gonna help us, ma’am?” he asked me.

“I’ll try. Now I know you aren’t this woman’s husband...?” I asked teasingly, trying to lighten the mood, but it had just the opposite effect when the young woman started crying.

“Elly’s man was killed a week ago. Was an accident; he drowned.”

“Oh, I am so sorry,” I said as I took her hand in mine.

“I want to die, too,” she declared.

“That is nonsense. You have a child to raise. Losing one parent is awful, but losing both of them is worse than you can imagine. I know that because I lost both of mine within weeks of each other. Thank God I had my older sister and her husband, but your baby needs you.” She cried out as another contraction hit hard, and I said, “Try to breathe slowly, Elly.”

“How is my girl, ma’am,” the older man asked from outside the wagon.

“I’ll do what I can, but I think you should go back to where you found me, and keep on riding on that path until you come to the Stanhope ranch. Go to the front door and tell them that I need Ursula, just in case Doctor Strand doesn’t make it in time.”

“I’m on my way. If you need water and the like, put Ben to work. Ben, you help this lady, hear? Elly, I’m fetching more help, honey. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He rode out, hurrying as fast as he could, and met up with another man in just about the same spot he found the lady. “Mister, am I headin’ the right way for the Stanhope Ranch?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m Robert Stanhope. Have you seen my wife?”

“Pretty little lady, riding a brown gelding...?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

“She’s helpin’ my girl. She told me to fetch a woman named Ursula in case my son don’t make it back with the Doctor in time to help my girl deliver.”

“Gillian hasn’t had a child, and I’m not sure if she knows what to do, but our housekeeper is good with this sort of thing. Where are you located?” Robert asked. Once he had the directions, he sent the man back to be with his daughter while he raced back to the ranch to get Ursula.

“I met up with your husband, ma’am. He went on to fetch your housekeeper.”

“Good. Thank you, Mr....?”

“Tom Riley, ma’am. How’s my girl doin’?”

“She’s close now,” I answered, praying that Robert would hurry. I knew the basic principles of delivering a baby, but it was one of those things you hope you never have to do for real. Still, there was a very real possibility I would be doing just that in the next few minutes. I said a prayer, and then concentrated on my patient and seeing a new baby safely into the world.

Robert heard the sounds of a baby crying and he couldn’t help but smile as he drove the wagon closer. He stopped and helped Ursula down, and she quickly hurried into the canvas covered wagon to see if Gillian needed help.

Gillian was happy to see Ursula and even happier when the older woman praised her and said she’d done as good a job as the Doctor could do. Once Elly was sleeping peacefully, and the baby cared for, Gillian left the wagon, eager to see Robert.

“Well, Mrs. Stanhope...? What do you have to say for yourself?” Robert asked quietly, reminding himself that it was not the time to take her to task for disobeying him.

“Robert, I have never seen anything so beautiful as that little baby making her way into the world.” I rested my head on his chest.

“A special birthday present,” he said, smiling at me.

I couldn’t believe he remembered it was my birthday, and the next thing I knew I was crying. “You remembered,” I blubbered.

“Of course I did.” He looked at me as if he couldn’t believe I wouldn’t think he would remember. “Did you think I would forget?” he asked of me. I could only nod, and he held me close.

“I didn’t think *anyone* would remember. I was feeling so lonesome this morning; I miss my family so much.”

"I understand that, but riding out alone is not permitted," he told me so gently that it made me feel even worse that I already did. I knew that he deserved an apology and I decided it would be best to take care of it in the moment rather than waiting until we were completely alone.

"Robert, I am sorry I went riding by myself. When Mr. Riley and two of his sons came out of nowhere and I realized I was alone it was a terrible feeling. I was frightened, and I know now that I was so lucky that they meant me no harm. I am sorry I worried you, and I promise I won't do it again."

"No, you will not," he agreed. "You earned a sound punishment."

"Not on my birthday!" I gasped, outraged at the very idea.

"If you break a rule on your birthday, then you will be punished on your birthday. This was your choice, Gillian, not mine."

"But, it is my birthday, and I was sad. I just needed some time alone."

"And what will you do the next time you decide you wish to be alone?" he asked of me.

"I can tell you that I will not go riding alone," I told him, meaning the words.

"This is very good. I do not enjoy punishing you."

"Then don't. I am not a child, and goodness knows, I was needed here. If I hadn't gone riding then Elly wouldn't have had the help she needed." I knew that I was pushing, and I hoped it would work.

It didn't.

As soon as we reached home later that day, Robert took my arm and led me up the stairs and down the hallway to my bedroom. "Oh, Robert! No...! Please...?" I tried again to dissuade him from what was coming.

"Did you know the rule, Mrs. Stanhope?" he asked of me.

"Yes, but..."

"Did you choose to break the rule, wife?" Suddenly I was angry and I gave him a great push, sending him sprawling on my bed. He recovered quickly, and jumped up to stand there, glaring at me and obviously trying to control his temper.

"How dare you call me '*Mrs.* Stanhope'? How dare you call me '*wife*'?" I raged at him. "I do not feel like your wife; I feel like your roommate. Roommates are not treated as a wife is treated, and you cannot have it both ways. If you expect to treat me like your

wife, then you are going to have to make me your wife... Then perhaps I will listen to your silly rules. But, right now you can just get your butt out of my room!"

Robert stood there staring at me as if I had two heads. I was so embarrassed I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me! I couldn't believe I'd given Robert such an ultimatum! I just knew I couldn't keep on living with things the way they were. It wasn't fair to either of us.

"Gillian, I think we need to sit down and have a serious talk. Come here," he said as he took a seat on the side of the bed, and then patted the quilt beside him. I didn't want to talk, but what choice did I have? I sat beside him, but refused to look at him.

"Gillian, I would love to have you for my wife in all ways any time you feel ready to take that step." He remembered his little sister's words, and even though he felt he was risking rejection, he said, "I love you, and I have since before we married."

I had to look at him then, to see if he was telling me the truth, and to my shocked surprise, he was! The look in his dark eyes was sincere as could be. "I love you, too, Robert," I confessed, finally saying the words I'd longed to say for the last several weeks.

"I believe you mean that."

"I do."

He kissed me then... And it wasn't one of those polite kisses on the cheek, either. It was a bona fide, man kisses his woman with passion kiss. It was an 'I love you' kiss, and I felt it clear down to my toes! When we finally came up for air, we were lying down on the bed and Robert was practically on top of me! "Oh my!" I gasped. "Now I know what my sister meant by 'Jason made my toes curl'! Robert, I really do love you," I said the words again, looking deep into his eyes.

"I love you, too, Gilly, and I should have told you a long time ago instead of assuming you knew. I planned to make today very special for you... and I was hoping that you would realize how much I care."

"I was too busy feeling sorry for myself," I admitted. "Oh, Robert, I am so thankful that God gave me a second chance to live and love."

"When you told me how you came to be here I knew that God picked you for me," he told me so earnestly that I had to believe him.

"I want to be your wife," I whispered, doing my best to let him know that I didn't want to wait until the cover of night to make love.

“I want you to be my wife, but we have one unpleasant matter to deal with before that can happen, Mrs. Stanhope,” he told me, and I knew that the blasted man still meant to spank me!

“Robert, couldn’t you just forget about that rule for today? *It is* my birthday, you know.” I tried pouting a bit and learned it had no more affect on him than it had on Jason.

“Rules are not made to be forgotten, sweetheart. You said yourself that you were frightened when those men approached you this morning. You have earned yourself a spanking and I expect you to act like an adult and accept the consequences of your actions. Turn over here,” he bossed, flipping me over on the bed.

“Robert, I already learned my lesson,” I insisted. My words did not sway him. He shoved my skirts up past my waist and then lowered my drawers. “Noooo!” I wailed, hoping I sounded pitiful, but that didn’t deter him from his purpose, either. Robert’s hard hand landed on my left cheek with a loud crack, one that I was positive Ursula could hear down in the kitchen. I felt my face flame with embarrassment even as a burning pain exploded on my bottom. Before I could complain loudly, Robert treated the other side of my bottom to the same hard smack, and this time I did yell. That didn’t stop him either, and, in fact, it seemed to encourage him to continue spanking me. His hand never landed where I expected it to, but spread its damage all over my backside until I was crying and pleading with him to stop. It was a terrible spanking, and it was a rotten thing for him to do to me on my birthday. Birthday spankings were supposed to be fun! Robert made sure that I wouldn’t want to sit down for the rest of the day. My upper thighs were as red and hot as my bottom cheeks, and that spot right between my cheeks and thighs was so sore that it hurt to even *think* about sitting. Not exactly a typical birthday spanking, and I was none too happy with Robert for taking me to task.

“You won’t be running off and riding by yourself again, now will you, Gilly?” he asked so tenderly that most of my temper with him evaporated into thin air.

“No,” I replied, and then hiccupped!

“Good. I could not bear for something to happen to you, sweetheart,” he told me, and then he gently kissed me and held me for a long time. My bottom finally stopped throbbing and my thoughts turned to other things, proving that my body was a traitor! I wanted to be angry with Robert for daring to spank me so hard on my birthday, but when he kissed me again and slowly introduced me to the pleasure of being his wife, I forgot all about the punishment and was a willing participant in making love. The first time with my husband was every bit as special and worth waiting for as Gail said it would be.

Later, much later, we dressed again and went downstairs. To my pleasant surprise, Ursula made a special dinner, including a pretty, decorated birthday cake, and there were gifts, too; combs for my hair, a new shawl, and a piece of fabric from Nellie. There were several books, a small bottle of French perfume, and a beautiful, handcrafted desk from my husband. The desk was the one in Gail’s photo, and the fabric from Nellie was what I

was wearing in the picture. I was truly happy, and I prayed that Gail had peace of mind in knowing that I was alive and well in the past.

The End