



ALL I NEED
IS YOU

CHARMAIN CALLAWAY

All I Need is You

Charmain Callaway

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Prologue

Middleton, TX 1855

They were going to get caught!

That thought kept repeating itself as Penny sat on her bed, waiting for Anna to return. She just knew ma was going to wake up and catch them.

And Anna would be in a lot of trouble.

Penny shivered as she thought about the discipline strap ma always carried around her waist. She knew how much hurt that strap could cause. Ma had not used the strap on Anna in a long time.

But, things could suddenly change.

Penny was trying to understand the sudden need for Anna and Alley to leave home in the middle of the night. Ma was a light sleeper.

They were going to get caught!!!

When her door quietly opened, she almost fainted from fright. But instead of ma, it was Anna.

Penny let out her breath. "You scared me!" she whispered.

"You knew I was coming back. Where's Alley?"

“Still in the kitchen.” Penny saw Anna was holding something in her hand. “What did you get?”

“My money.”

Penny’s eyes widened when she saw the bills. “I thought ma hid the money.”

“She did.”

Penny looked from the bills to her sister. “How did you find it?”

“I saw where she put it.”

Penny knew how careful ma was with the money. “Ma didn’t see you?” Penny asked as she watched her sister place a small blanket on the bed, then laid hers and Alley’s clothes neatly in a stack on top. She watched as Anna carefully hid the money in the middle of the pile of clothes.

“No. At the time, she was busy. . . making arrangements.”

Penny’s mind was already anticipating the reaction. “Ma is gonna be real mad when she finds out you stole her money.”

Anna put the last of her clothes on the top of the stack, then placed a rope on top, leaving the ends hanging outside the blanket. “I didn’t steal *her* money. It’s *mine*.”

Penny watched as Anna rolled the blanket up, then used two ribbons to tie the roll shut. “Do you really have to leave?”

Anna tied the ends of the rope together to make a loop. “I’m not marrying that fat man.”

Penny thought Anna was right. Mr. Jake Taylor was fat.

“He’s fat, he sweats a lot, and he stinks!” Anna added. She turned to Penny. “And I hate it when he calls you ‘little one’. *Pass the biscuits, little one*,” she mimicked his deep voice. “And he always calls Alley ‘honey’. *Hows about some potatoes, honey?*” She turned back to her packing. “I don’t like the look in his eyes when he talks to us.”

“Why are you supposed to marry him?” Penny asked Anna.

“Cause ma . . . said so.”

Penny thought on that. “Maybe, if you told ma how you feel, she won’t make you—”

Anna turned angry eyes at her younger sister. “She’s not my ma. And she’s not yours either. It’s best if you remember that.”

Pennystood next to her sister, her hands still clutched

together. Penny knew Anna was sorry for her outburst.

“Penny, you’re too young to understand. Besides, I don’t like the way Mr. Taylor looks at me when ma or pa turn their backs.”

The door opened and Alley quietly came in. All three girls were as different as could be. Of course, the reason was they were all adopted.

Anna was just turning fifteen. Slim with olive colored skin, her hair was long and black, which made her blue eyes stand out.

Alley was a few months younger. Also slim, her skin was fair, her hair long and blonde, and her eyes were a rich brown.

Penny was only twelve. Shorter than the older two, and not as slim, Penny’s hair was brown, her eyes hazel. And unlike Anna or Alley, freckles dotted Penny’s nose and cheeks.

“I packed enough food for several days,” Alley whispered as she put the different piles of food on the bed. Anna pulled her pillow out if it’s case and began to fill it with the food. “Are you sure I need to go too?”

Anna turned to Alley. “Alley, you’ll be fifteen in a few months. I don’t want you to go through this.”

Penny watched as Alley nodded her head.

“What do you think Mr. Taylor will do when he finds out you’ve gone and taken the money?”

Anna’s expression was cold as she looked at Alley. “I don’t care.”

Alley paused for a moment. “You think pa will find us?”

“No! I’m not coming back!”

“Where are you going?” Penny asked.

Anna shook her head. “I can’t tell you. When ma asks, you can tell the truth. You don’t know.”

“Have you thought about what we’re going to do after we leave?” Alley asked.

Anna placed the rope she tied together over her head and around her neck. Their clothes now hung against her hip. She handed the sack of food to Alley to carry. “I’m not sure yet. I can cook and sew. And so can you. Maybe we can start our own business.”

Penny felt the familiar twinge of jealousy. Ma had not taught her how to cook or sew yet. From a distance she had

watched, but Anna and Alley were the ones ma had spent time with. Penny had been the one to chop and stack the wood, wash the clothes, feed the stock, milk the cows, or empty the bedpans. Ma did not seem to have any patience with her in the kitchen, or teaching her with a needle.

Anna looked around the room again, making sure she packed all they needed. Her eyes fell on Penny.

“I know you’ll be scared, and all alone. Promise me you won’t do anything to anger ma.”

“Like trying to grow a tree sprig in one of ma’s canning jars,” Alley added.

Penny shuffled around a bit. “I only wanted something that was mine.”

“You need to remember that whatever you do, think of how ma is going to react. Promise me?” Anna asked as she looked directly at Penny.

Penny nodded her head.

“And I promise you,” Anna added, “we will be together again.”

Penny’s eyes lit up with hope. “You promise?”

“No matter where they move to, I will find you. I *will* come back and get you.”

Penny looked at her two older sisters. It did not matter that they were not true blood sisters. In Penny’s mind, what they shared made them family for life.

The sisters hugged each other, then snuck out of the house. Penny stayed in bed, hoping Anna and Alley made it to wherever they were going.

It was only half an hour later when she heard ma get up to check on the stove. Penny tried to keep still when she heard the bedroom door open, but jumped when she heard ma scream.

“BEN, THEY’RE GONE!”

Penny answered truthfully about their whereabouts: she did not know. She watched as pa grabbed his rifle and headed out the door.

Penny did not like being in the house alone with ma. She was madder than she had ever seen her. Every now and then, ma would shake her, then slap her, wanting to know where the girls

went.

But Pennystill did not know.

It was several hours later when pa returned with Alley in his arms.

Alley had tripped on a tree root and sprained her ankle.

Penny tried to cover her ears when ma used the discipline strap on Alley, trying to find out where Anna went. When Alley came to their room, Penny tried to comfort the crying girl. Her backside was bruised with marks ma had made. Penny knew from experience how much Alley was hurting.

Later, Alley had explained how after she fell, she had urged Anna to continue without her. She promised Anna that she would be ok, and that she would look after Penny.

The next week was filled with anger. Ma soon found out that Anna took the money, and like Penny thought, she was mad. Penny was trying to figure out why she was so upset when it was Anna's money, not hers.

By the end of the week, Mr. Taylor came by again. When he learned that Anna was gone, he was madder than ma, if that was possible. Penny listened from her bedroom window as he and ma shouted at each other.

Mr. Taylor spent several days at their place. Sometimes she could hear him and pa talking just outside her bedroom window.

"Are you sure about the delivery?" Mr. Taylor asked one night.

"It's coming, Jake. Be patient," pa said.

"Yea, well, things can happen. I don't want to lose this shipment."

"We won't."

"Are you sure no one knows about it?"

"No one's ever found it. And I *always* have a secret panel in my wagon."

Penny wondered where the secret panel was. Maybe, if it was big enough, she could hide there when ma was so mad. It could be her special place.

During dinnertime, Penny noticed how Mr. Taylor looked at both her and Alley.

"Hand me those biscuits, honey," he would say to

Alley. “Hey, little one, how’s about some butter for my biscuit?” he would say to her. She noticed Alley kept her head down, always looking at her hands or her plate.

When Mr. Taylor finally left, pa went too. It was a few days later when pa returned. Whatever he did, ma was finally not shouting at them.

Penny was surprised when, a few weeks later, Mr. Taylor came back and took Alley. Alley cried and begged ma not to send her away. Penny thought she was being punished for trying to run away. She figured, when the punishment was over, Alley would return.

Penny watched the road every day for several months, waiting. But Alley never returned. Every now and then, ma would think about Anna, then her anger would quickly build. Penny made it a point to remain outside during these times. When ma got mad like that, nothing anyone did was right.

She noticed even pa stayed away from ma at those times.

Penny tried to do all she could to keep ma happy. She made sure she was up and dressed before ma was. She did her chores before anyone had to tell her to. And she kept her room clean and tidy.

She did not want to ever feel the discipline strap again!

Day after day, Penny would watch ma from a distance as she prepared the various meals. Every month, pa would take ma to town to get supplies.

She was never allowed to go to town and shop.

She wanted so much to learn to cook and sew, like Anna and Alley. But ma would scream at her when she made *any* mistake.

“It’s easier if I just did it myself,” ma would snap as she pushed her aside.

She contented herself with sitting in the corner and watching as ma made the biscuits, then the gravy. She tried to impress upon her young mind each of the ingredients, so the next time ma let her help in the kitchen, she would know better. She tried to repeat what she saw to herself, to reinforce her memory.

One day, she would make ma proud.

She never learned how to cook or sew, but she did learn to read and write.

And she learned how to draw. Actually, drawing seemed to come naturally to her. On any scrap of paper she could find, she would draw whatever caught her attention. She had several drawings of Anna and Alley she had drawn from memory. And if she had no pencil, she would use the charred remains from the fireplace.

Her drawings gave her comfort and peace. And they made Anna and Alley seem closer.

She had to keep her drawings hidden. Ma did not like it when she wasted her time doing useless stuff.

There's always work to be done, she would say.

Three months before Penny turned fifteen, Mr. Jason Banks showed up at their house. He stayed for dinner, talking about his ranch and house. As he sat across from her, Penny noticed he kept looking her way. He did not look at her the same as Mr. Taylor looked at Anna or Alley. Mr. Banks smiled more, almost encouraging her to smile back.

A month before she turned fifteen, ma packed her clothes in a bag and took her to town, to the stage depot.

“Mr. Banks is going to meet you in Clearwater,” ma told her. “Now, you do what he tells you.”

Penny did not understand. “Why am I going to meet Mr. Banks?”

“Because, now he's your husband.”

Penny's eyes widened. “My husband?”

“He already sent a stage ticket for you. He has a nice place, so you mind your manners. I don't want him regretting his decision.”

Penny understood enough about marriage. This is what Anna ran away from.

This is where Alley went when Mr. Taylor came back.

Penny watched as her ma turned and left her standing on the stage depot platform. With a ticket in her hand and a small carpetbag by her feet, Penny was determined not to show how frightened she really was. Surrounded by strangers, she grabbed her belongings and sat on one of the three benches.

As she sat alone, she wondered:

What happened to Anna?

All I Need Is You

What happened to Alley?

What was going to happen to her?

Chapter 1

Clearwater, TX 1862

Pennystood alone, staring at the grave.

Most of the townspeople had already left. She felt alone. Again!

Jason Banks, her husband, was dead.

He had been such a quiet man. Working as a blacksmith several days a week, Jason had been as strong as an ox.

But his strength did not help when a horse he was shoeing suddenly kicked him in the head.

Within a day, Jason Banks was dead, leaving behind a stunned wife and many friends. Doctor Grant assured her that Jason had not suffered, that he had died at peace. Knowing she was now all alone, Doctor Grant had stood beside her at the grave, silently supporting her as people filed by, shaking her hand or hugging her as they said a few words.

“Always enjoyed talking with Jason when he came to town...”

“He was such a hard worker...”

Many of the townspeople had come to the funeral. She knew

most of them by name only. She and Jason had never gotten around to visiting the neighbors on a regular basis. Jason was always busy trying to keep the ranch going, and she had refused to go anywhere alone.

"I made a stew for later. I'll just leave it in your kitchen. And if you need anything..."

Penny looked into the eyes of her kindly neighbor Mrs. Cutler.

If I need anything...

Other people began to pass by.

"Never knew a man who was so happy..."

"I remember when he helped build my barn..."

"Jason always was there to help..."

"Never said a bad word about anyone..."

A young woman stood before her, her eyes brimming with tears.

"I'm so glad Jason brought you to Clearwater. You made him so happy..."

Margaret!

Both of the same age, Penny had started to look forward to her monthly visits to town. Jason was ever patient while she and Margaret spent time together.

Margaret was her closest friend.

More people went by.

"Had a way of making you feel at ease..."

"I remember when he built this house with his own hands..."

"I'll always remember how quick he was to smile..."

"If you need anything, be sure to let me know..."

If I need anything...

Penny realized the voices had finally stopped. She looked from the fresh grave to the empty road leading into town. Clearwater was just an hour away. She looked around. People who had before stood with her, were already at their homes.

Had she been standing here alone that long?

Behind her was her home, the home Jason brought her to when he had met her at the stage four years ago. The home he had built for her. It was not a large house, but it was enough. It

was theirs.

Now it was hers.

Shedding another tear, she bent and placed a wildflower on his grave. She promised to plant some all around later on. Jason loved wildflowers.

She remembered how afraid she had been when she disembarked from the stage, not sure what to expect. But Jason had been a gentle man. He had been patient with her when she burned the dinners, or failed to sew his shirts properly. Instead of becoming angry, he would just smile, and tell her in time, she would learn.

Time.

Jason had no more time.

She never did learn how to cook a proper meal. She had tried to remember how ma had made the biscuits or cooked the gravy or stew. Jason just got used to eating whatever she made.

Jason always seemed happy.

She remembered the first time she tried to make gravy. She knew you added flour and water to the grease. At first, she mixed too much flour in the grease, which meant she had to add more water to the thick paste. Then the gravy was too thin and soupy again. She kept adding flour, then water until the skillet was overflowing with lumpy gravy, which was still too soupy. But Jason had laughed. Said we had enough gravy for a month.

Another tear fell down her cheek as she looked at the grave.

Jason was gone.

She was alone.

If I need anything...

There were a few men still at the ranch, men Jason had hired to help. She pulled her shawl tighter across her shoulders. What was she supposed to do now?

The grave looked barren, the mound of dirt announcing to everyone that death had again been victorious. She needed to get a headstone. Jason deserved that.

If I need anything...

She felt the fear of being alone again. The same fear she had felt when Anna and Alley left. The same fear she had felt when ma left her at the stage depot.

All I Need Is You

Again, she felt alone.

Again, she wondered, *what was going to happen to her?*

Chapter 2

Michael and Pat crested the hill and looked over at the town of Clearwater. It was an average size town, larger than Round Rock, which is where they were traveling from. Michael's sister, Toni, had recently married, and he was staying on. He liked his new brother-in-law, Conrad. In fact, he was in Clearwater now because of Conrad.

Inside his vest pocket was a letter promising the sale of a purebred Angus bull. All Michael had to do was locate the Banks ranch, collect the bull, pay Mr. Banks, then with Pat's help, drive the bull back to Round Rock.

He expected to be back home in less than a week.

Riding next to him, Pat looked at the town below. "Where's the Banks ranch from here?"

Michael pulled out the letter from Jason Banks and studied the crude map drawn. "I think it's that way," he said as he pointed to the west. "Maybe an hour ride."

"Want to head into town first, or just head over to the ranch?"

Pat was a good friend of Michael's. Being the middle child of triplets, Pat was the risk taker, the man who went out on a limb. He was the one who liked to enjoy life. Every day of it!

"If you don't mind, I would like to get the bull and head back

home.”

Pat made a face. “I had a feeling you would say that!”

Michael smiled as he turned his horse west. “I know you. If you get too close to town, I’ll never get you away from any pretty gal you set your eyes on.”

Pat smiled. “There’s no reason why a man can’t have a decent conversation with a pretty lady,” Pat replied as he followed his friend.

“*Conversation* is not the problem.”

Pat rode up beside him. “Are you trying to say something?”

“Yeah. I think I need to put up a poster in town warning all single females about you.”

Pat smiled again. “It’s not my fault the women find me alluring.”

Michael turned in his saddle. “Alluring? Is that another word your mother learned?”

“Yeah. She read it in newspaper. She’s been using it a lot this week. I thought it sounded about right.”

Michael laughed as he rode on. “One day, you’re going to meet your match.”

“You mean meet some gal who’ll make me either weak in the knees or unable to say one complete sentence?” Pat slapped his hand on his heart, his face looking shocked. “Or worse, both?”

“Yep. And when you do, I plan to watch.”

Pat slowly shook his head. “Friend, you have been sorely misinformed. Those are the feelings that *women* have when they meet a man with considerable charm.”

“Charm?”

“Yes, charm. It’s something you would do well to work on yourself.”

Even as Michael snorted, he had to admit: when Pat was around, women seemed to be drawn to him for some reason. He had thought it was his smile, or his stature.

But charm?

Michael gently kicked his horse to speed up. Pat kept up beside him with no problem.

Chapter 3

Penny let her eyes adjust to the semi-darkness inside the barn. The mare gave a soft whinny as she approached.

“How you feeling?” she asked, giving the horse a soft pat on the rump as she walked around her, then set the buckets and rags she carried down in the stall. “Well Maggie, let’s see if we can fix your foot.”

Maggie gave a snort as she watched Penny set things around her.

“I know, I should have done this last week, but things have been busy,” she absently talked to her horse. For the past few months, the animals were the only ones she had to talk to.

If you did not count Baxter’s men!

Maggie’s ears perked up when Penny slammed the bucket down with more force than necessary.

“Sorry,” Penny softly cooed as she stroked Maggie’s neck. “I’ll try to keep my temper in line.”

Maggie shook her head, as if to say, *Just don’t let it happen again.*

“Baxter has become a thorn in the flesh lately.” Penny did not seem to mind that no one answered her. She had become used to it.

“Can you believe the nerve of that man! Thinking he can just

ride up to the front door and take over Jason's place!"

She laid her make-shift bandages out, then retrieved the milking stool.

"Just because he owns so much land doesn't give him the right to take from others. Or force them to sell!" Without meaning to, she smiled. "But you had to see him last week, all dressed up in his Sunday best."

She put the stool next to the front leg. "Guess he decided to change his tactics. If he couldn't push me off, he thought he could be sweet on me and get the ranch another way. Ha!! I much prefer it when he's mean. At least his true colors were showing. Let me look at your foot."

Maggie did not object when Penny lifted her front leg.

"Any idiot could see what he was doing. He must think me something of a fool. Maggie, will you stop leaning on me?"

Penny smiled as she pushed the mare's weight off her shoulder. "You're supposed to carry me, not the other way around."

Penny located a small stick and began to remove the mud from the hock.

"I should have watched Jason do this more often," she observed. She abruptly stopped, then let the foot down as she looked around. "I think Jason has a tool for this."

The sound of horses approaching made her reach for the shotgun she constantly carried with her.

Baxter's men again!

The man was persistent.

Chapter 4

Michael and Pat stood before the small house, wondering if anyone was about.

“Maybe everyone’s on the range,” Pat commented as he turned to look behind him.

“Could be,” Michael agreed.

“Sure we’re at the right home?”

“According to his map, this is Banks’ ranch.”

Handing his reins to Pat, Michael walked up to the door and knocked. He waited several moments, then returned to Pat and the horses.

“All the men must be out riding.”

“Guess we wait,” Pat observed.

Both men turned and looked around.

Behind the house was a small creek, a milk cow lazily grazing on the grass growing nearby.

Michael turned his attention to the barn. The shiny new hinge drew his attention to the barn door. He noticed one wall had been fixed with new planks. The owner had not yet painted the new boards.

He looked toward the corral. It was empty.

“Don’t see any extra horses,” Pat observed.

“Yeah, I noticed too.”

He looked back toward the house, willing the owner to answer.

Neither man heard anyone approach, but they heard the hammer of a shotgun being pulled back.

Michael slowly turned and saw a young woman standing in front of the water trough, aiming the shotgun at him.

“Who are you?” the woman asked.

“My name’s Michael Bradley. This is Pat Curry—”

“I already told Baxter the ranch is not for sell,” she interrupted, “so ride off!!”

Michael’s eyes narrowed. “We don’t know anyone named Baxter. And we’re not here to buy your place.”

Michael watched the eyes of the woman shift from him to Pat, obviously wondering if he was telling the truth.

“What do you want?” she asked, the shotgun still pointed at his chest.

“If this is the Banks’ ranch, we came to pick up a bull my brother-in-law is buying.”

The shotgun did not move. “I don’t know anything about a bull being sold.”

Michael carefully pulled out the letter again, his eyes never leaving the woman. He could tell she was nervous. His first reaction was to grab the shotgun from the woman’s hand. But he noticed that both hammers were pulled back. And with that shotgun, even if she did not aim it properly, buckshot could be fired in a wide area.

“Is this Jason Banks’ ranch?” he asked in a calm voice.

The woman paused. “Yes, it is.”

Michael unfolded the letter, then reached it over to the woman.

The woman tried to hold the shotgun steady, but it was heavy, and when Michael stepped forward, she naturally stepped backward. She did not see the rock behind her, but she felt her foot twist as she tried to keep her balance.

As she fell backward, her hands naturally wanted to grab something to keep her balance. Unfortunately, she was already holding the shotgun in her hand. She felt her finger pull the trigger, then felt the force of the blast throw her backwards.

Into the water trough.

As the woman gave a cry of alarm, both Michael and Pat were quick to drop to the ground as buckshot filled the air.

The two horses panicked as they bolted away.

The shotgun flew through the air as she let go of it. When it landed on the ground, the force caused the second hammer to release, setting off another loud fire. This, thankfully, was aimed at the open range.

Michael raised his head after the second shot. Making sure he was fine, he looked up to see the woman sputtering in the water trough, trying to get out.

“Of all the stupid things to do,” Pat was spitting as he rose from the ground, using his hat to dust off his clothes.

Both men saw where their horses were headed. “I’ll go get the horses,” Pat offered. “You can deal with Lady Sharpshooter there.”

Michael watched as Pat put his hat back on with more force than was needed, then headed toward the horses. Michael smiled. Pat’s anger was accentuated with every step he took.

The sound of the woman still in the trough made him turn back around. She hesitated when he offered his hand, but eventually she allowed him to help her out.

Michael thought she looked confused as she looked around, locating the shotgun laying several feet behind her.

“I didn’t realize the gun would throw you back like it did,” she confessed.

Michael raised his brows. “Haven’t you ever fired it before?”

“No.” The woman looked down at her soaking gown, then at the muddy puddle developing underneath her. “If you’ll excuse me. . .”

Michael watched as she carefully walked inside. He knew it would take several minutes for her to change clothes.

Retrieving the shotgun, he removed the empty shell cartridges, then did a quick inspection of the barrel. Satisfied that it was undamaged, he leaned it against the porch post. While waiting, he took another quick look around.

A chicken coop was attached to the side of the barn. Several chickens were pecking around, making their clucking sound.

She had come from the barn, so he decided to look inside. All the stalls were empty except two. In the first one was a parked wagon. An older brown mare was standing in the third stall. There were several buckets of water and rags scattered around the stall. Curious, he walked in, softly talking to the horse.

The mare watched as he approached the stall. He noticed she was favoring her right front leg.

“Hey there girl,” he softly whispered as he held out his hand to let her smell him, then patted her neck before giving her a quick scratch along her mane. The mare gave a soft whinny as he ran his hand down her neck and down the right leg. He felt the mare tremble as his hand reached down to the hoof.

The area was warm.

“What have you got there?” he softly asked as he reached for the foot. The mare obediently raised the hoof. It did not take long for Michael to find the problem: a stone had embedded itself in the pad and the area had become seriously infected.

“I see your owner was trying to doctor you up. Let’s see if we can lend her a hand.” Michael looked around and found the hoof knife hanging from the wall. Using the knife, he quickly cut the old skin away. After a few minutes, he drained the infection. Looking around, he located the ointment most farmers kept in the barn for just this purpose.

He took one of the rags that had been draped over the stall and wrapped the hoof in it.

“That should keep it clean for a few days.” He patted her neck again, then rubbed her nose. “You should be feeling better already, ol’ gal.”

The mare shook her head, obviously pleased at the relief of pain.

With a final pat on her rump, he left the barn and stood in the yard.

He could see laundry hanging on the clothes line beside the house. There was something about the laundry that tugged at his mind, something not right. It was on the tip of his mind when he heard the sound of Pat returning with the horses.

“Where is she?” Pat demanded, a note of irritation in his normally calm voice.

“Changing.”

Pat looked at the doorway. “Is that Banks’ wife?”

Michael also looked toward the doorway. “I think she is.”

Pat dismounted, a look of irritation matching his tone. “It’s been some time since someone took a shot at me.”

“She didn’t mean it,” Michael defended.

Surprised, Pat looked at his friend, then smiled. “Well—”

“Wipe that smile off your face,” Michael threatened, “or I’ll take it off.”

Penny was so embarrassed.

She almost shot two men.

Of course, if they had come from the Baxter ranch, then she was sure they deserved it.

Penny was trying to pull off her dress, but the wet ties were being stubborn.

Did Jason sell some of the herd? she was thinking to herself as she finally shed her wet clothes. Jason had never mentioned it to her.

With the men gone, how was she supposed to find this bull?

Something else to worry about, she thought to herself as she changed her petticoat and selected her last dry dress from the hook on the wall. Quickly getting dressed, she buttoned her dress up, then headed for the front door. The two men were still there. The one with the letter was sitting on the edge of the porch while the other one was leaning against the porch post. Both men turned toward her when they heard her approach.

“I’m really sorry about that,” she apologized as she looked from one man to another.

“Not a problem,” the man with the letter assured her as he stood up.

She hesitated, trying to remember their names. The man with the letter must have noticed her hesitation.

“My name’s Michael, Michael Bradley,” the first man said as he tipped his hat. “And this is Pat Curry.”

She noticed the second man reluctantly tipped his hat also.

“My name is Penny Banks. I . . . I thought you were Baxter’s

men,” she tried to explain.

“Do you always greet Baxter’s men with a shotgun?” Pat asked, his voice an indication of his irritation.

Penny’s face darkened. “Just since they lost their manners.”

Pat’s eyes narrowed for a moment in thought, then he lowered his face as he continued to lean against the post.

She noticed Michael give his friend a warning look, then turned back to her. “Is your husband around?”

“I’m sorry, but...” The fleeting feeling of pain crushed her heart again. “Jason died a few months ago.”

The man looked around the yard. “I’m sorry,” he softly said as he turned back to her.

“Thank you.” Penny looked from her hands, to the man before her.

Again, she was alone, she thought as she turned her gaze to the barn.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I went inside the barn,” Michael spoke, breaking her pained thoughts. “Noticed your mare was favoring her front leg.”

Penny looked at the man. “I was trying to find out what was wrong when I heard you ride up.”

Michael nodded his head. “I took a look at her. Her hoof was deeply infected. I opened it, let it drain, then put some salve on it. She should be ok in a few days.”

She actually felt a smile on her face.

“Thank you. I was not sure how to do it.” She paused. “Jason always took care of that.” She took a deep breath to clear her mind. Finally under control, she held out her hand. “May I see the letter?”

Michael removed the paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. Penny studied the note, noticing Jason’s handwriting. This letter was promising one of the three purebred bulls Jason owned. She remembered how excited he was when he bought them.

“Penny, these bulls are gonna improve our herd. Just you wait and see,” Jason had promised.

Penny had looked skeptically at the young calves. “But they’re just babies.”

“But they’re gonna grow up to be beautiful and powerful bulls. Just wait a few years, and you’ll see the difference in the herd.”

That was two years ago.

Before she was alone.

She noticed the price of the bull. “Had Jason been paid for this bull?”

The man shook his head. “No. I was to pay after I inspected him.”

A part of Penny was relieved. At least she would not have to repay this man if the bull could not be found. But if they could find the bull, the extra money would be welcome.

“I’m not sure where the bull your brother-in-law wants to buy would be,” Penny spoke out loud. “I do know that Jason has three purebred bulls. They would be just over threeyears old now.”

Michaellooked around. “Where are the ranch hands?”

Penny folded the paper and handed it back. “They’re gone.”

“Gone?”

“A few weeks after Jason died, the men left.”

“They just up and left you alone?” Pat asked, surprised.

Penny did not answer, just looked at the ground.

“Where is your herd?” Michael asked.

Penny took a deep breath. “I don’t know.”

“How big is the herd?”

Penny shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know.”

Michael looked at Pat, then back at Penny. “You don’t have any idea?”

“Jason always said he had a small herd, just enough for us.”

“That’s not useful,” Michael thought out loud.

“Guess we could ride across the spread and find out,” Pat suggested.

“Good idea.” Michael turned back to Penny. “Can you tell us the lay of your spread?”

Penny looked at the horizon, from North to West. “I don’t know exactly how far the ranch goes.”

Michael took off his hat and wiped his forehead across his sleeve, obviously trying to keep the frustration from his voice.

“Ma’am, how can you not know the lay of your own land, or what cattle you’ve got?”

“I’m sorry, but, my husband took care of that.”

Penny watched as Michael turned around and looked at the vast expanse of land all around. Without boundaries, they would have no idea where to even start looking for the lost cattle, and their bull.

“We could ask the neighboring ranches where their boundaries are,” Pat suggested.

Michael looked from Pat to Penny. “Did your husband have a deed for this ranch?”

Penny thought. “I’m sure he did. It would be in his desk.”

Finally able to do something constructive, Penny turned and went inside the house.

She heard the men follow her inside as she opened a small roll-top desk in the corner.

“What would a deed look like?” she asked as she began to slowly look at each paper.

“Usually has a border, folded and maybe in an envelope,” Pat offered.

“May I look at that?” Penny saw Michael pointing at a small notebook.

Penny picked up the book, then flipped through the pages. “Jason wrote in this almost every day.”

Handing it over, Michael quickly scanned the latter pages. “It appears Jason had just over a hundred head.”

“Small herd,” Pat commented as he continued to check the desk for the deed.

“Here’s where he bought the three bulls,” Michael continued reading, “and their identifying marks.”

Pat was glancing at the papers in various places in the desk. Seeing one in particular, he pointed to it. “Look at that one!”

Penny opened the paper Pat pointed to.

“That’s it!” Michael confirmed. “May I?”

Penny handed the deed to him.

The three of them stood around the kitchen table.

“I need a piece of paper.”

Penny went to her books, pulled out a blank piece and handed it to Pat. She watched as Pat began to draw a rough sketch of the property as Michael read the deed. Pat made an X on the mid-east section.

“The house should be about here,” Pat suggested.

Michael looked at the drawing. “Looks about right. Can you show where the neighboring ranches are?”

Penny wrote the names of the three surrounding ranches. “Baxter is to the west, Williams to the east, and Cutler to the south.”

Penny looked at the drawing of the land. Compared to the surrounding ranches, Jason’s land was long and narrow.

“A lot of land to search,” Pat observed.

“A lot of places cattle could be comfortably grazing in,” Michael confirmed.

Penny looked at the drawing of her property. The way Jason talked about it, she had thought the tract of land was small. Obviously the scale of the drawing was off.

“I’m not sure how long it will take to find the herd and the bulls,” Penny thought out loud, “but if you need a few days, the bunkhouse is behind the barn.”

Michael nodded his head. “Thanks.” He looked again at the map. “Can you remember anything your husband said about the cattle? Any areas where they might be grazing?”

Penny thought, trying to remember. “Jason used to send the men to the northwest area. There was a gully or something. The men were told to herd them south.”

Michael and Pat each checked their rough map.

“Somewhere here,” Pat pointed at the line dividing Baxter land with Banks.

“Baxter,” Michael softly spoke to himself as he studied the map, then looked back up. “Is that who you thought we were?”

Penny looked from the map up to the man beside her. “He’s been trying to get Jason’s place since he died. He’s a very persistent man.”

“Persistent enough that you felt you needed to keep a shotgun at your side at all times?”

“Sometimes saying no is not enough. When Mr. Baxter wants something, he usually gets it, by any means.”

“Did he offer you a fair price?” Pat asked.

“I’m sure it was. But I’m not selling.” She looked around, memories making her smile. “You don’t understand. This is the first thing that is actually mine. And no one is going to take it from me. I have nothing else. This,” she spread her arms wide, “is all I have. All I need. And if I need to carry a shotgun at all times, then I will.”

Pat rubbed his chin. “You may want to practice some with that scattergun.”

“Oh, I plan to.” She absently rubbed her shoulder. “I won’t be caught by that kick again.”

She saw the strange look Michael briefly gave her before looking back to the map.

“Well, there’s still several hours of daylight left. We can at least look toward the northwest section, see what’s there.”

“It’s a place to start,” Pat agreed.

Chapter 5

Both men were silent as they rode, each looking for tracks to indicate where the herd would be. It was just over an hour when they came upon the remains of a camp. Both men dismounted, checking the area.

“A partial carcass,” Pat observed.

Michael studied the remains. “Looks several weeks old, maybe even a month.”

“Could be an injured steer that a coyote took down,” Pat spoke out loud.

“Could be.”

Michael looked around again. “The tracks are faint, but it looks like someone headed northwest.”

Both Michael and Pat mounted their horses, then followed the faint trail. It was another hour before they found the next camp.

“Rabbit,” Michael said as he poked the ashes with a stick, revealing the small bones left behind.

“Looks about a week old.”

“Yea,” Michael agreed. “I count three bodies.”

Pat followed the trail. “Looks like they headed north.”

Michael walked around the camp. “I don’t see any signs of cattle, though.”

“Maybe they were just passing through.”

Michael looked off into the distance. “Could be. Let’s head north.”

Trying to cover as much ground as possible, the men rode a good distance apart. Michael was busy watching the ground, looking for any indication that the cattle had recently come through this way.

“Tracks here!” Pat yelled.

Michael studied the shod prints. “Looks like our three men again.”

It was another hour before they found another campsite.

“This one’s only a few days old,” Michael observed.

“Whoever they are, they’re not trying to hide their tracks.”

“Yeah, I noticed too.”

Pat looked around. “I see vegetation up ahead. The good grazing must be up there.”

Michael looked from the north to the south. “There’s no reason for the cattle to roam this far without grass or water.”

“Then they must be ahead.”

Again, Michael looked from the north to the south. “It’s getting late. Let’s head back and start early.”

Pat was already remounting. “Sounds good to me. I’m hungry.”

Michael laughed. “You’re always hungry.”

“Right now, I could eat anything!”

Chapter 6

It was only his good upbringing and a firmer stomach that kept Michael from spitting out the beans.

They were not just bad, they were terrible.

How can you ruin a pot of beans? Michael thought. Everyone knows how to cook a pot of beans!

“I think I’ll just have some biscuits,” Pat said as he tactfully pushed his bowl away. Michael figured it would be best to do as his friend. As he reached for a biscuit, he noticed Pat took a bite of one, chewed for only a second, then frantically looked around, obviously looking for some place to discretely spit it out.

Somehow, the biscuits were worse than the beans.

They had come back half an hour ago, tired and hungry. Mrs. Banks had met them on the porch as they rode up to the house.

“I was wondering if you gentlemen would be back or not,” she called out.

Michael dismounted first. “We found some tracks, but they were a far distance north.”

Mrs. Banks nodded her head. “I have some supper ready if you’re hungry.”

Pat smiled as he led his horse to the barn. “Sounds good to me,” he called out.

Michael tipped his hat. "We'll just wash up in the bunkhouse after we see to our horses."

Mrs. Banks was wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "Come on in when you're ready."

It did not take long to rub their horses down, then put some feed down for them. The bunkhouse was small, six beds against the four walls and a stove in the middle of the room. A water pump was outside against the west wall. Both men put their saddle bags on a bed, then each took turns washing up.

The men hesitated before knocking on the front door.

"Come in," Mrs. Banks called from inside.

Michael and Pat removed their hats as they made their way inside.

"Sit wherever you want," Mrs. Banks offered as she busied herself in the kitchen area.

"This is real nice of you," Michael offered as he watched the pot of beans placed on the table, followed by the biscuits. Pat was ready to dig in.

Michael had always thought that if a person was hungry enough, he could eat anything, no matter what.

He was wrong!

As he pushed the beans around, he considered the woman before him.

She was young, maybe nineteen or twenty. Too young to be a widow. She was about the same height as his sister Toni. But she was filled out in more places. Definitely more curves.

She was shy by nature, he could tell. But she did not let that keep her from offering the hospitality of the west. Obviously she was not a good cook, but it was evident she tried to put a meal together for them. He looked at the awful beans and biscuits and wondered what she normally ate.

The house was neat and clean. He remembered when she first mentioned she was a widow, he had glanced again at the laundry hanging on the line. There were no men's clothing, only women's. That was what had bothered him before.

"I made some coffee," she offered as she left the table and headed for the stove.

As soon as her back was to them, he quickly pulled off his bandana from around his neck and scooped as many beans and biscuits from his plate onto it. As he grabbed some extra napkins, he noticed Pat saw him and decided to do the same thing.

Normally, he would have pushed the plate back. But for some reason, he did not want to hurt her feelings. They had beef jerky in their saddlebags, so they would not go hungry tonight.

They had just removed their bandanas full of food when she turned back toward the table. The coffee was passable. Not strong enough for him, but he drank it anyway.

“Would either of you like more?” she asked.

“No,” both men almost shouted.

Not wanting the beans to soak through the bandana and napkins and leave a wet spot on his lap, Michael quickly finished his coffee, then rose.

“Thank you, ma’am, for the meal.” He did not need to encourage his partner to hurry up. Pat was already on his feet too.

Both men quickly grabbed their hats from the back of their chairs and held them in front of the pouches of food, hiding them from her gaze.

“Yes, thank you,” Pat offered as he began to back up.

“Umm...we probably will start searching very early, so we won’t bother you in the morning.”

“It wouldn’t be a bother—”

“We really will be leaving very, very early,” Pat interrupted.

Penny looked between the men, confusion on her face. “Well, at least take a few more biscuits. They’ll keep till the morning.”

Michael looked at the basket and decided it would be easier to just take a few more than argue.

“Thank you again, ma’am.”

He tried to walk normally back to the bunkhouse. But with a pouch full of food in his hand, he knew he looked suspicious.

When they reached the bunkhouse, he looked back to make sure she was not watching them. He noticed Pat was opening his bandana.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

“Throwing this stuff out!”

Michael glanced back at the house again. “Not here.”

Pat stopped and looked around. “Behind the bunkhouse!”

Michael grabbed his arm as he began to walk. “No. She’ll see it when she walks around.”

“Not if the coyotes eat it first.”

Michael was thinking of not hurting Penny’s feelings. “We can’t.”

Pat looked at his bandana full of inedible food. “You’re right. Even a starved coyote wouldn’t eat this stuff.” Pat gave a sigh of frustration. “Then where do we throw it? On the roof?”

“Don’t push it!”

Both men looked around. Michael saw it first.

“The outhouse!”

Chapter 7

Michael leaned back against a rock as he wiped his hands on his pants.

“Rabbit was good,” Pat mentioned to Michael.

“Never knew rabbit could taste so good,” Michael considered as he began to cover the fire with dirt. “Sure could use a good cup of coffee right about now.”

Pat gave a snort. “Key word there was ‘good’. Don’t look at me like that! You know what I mean.”

Michael looked at the leftover fire. “Yea. I feel guilty, though, sneaking out like we did this morning.”

“How else could we get a decent meal?” Pat shook his head. “Never knew a woman could ruin a pot of beans. Or make such bad biscuits.”

“She tried.”

“Tried to kill us!”

“She did not,” Michael warned. “It’s obvious she never learned how to cook.”

Pat shook his head. “What did her husband eat? Surely not beans and biscuits.”

“Give her a break. She’s alone now, and probably doing the best she can.”

Pat looked up, his eyes narrowing. “You like her.”

Michael looked over the horizon. "She's a nice lady."

"No, you like her. I've been around you long enough, I can tell."

"Well, it doesn't matter. She's a widow still in mourning. And besides, we have a job to do."

"It's been four months," Pat observed.

Michael shook his head. "Women tend to mourn for nearly a year."

Pat shrugged his shoulders. "Not all women."

"Let's keep our minds on our job," Michael warned as he stood up, indicating this conversation was over. "We have a lot of area to cover."

Pat kicked dirt over the last spark in the fire. "Have it your way. But I still say you like her." He looked up. "Ok, ok, stop giving me that glare." Both men went to their horses. "Which way?"

Michael looked around again. "Let's follow those tracks we saw yesterday."

Pat swung into his saddle. "North it is."

The sun was beating down on them as they rode north.

"The gully should be up ahead soon," Michael spoke out loud.

"Hopefully, we'll find some cattle today," Pat declared. It was obvious that Pat was frustrated.

For the next half-hour, the men rode side by side in comfortable silence.

"Where do you suppose the cattle are?" Pat asked, breaking the silence.

"Been wondering the same thing," Michael confessed. "A hundred head of cattle just don't disappear."

"Maybe, someone helped themselves. A woman alone, not able to properly run the ranch, it has happened before."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

They followed the tracks for over an hour when Michael saw the camp.

"Mexicans," Pat observed as they rode closer. "They look harmless."

Three men watched them approach. As they rode closer, all three of them rose. The oldest man stepped forward as Michael stopped in front of them. Pat stopped beside him.

“Hello,” the older man spoke, a smile on his dark weathered face.

“Hello,” Michael returned the greeting as he quickly looked around. He saw two rifles laying near the bedrolls. But none of the men looked nervous, just curious. “You three alone?” he asked as he dismounted.

The oldest one kept smiling as he nodded his head. “We travel together. I am Emilio. This,” he turned to the younger one, “is Miguel. And this is Alejandro,” he pointed to the third man.

Michael stepped forward and offered his hand. “I’m Michael.”

Pat nodded his head. “And I’m Pat.”

“We followed your campsites,” Michael began, already knowing these Mexicans were not responsible for the missing cattle.

Emilio was still smiling as he nodded his head. “We have coffee. You want some?”

Neither Michael nor Pat needed anymore encouragement as they sat around the small fire.

Miguel cleaned two of their mugs and then filled them. Michael thanked the young man as he accepted the cup, then held the coffee close, inhaling the rich brew. He gave a sigh of contentment as he took his first sip.

“Coffee is good.”

Miguel smiled his appreciation.

Pat was even quiet for several moments as he enjoyed his own cup.

Michael looked at the three men and saw no threat. “We’re looking for a herd of cattle.”

Emilio looked from him to Pat, then back to his two friends. Their conversation was fast, and in Spanish.

“My Spanish is rusty,” Pat whispered from beside him.

“Mine too.”

The three Mexicans finally finished their conversation, and Emilio turned back to them.

"This land, it belong to Mrs. Banks?" he asked.

Michael nodded his head. "Yes."

Emilio also nodded his head. "Mrs. Banks nice lady."

Michael's eyes barely narrowed as he tilted his head. "You know Mrs. Banks?"

Emilio's smile was back as he nodded his head. "Yes. We meet her. She nice lady."

"She let us fix barn," Alejandro spoke up.

Emilio was nodding his head again. "She nice. She feed us."

Michael noticed the smile disappeared.

"She not good cook," Alejandro added.

Emilio turned to his friend and another rapid conversation in Spanish followed. Michael only understood parts of the conversation.

Emilio turned back to them. "Mrs. Banks, she nice. She tell us we can have one steer."

"So you know where the herd is?" Pat asked.

"Yes. We kill one steer. Make jerky for travel."

Michael looked to where Emilio pointed at their saddle pouches, obviously bulging from beef jerky.

"We leave side of beef in smokehouse," Emilio continued. "To say *thank-you*."

"She not have men to help on ranch," Alejandro added.

"Have you noticed anyone else around, interested in her herd?" Michael asked.

Alejandro looked to Emilio.

"Several men on land," Emilio offered. "From west."

"Baxter," Pat whispered to himself.

"Where is the herd?" Michael asked.

Emilio looked around, then raised his arms and spread them wide. "Herd everywhere."

Michael gave a sigh of frustration. "I was afraid of that."

"We'll be several weeks just looking for the herd," Pat commented. "Think Baxter helped himself?"

"More than likely. But before we talk to him, we need to see what is left, and if the bulls are safe on her land."

Pat nodded his head. "So much for this being a quick trip."

"I know. If you want to head back home, I'll understand."

Pat's eyes widened, a look of false indignation. "What? And miss all the fun?"

Michael smiled at his friend, then turned toward the three Mexicans. "We could use some help locating the herd. And you seem to already know the lay of the land."

Emilio turned to his two friends, spoke quickly, then turned back. "We help. Mrs. Banks nice lady."

Michael took out the paper they had drawn on Mrs. Banks kitchen table and laid it before Emilio.

"Can you tell us where you have been so far?"

Emilio looked at the map and shook his head. "This not right."

Michael watched as the men conferred with themselves as they pointed to different parts of the map.

The next half hour, Pat and Michael enjoyed two more cups of coffee as Emilio, Miguel and Alejandro went into detail describing the lay of Mrs. Banks land.

Michael learned that most of the herd the three Mexicans saw were located in the southern pasture.

"It good land," Alejandro said. "Much grass and water."

"How many cattle did you see?" Michael asked.

The three conferred again, then Emilio turned to Michael.

"We think maybe twelve."

"Twelve?" Pat asked, astonished. "She had around a hundred head."

Emilio shook his head. "Only twelve."

Michael took the makeshift map and placed it in his shirt pocket. "Well, let's go check out the southern pasture."

They rode side by side most of the time, but every now and then, the Mexicans would take the lead. It was several hours before they rounded a bend and saw the lush pasture.

Pat gave a whistle. "That's a good looking piece of land."

They found thirteen cattle, most laying on the soft grass and chewing their cud, the others walking around, either heading to the lake for water or chomping on the plentiful grass.

Michael and Pat went to the lake, and noticed a stream leading both east and west.

“Must be an underground spring,” Michael observed as he watched the stream. “Natural water spring. No wonder Baxter wants this land.”

“This area must stay green nine months of the year.”

Michael turned to Pat. “Maybe Baxter’s afraid she’ll block it off.”

“That would hurt his water supply.”

“Would explain why he’s so persistent.” Michael looked again at the land. “I can see why Jason only had around a hundred cattle. This place can comfortably hold that many, no problem.”

“With this much water and grass, the cattle would have no reason to travel north. There’s nothing there for them.”

Michael looked north. “I agree. There’s nothing there. There’s no reason for the herd to naturally go anyplace but here.”

“Good men have been known to do bad things to acquire a piece of land like this,” Pat whispered.

Michael nodded his head. “I know.”

Chapter 8

Penny washed the last of the dishes from her noon meal, dried them, then put them away. Finished, she walked to the open door and looked out in to the yard. Beyond the corral, she could see the endless acres of land.

Looking to the left, she could see the trail leading to the lone grave.

With a sigh, she turned, collected her book and pencils, then began the weekly journey.

“Things are changing, again,” she spoke to no one as she sat against the small tree next to Jason’s grave. She knew the man she married was not really there, but she somehow found comfort in expressing her fears, desires, wants and opinions.

She opened her book and found the next clean page.

“Those bulls you bought,” she continued as she made herself comfortable, “seems you decided to sell one of them. The man came by to collect, but I have no idea where they are.”

Her pencil strokes were quick and fluid, with no hesitation. She spoke about Michael Bradley arriving, the letter Jason had sent, and men’s search for the missing bulls.

“I think you would like them. Mr. Curry gets a little hot-headed sometimes. But Mr. Bradley is patient and quiet. I almost shot them yesterday,” she confessed as she completed the face on

her drawing. "You never warned me about the kick that shotgun gives. Sent me flying into the water trough." She smiled. "You would have laughed at the sight."

She added some small detail work, fixing the expression in the face.

"They seem to be in a hurry to find the bull, though," she continued as she turned the page, starting another picture. "They didn't stay for breakfast, nor appear for lunch. They just left early this morning before sunrise. I must admit, it was nice to have someone to talk with last night."

She paused with her drawing and looked at grave. The grass had already grown over it. The only evidence of the grave was the new headstone.

"Mr. Finch did a nice job." She gave a heavy sigh. "I'll need to pay him the next visit to town, which will probably be this weekend. With two more men, I need to buy more supplies."

She finished her second drawing, critically inspected it, and was pleased with the result.

"This is Mr. Bradley." She drew a few more details around the eyes and hair.

Satisfied, she closed her book and leaned her back against the tree, closing her eyes for a few moments.

"It's so peaceful here. But, I have work to do."

She collected her things, gave a long wistful look at the grave, then turned to leave.

"Talk with you later," she promised.

Chapter 9

It was nearing evening when the men returned to the house. Penny just finished making a new pot of coffee when she heard the riders.

It sounded like more than two, she thought, then grabbed her shotgun.

“If it’s Baxter again, so help me I’m going to shoot him in his backside,” she threatened as she stormed out the door.

She came to a sudden stop when she saw it was Michael and Pat, and the three Mexicans she had met over a month ago.

“Hello,” she called out as she reached inside the doorway and propped her gun against the wall.

Michael Bradley rode to the front porch, his eyes scanning the area. “I found some help.”

Penny’s gaze went back to the three Mexicans. “It’s good to see you again,”

“Good to see you also,” the older one replied.

“Penny, this is Emilio, Alejandro, and Miguel.”

Penny smiled. “I remember you.”

“They’ve been watching your land, sort of like a ‘thank you’ for your hospitality,” Pat added.

“Oh, that’s nice. Did you leave the beef in the smokehouse?”

Emilio smiled again. “Yes. We not want to waste.”

“Well, I appreciate it. And thank you.” She turned to Michael. “Did you find the bulls?”

Michael shook his head. “No, but we did find thirteen of your cattle.”

Penny frowned. “Only thirteen?”

“Only thirteen,” he confirmed. “Seems the rest of the herd is scattered all over. Emilio and Alejandro have seen several of them about, but it will take some time to gather them all together.”

Penny looked to Emilio. “Have you seen the bulls?”

Emilio shook his head. “No, ma’am. No bulls.”

“Well, they have to be somewhere.”

Michael looked from Pat to the others. “These three are going to be helping us. Hope you don’t mind.”

Penny was shaking her head. “No, I don’t mind at all. They can stay in the bunkhouse. In fact, I have potatoes in the oven and some steaks already sliced.” She turned to the three Mexicans. “Would you like to join us for dinner?”

Miguel and Alejandro quickly began shaking their heads. Emilio answered for them. “Thank you, but we have dinner. We eat in bunkhouse. OK?”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

Emilio smiled again. “We sure. We see you in morning, yes?”

Penny smiled in return. “Very well, and thank you again.” She watched as Pat walked with the three toward the bunkhouse, the three Mexicans whispering among themselves. Michael dismounted, his reins held in his hands.

“I need to talk to you, after I put my horse up. I’ll be back in a few moments.”

Penny watched the five men as they all headed first to the barn. She wondered if Michael was going to leave without the bull, since it appeared to be nowhere.

For some reason, the thought made her lonely.

She shook her head, then went back to her kitchen. She had set the table for three, thinking Pat would join them.

“Pat’s going to eat with the guys,” Michael told her when he saw the table setting.

“Oh,” she exclaimed as she removed the plate, fork and glass from the table. “That’s fine.”

“Can I help?” Michael offered as he watched her place the skillet on the stove.

She turned around, surprised. “Help?”

“Sure. Ma taught all of us how to fend for ourselves in the kitchen. And to tell the truth, I mostly enjoy it.”

Penny looked from Michael to the steaks sitting in the pan to the skillet on the stove. No one had ever asked to help her in the kitchen.

“My pa had a special way he like to fry his steaks. Can I show you?”

Penny stood for a moment, totally perplexed. “I guess so. I’ve never had anyone show me how to cook.”

Michael smiled as he took the skillet and put it on the stove. “Where are your spices?”

Penny opened a cabinet drawer, and Michael found only the basic spices.

“These will do,” he claimed. “Do you have a small onion?”

“Sure.” She went into her pantry and returned with a small onion. She watched as he greased the skillet, seasoned the steak with several of her spices, then cut the onion into slices. Before placing the steaks in the skillet, he placed the sliced onions in the hot grease. She watched, surprised at how efficient he was in her kitchen. She had to admit, the onions themselves smelled good, cooking on their own. She continued watching as he finally placed the steaks on the fried onions. When the steaks were almost done, she realized she had said very little while he cooked. Instead, she was watching every move he made, memorizing each and every step for future use.

“These look ready,” he announced as he carried the skillet to the table and deftly placed a steak on each of the plates. “Are those potatoes ready?”

Penny looked up, startled. “Potatoes? Oh, yes.”

Penny took her towel and opened the oven, removing the three potatoes she had cooked. She placed one on her plate and one on Michael’s.

“Don’t worry,” he smiled as he watched her hold the third potato. “I’ll probably eat that one too.”

Penny could not help but smile back in return. She looked at the table. “Oh, I forgot the biscuits.”

She turned to grab the flour but Michael stopped her.

“Don’t worry. We don’t need them.”

“Are you sure? It won’t take long-”

“I’m sure. Steak and potatoes will do just fine. Here,” he pulled out her seat. “Have a seat.”

The meal was delicious, the aroma of steak and onions still lingering in the air.

“You are a fine cook,” she declared later as she collected the dirty dishes.

“All of us had to take turns helping. It became a challenge later, who could do the best.”

“And where did you rank?”

Michael gave a sheepish smile. “I came in last.”

Penny gave a start. “I don’t believe you.”

Michael merely smiled, and Penny was left wondering if he really did take turns cooking in the kitchen with his ma. She wondered if she would ever know.

“How about some coffee,” she asked instead. “And then you can tell me what’s on your mind.”

During coffee, Michael explained about the problem with the cattle.

“Pat and I have been over several acres of your land and as yet, we have seen very few tracks.”

“Which means?”

“Your cattle may very well not be on your property.”

Penny blinked a few times. “Then where would they be if not on my property? The only land next to mine is Cutler, Williams and Baxter.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Baxter! You think Baxter has taken Jason’s cattle?”

“We don’t know for sure, but there is definitely something wrong. A hundred head of cattle is a small herd, but you should still see more evidence of them around. We went to the southern pasture, and I have to admit, it’s a very good piece of land. Your

cattle should stay within walking distance at all times. Unless there is another very good grazing patch somewhere where they are hold up.”

Penny shook her head. “I don’t know. Jason never really talked to me about the cattle.”

“That’s not a problem. Pat and I, and the new guys, we’ll check all your land. Wherever they are, we’ll find them.”

Penny lowered her head. “I’m sorry about the cattle, but,” she raised her head. “I’m grateful for your help. All of you.”

Michael rose and took his coffee cup to the sink. “I just hope this bull is everything Jason promised.”

She stood up also. “Jason thought so. He was so excited about them.” She wiped her hands on her apron. “I need to go into town tomorrow. Is there anything in particular I can get for any of you?”

Michael stopped at the door. “Into town? Actually, I need to go to town too. Would you mind some company?”

Penny tried to hide her smile. “Not at all.”

“When would you like to leave?”

“First thing in the morning, if we can. I have several errands I need to make.”

Michael nodded his head. “Pat may want to come too. If you don’t mind, I’ll let the other men know where we want them to look for the cattle tomorrow.”

“That would be fine.”

Michael nodded his head, his hat in his hand. “Well, good night.”

“Good night. And thank you again, for the steaks.”

Michael Bradley smiled. “My pleasure.”

She watched as he made his way across the front yard and into the bunkhouse. She could see the lantern still lit inside, could imagine the men discussing what was done today, and what needed to be done tomorrow. They may even be playing cards. Jason’s other hands liked to play cards at night.

With a spring in her step, she went to her room and laid out her Sunday best dress. After all, there was no reason she should not look her best when she went to town.

Was there?

Chapter 10

Penny handed her list to Mr. Chase at the Mercantile Store.

“It will take me several minutes to fill this,” he advised her.

“I have to see Mr. Finch, so I’ll be back then.”

“I’ll have it ready,” he promised.

Leaving Pat inside to buy some personal items, Michael followed Penny outside the store. “Mr. Chase will need a few minutes, and I have to see someone down the street.”

“Penny! Oh Penny!”

Both of them turned as Mrs. Cutler and her daughter crossed the street and quickly walked toward them.

“Penny, how have you been?” Mrs. Cutler asked as she looked from Penny to the man standing beside her.

“I’m doing fine, Mrs. Cutler.”

“I wanted to stop by a few weeks ago, but both Dovie and David were sick.”

Penny turned to the young girl. “I’m glad you’re doing better.”

Dovie smiled. “Me too.”

Penny narrowed her eyes as she examined the young girl. “It looks like you’re taller than your brother now.”

Dovie beamed. “I am.”

“Just you wait,” Mrs. Cutler warned. “David will soon tower

over you, just like your pa.”

“But right now, I’m taller,” Dovie quipped with pride.

Penny smiled at the family, then heard Michael as he chuckled behind her.

“Mrs. Cutler, this is Mr. Michael Bradley.”

Michael tipped his hat. “Mrs. Cutler.”

“And this is her daughter, Dovie,” Penny added.

Again, he tipped his hat. “Miss Cutler.”

Dovie giggled as she scooted closer to her mother.

Penny saw the curiosity in the older woman’s expression.

“Mr. Bradley is here to pick up a bull Jason sold to his brother-in-law several months ago,” Penny explained.

Mrs. Cutler looked to Michael. “Will you be in town long, Mr. Bradley?”

“That depends on when I find the bull.”

“Seems several of Jason’s herd are missing,” Penny clarified.

“Well,” Mrs. Cutler offered. “I’m not sure I would say they are missing, as they might be . . . resettled.”

“Does that happen much,” Michael asked. “Cattle being resettled?”

“Not usually. But it’s surprising how many cattle can wander on the western pasture and be . . . encouraged to keep roaming.”

Michael caught the meaning. “Well, we’re getting ready to *encourage* Mrs. Banks cattle back to familiar land.”

“We?”

Michael nodded his head toward the store. “I have a friend with me. And Mrs. Banks seems to have a few helpers camping on her land.”

“My husband, Steven, said he’s seen them over by the east valley. They seemed to be causing no problem, so he left them alone.” She looked from Michael to Penny. “I’ve been meaning for you to stop by for lunch, but it seems we always miss each other. I insist you stop by. You know we’re on your way home.”

Penny looked uncertain. “I’m not sure—”

“Nonsense. You need to eat almost as much as you need to visit with friends.” She turned as her husband walked across the street. “Steven, this is Mr. Bradley. He and his friend are helping Penny collect her cattle.”

Steven shook Michael's hand. "Hope you find them all," his tone indicating a different meaning.

"Oh, I will."

"Steven," his wife quickly interrupted. "They're stopping for lunch on their way home."

Steven looked from Michael to Penny, a genuine smile on his face. "Good."

"We'll get going," she said as she directed her family back across the street. "Now, don't dawdle. I want a proper visit."

"Bye," Dovie waved as she followed her parents.

Penny watched as the family climbed onto their wagon. "Guess we're stopping for lunch," she said to no one in particular.

"Lunch?" Pat asked as he joined them on the boardwalk. "Where?"

"The Cutler Ranch."

Pat saw the family as their wagon headed out of town. "That them?"

Penny waved as the family drove by. "That's them."

"Seems like a nice family," Michael observed.

"They are. The first time I came to town with Jason, I met Mrs. Cutler. She was so friendly. She introduced me to others in town."

Michael looked from the disappearing wagon, back to Penny. "How much more do you need to do in town?"

"Just one more stop. I need to pay Mr. Finch for some work he did for me."

Michael nodded his head. "I need to send a telegram to Conrad, letting him know what's going on."

"In that case, I'll just load the wagon and wait for you both." Pat offered.

Penny looked from Michael to Pat. "Thank you."

Michael watched as Penny headed toward the undertakers office. He knew she was going to pay for the headstone Mr. Finch had made and placed on Jason Banks grave.

She was intercepted by a rancher.

"Hello Mrs. Banks,"

"Hello, Mr. Williams. How are you today?"

"Fine, just fine. I see you're getting errands done today also."

Penny looked at her small purse hanging from her wrist. "Yes. A few."

He tipped his hat. "Enjoy the day."

Penny continued to the undertakers. Michael noticed the man watched her, then turned to him.

The man held out his hand as he approached. "Name's Clyde Williams," he offered. Michael recognized the name as the eastern border ranch.

Michael took the firm hand. "Michael Bradley."

"My men have seen you and your friend riding her range."

"Just helping out for awhile."

Williams turned and watched Penny enter the Undertaker's office. Michael noticed he smiled.

"That little lady can sure surprise you."

"Oh?"

Williams turned back. "Before Jason died, they traveled to the north and headed all the way around to get to town. Took almost three hours. When Jason died, she rode her little wagon with that mare of hers right up to my place, and asked ever so politely if she could trespass on my land to get to town, as it saved almost two hours. Never had a sweeter request. My men see her all the time, her buggy being pulled by that little mare. My men have orders to leave her alone."

"I appreciate that," Michael replied.

Williams looked at the man before him and smiled. He tipped his hat. "Yep, never had a sweeter request," he repeated to himself as he turned and headed off.

Turning, Michael headed to finish his own business. He was still deciding what to tell Conrad as he entered the office.

"Need to send a telegram," Michael spoke to the man behind the counter.

The man handed him a pad and pencil. Michael knew if he told the whole truth, Conrad would be riding into town within a few days. Michael was sure he would not need his help.

He had Pat.

He had Emilio, Miguel and Alejandro.

Would Baxter give them any trouble?

He took a deep breath, then took the pencil and wrote:

TO: CONRAD MORGAN
ROUND ROCK, TX

ARRIVED SAFELY STOPBANKS DIED FOUR MONTHS
AGO STOP CATTLE SCATTERED STOP NEED FEW DAYS TO
LOCATE BULL STOP WILL RETURN WHEN FINISHED STOP

MICHAEL

Michael figured he said enough without alerting Conrad to the problem at hand.

He was still not sure when he found Conrad's bull, if he would leave right away and head home, or stay.

He had a feeling Penny Banks was going to need help.

Nobody saw the man standing in the shadows between the two buildings. His eyes were intense as he watched the scene with interest, an idea already forming in his mind.

For the past two years, he had been wandering from town to town. He meant to ride through this town, stopping only long enough to buy supplies and maybe enjoy what the town had to offer for a few days, then move on.

His eyes narrowed as he watched the dark haired man help the young lady into the wagon. He was sure it was her. It would not take long to find out.

He lowered his hat as the wagon drove by. He could hear the laughter from the man on horseback at something the dark haired man in the wagon said. As the wagon turned at the edge of town, his eyes followed.

He needed to send a wire to someone.

Jake Taylor decided he was going to stay a little bit longer!

Chapter 11

Lunch at the Cutler Ranch was a noisy event. Everyone was talking and eating at the same time, something not usually seen in families.

Usually, western men took their eating seriously. There was a time to talk, and a time to eat. Rarely did these two times cross.

But on the Cutler Ranch, there seemed to be no such rule.

After introducing Pat to everyone, Michael and Pat joined Mr. Cutler and his son David outside while Penny joined Mrs. Cutler and Dovie inside.

“Can I help, Mrs. Cutler?” Penny asked.

“First off, my name’s Ester, like in the Bible. And we’re neighbors, Penny. Do you mind if I call you Penny, or would you prefer Mrs. Banks?”

Penny smiled. “I see your point, Ester. And I prefer Penny myself.”

“Neighbors, and already agreeing.” Mrs. Cutler smiled as she stirred the cooking stew. “Stews almost ready. Why don’t you make some biscuits?”

“Ok.”

Mrs. Cutler watched as Penny took the flour, added way too much salt, not enough milk, and began to knead the dough.

“Honey,” she asked in a soft voice. It was evident that

Penny did not know how to make a simple pan of biscuits, and she did not want to offend her young friend. “What are you doing?”

Penny looked surprised at the question. “Making biscuits.”

Mrs. Cutler shook her head. “If you make them like that, they’ll be harder than a rock.”

Penny looked from Mrs. Cutler to her dough. “Aren’t they supposed to be hard?”

Mrs. Cutler smiled as she wiped her hands on her apron. She wondered what this poor creature ate at home, let alone fed the two men, Michael and Pat.

“Honey, let me show you how to make the best biscuits in Texas. Dovie, please go ahead and set the table.”

Penny watched as Mrs. Cutler measured out a new bowl of flour, then added some sugar, salt, soda, a small amount of baking powder, then cut in some lard.

“I didn’t know you were supposed to add lard,” Penny observed as Mrs. Cutler finally added buttermilk.

“That helps hold the dough together, and makes them flakey.”

Mrs. Cutler kneaded her dough, then grabbed a small amount and pinched it loose. After rolling it into a ball, she patted it flat, placing it in a pan.

Penny watched as Mrs. Cutler repeated the process again and again, until all the biscuits were side by side in the pan.

It was all done so smoothly, almost in one continuous motion.

“Now, you try,” Mrs. Cutler said as she set her pan of evenly round biscuits on the table.

Penny was eager to learn. She started measuring the flour like she had seen Mrs. Cutler do, then the sugar, salt, soda and baking powder. With Mrs. Cutler’s help, she soon had a pan of biscuits baking alongside Mrs. Cutler’s. No one seemed to notice how no two biscuits on her pan were the same size. But to Penny, it made no difference.

Half an hour later, the men joined the women around the table.

“Don’s been working hard on his new home,” David

continued with the men's conversation.

Mrs. Cutler saw the confused look on Michael and Pat's faces. "Don Miller is our neighbor. He's marrying Margaret next month."

"Well then, I wish them luck," Pat offered as he helped himself to potatoes.

"Margaret asked me to be her bridesmaid," Dovie claimed proudly.

"I'm glad she found somebody," Penny thought out loud. "I missed my visits with her every month we went to town."

"Margaret is a lovely girl," Mrs. Cutler agreed as she passed the bowl of stew. "She'll make a fine wife. In fact, this weekend, the womenfolk are getting together to work on her wedding quilt." She turned to Penny. "Why not join us?"

Penny looked up, surprised. "Me? I'm not sure . . ." Penny hesitated as she looked down at her hands. She was unaccustomed to social gatherings. Jason had been very shy. He had talked to several men when he went to town, but they never went to gatherings.

At first, Penny had been glad. Shy herself, she did not want others to see her lack of education or abilities. But after a few years, the desire for female companionship became stronger and stronger. She had contented herself with visiting certain women each time they came to town for supplies. Jason had seemed to recognize her need because he allowed extra time in town each month.

"It's a gift from all us women," Mrs. Cutler continued as she passed the bowl of greens. "Gives us a chance to catch up on what's going on with each other."

"Every family is doing a separate square," Dovie spoke up as she passed the stew around. "Ma, maybe Mrs. Banks can do my square."

Penny was shaking her head. "Thank you, but—"

"That's a fine idea, Dovie," Mrs. Cutler cut in as she looked from her daughter to Penny. "That way, you can embroidery your initials in your square. It's a great way for the bride to remember who helped with her quilt."

"I'm not sure—"

“Dovie only volunteered to do a square because we had an extra one.”

Penny looked at the expectant faces across the table.

“Why don’t I drive you over,” Michael offered as he helped himself to a generous portion of the stew.

“I could use some help with the tack,” Mr. Cutler added.

“Sounds good.” Michael turned to Penny. “Would that work for you?”

Penny looked from Michael to Mrs. Cutler. She hoped the fear she was feeling was not showing on her face. “I’m not sure. My sewing is not good . . .”

Mrs. Cutler nodded her head in understanding. “There’s nothing better to help improve yourself than learning from others. Besides, the quilt is not about who’s square is the best. It’s about sharing in the event, and leaving a part of you with the bride for her to look back on and remember.”

Penny smiled. She really wanted to learn, and she really wanted to be with other women. “Then, I guess next weekend it is!”

Satisfied, Mrs. Cutler smiled. “Good. David, take your elbows off the table. In fact, the next few months are going to be busy. In two weeks after the quilting, the men are going to have a barn raising for Matthew Stall.”

“His barn burnt down the first of the year, and he finally got enough wood to build another one,” Mr. Cutler added.

“And two weeks later, Margaret and Don get married,” Dovie proudly announced.

“I can see how everyone will be busy,” Michael agreed as he accepted the bowl of greens.

“Everything smells great!” Pat commented as bowls and plates of food were being passed around.

“Penny helped me with the meal,” Mrs. Cutler acknowledged as Mr. Cutler passed the basket of biscuits. Pat took the basket and reached inside for one.

“She even made the biscuits,” Mrs. Cutler continued.

Pat hesitated, dropping the biscuit he just grabbed in one smooth movement. He was hoping no one saw him as he handed the basket to Dovie seated next to him.

Michael looked at the biscuit he had already placed on his plate, debating what to do. He figured there might be enough gravy in the stew to cover the biscuit and soften it.

When the basket came back to Mrs. Cutler, she handed the basket back to Pat. "Have a biscuit, Mr. Curry."

For a moment, Pat looked trapped.

Michael tried to hide his smile at his friend's discomfort.

"Go ahead," she encouraged as she continued to hold the basket across the table. "I taught Penny a new recipe."

The expression of surprise, then hope, showed on Pat's face as he carefully selected the smallest biscuit.

Michael turned to look at Penny, who was obviously embarrassed, but also obviously proud of her new work. Before Pat could, Michael bit into his biscuit, his chewing changing from cautious to fully enjoying the moment.

"These are really good!" he announced.

Mrs. Cutler smiled as she turned to Penny. "Told you!" she whispered.

Penny was more than pleased. During lunch, she noticed Pat took another three biscuits, and Michael took another two.

For once, talk was quiet as everyone ate around the Cutler table.

Chapter 12

After lunch, while the women cleaned up the kitchen, the men went outside. Michael and Pat followed Mr. Cutler as he went to check on his horses.

“I’d say Penny has changed a lot since she first came here,” he quietly spoke as he scratched the nose of a mare. “Ever met Jason?” he asked Michael.

“No.”

“Jason was a good boy. People around would say he was slow, but he was a hard worker.” Another mare appeared, obviously wanting her nose scratched as well.

“Ten years ago,” Mr. Cutler continued, “he wanted to buy a piece of land. Wanted to have his own place, just like any other man. Funny thing was, when Baxter and Williams both bought their land, neither noticed the piece in between. Guess both thought it was included in what they bought.”

Mr. Cutler chuckled at the thought. “Sure rubbed Baxter the wrong way when he found out he didn’t own the land. But Jason worked it best he could.”

Mr. Cutler turned to Michael. “Probably noticed it’s not the best piece of grazing?”

“It may not be the best grazing land, but I’ve noticed it has its benefits.”

Mr. Cutler watched as Michael softly stroked the mare's head. "You see the lay of the land also, I see. About five years ago, Jason decided he wanted to get married. As you can guess, not many womenfolk lined up to fill that position. But Jason never gave up."

The first mare gave a playful nip to the mare beside her. She clearly wanted the attention all to herself.

"He went away for a few weeks," Mr. Cutler continued, "and then a few months later, Penny arrived." Mr. Cutler smiled. "Folks were mighty surprised when he took her straight to the church and married her right then and there. She was a bit shy, but every month when he came into town to buy supplies, he brought Penny with him. Oh, some of the younger womenfolk ignored her. But most of the town stepped up, did the neighborly thing."

"What happened to Jason?" Michael asked as he petted the second mare.

"Terrible accident. He worked at the livery in town a few times a week. He was shoeing a new horse. When he bent over, the horse up and kicked him in the head." Mr. Cutler shook his head. "Poor man. Doc Grant said he died almost immediately."

"Whose horse was it?"

Mr. Cutler gave a knowing smile. "Baxter brought in a string of new horses to be shod. But before you ask, there was no telling which day Jason would be working in town."

Michael gave a whistle. "Sure is a coincidence."

"Yea. You could tell, many of the townsfolk were thinking the same thing. A lot of people liked Jason. But, accidents happen."

He turned around, placing his elbows on the fence as he looked at his homestead. "Baxter was hoping Penny would sell the land to him. I think he's afraid she'll sell it to Williams."

"Would Williams buy it if she sold it?"

"Probably. There's no love lost between those two."

"I met Williams in town today. Seems like a decent man."

"He is. Minds his own business. Honest."

"Unlike Baxter?"

Mr. Cutler looked at the young man leaning against the fence, same as him. "Baxter is a business man. He looks out for

his ranch. That's all."

"I've followed the tracks of Penny's herd, and it appears Baxter is helping himself to more than his fair share."

Mr. Cutler was quick to note the way Michael talked about the young lady. "Baxter is a shrewd man. He probably sees the young unbranded cattle as fair game."

Michael gave a sly grin. "If it were only the young unbranded cattle we were talking about."

Mr. Cutler chuckled. "You've got a good head on your shoulders, young man. Would love to see Baxter's face when you talk to him."

"Well, I'm just making a thorough sweep of Penny's land, to make sure the bull I came for is not hiding in some ravine."

Mr. Cutler nodded his head. "Good idea. No need to stir up a hornet's nest if you can get around it."

He turned to Pat, who was quietly listening as he whittled a whistle from a piece of wood he had found. "Hear you met the three Mexicans on Mrs. Banks land."

Pat looked up. "Yea, Emilio, Miguel and Alejandro. Seem like nice men."

"I had my boys watch them when we first sighted them a few weeks ago. But they seemed to be minding their own business."

"When they passed her home, Mrs. Banks didn't have enough food for them, so she let them have a steer. They took one of the smaller ones, then made jerky out of what they didn't eat. They said they appreciated her kindness, so while they were there, they decided to keep a watch on her land."

Pat looked at the work he had done on the whistle. "When we told Mrs. Banks they were still on her land, she hired them to keep watch on her remaining cattle."

"Good idea. I'll tell my boys so they don't think they're helping themselves to her stock."

"I'll be having them check the east boundary for any strays," Michael spoke up. "I'll be sure to tell them to send any of yours back your way."

"I've already told my boys to keep an eye out for Jason's stock. I've got enough. I don't need to be robbing a poor widow of her rightful property."

“I’m sure Penny appreciates that.”

“Just be careful about her western border. Baxter’s boys can be ruthless. And right now, they think she’s just a lonely defenseless widow who doesn’t know how to run a ranch.”

Michael straightened up as he saw Penny step out of the house. He was sure she felt it was time to head home. “Rest assured. Penny may be defenseless, and she may not know how to run a ranch, but she is definitely not alone.”

Not as long as you’re here, Mr. Cutler thought with a smile.

Chapter 13

The next part of the week was filled with the five men taking off and searching every acre of Bank's ranch. Penny felt more confident after learning from Mrs. Cutler how to make a proper pan of biscuits. She noticed Pat even joined Michael for the meals lately.

And Mrs. Cutler even showed her how to make a delicious stew. She almost could not wait for the next day to try out her new recipe.

She had felt empowered with her new ability. She made a point of writing out how to make the biscuits, steak, and stew so she would not forget.

She found Alejandro making tortillas one morning and asked if he would teach her how to make them.

They were fairly easy to make, and it made eating on the go easier. Just stuff the tortilla with some meat, and you had a burrito.

She could not believe how easy it was to learn. All she needed was someone to show her.

She was even looking forward to the weekend quilting circle. Not for the sewing, which she was still having trouble with, but for the chance to learn another recipe from Mrs. Cutler.

Penny laid her patch of material flat on the table and tried to sew the small pieces together. Thankfully, Dovie had already pinned the pieces in place. But the material kept bunching up on her. And she stabbed her fingers countless times.

Several times she had to stop for long periods when her fingers would bleed because of the needle. She was determined not to get any blood on her patch.

But the material was not cooperating.

She carefully lined up the needle and pushed it through again. Then she tried to hold the material and push the needle from the back. But she seemed to have trouble finding the right place.

She was on her third day of sewing and had yet to sew any piece completely on. She decided to give up for awhile and tend to her other chores.

When the laundry was finished, she took her book and sat on the porch and drew.

Drawing always calmed her. She drew the three Mexicans as she remembered them sitting in front of the bunkhouse, enjoying the sounds of the night. Alejandro was the tallest, Emilio was next and Miguel was the shortest. Each had dark hair, dark skin and dark eyes.

She smiled at a thought.

Michael must be a popular name. She knew Miguel was Spanish for Michael.

Next, she drew Emilio as he and his friends practiced roping the corral post.

Then she drew Michael as he sat on the porch, watching the others in the front yard. He looked so at peace.

She stopped her drawing when she heard the riders coming. She gave a surprised start when she realized how late it was. She

knew Michael and Pat would join her for dinner after they had seen to their horses and cleaned up. She waved to the men, then quickly made her way inside.

She had made stew again, and she was going to make biscuits.

Everything was ready when the men knocked on her door.

“Come in,” she called out.

Both Michael and Pat removed their hats and placed them on the pegs by the door.

“Smells good,” Pat smiled as he inhaled the rich aroma filling the house.

“Thank you,” she replied.

Pat sat down, then quickly stood back up again. “Sorry,” he apologized. “My ma would tan me alive if she saw me do that to a lady.”

Penny smiled at the gesture. It was nice to be treated like a woman.

“Pat, if you would place the stew pot on the table, and Michael, if you would fill the cups with coffee, I’ll get the biscuits and we will be ready.”

Each man did his job and soon they were all seated around the table.

“How did the search go today?” she asked.

Pat took another bite before he answered. “We found seven more. And no, we did not find the bulls.”

Penny laid her spoon back down. “Only seven?”

Michael reached for another biscuit. “We’ve pretty much covered the whole south pasture and the center. We’ll finish up the eastern border by the weekend.”

“So you’ve only found about twenty so far.”

“That’s only a fifth of your original herd.”

She looked at Michael. “Original herd?”

“Yea. Especially with three good bulls, you should have at least sixty young calves running about.”

Penny looked off into the distance, reflecting on the new information. “Sixty young calves. I never considered that the herd should increase in size.”

“Well, you should. That’s probably one of the reasons why Jason bought the bulls to begin with. Plus, he probably wanted to improve his herd.”

Penny stirred the stew in her bowl. “If Baxter has my herd, how are we going to prove they are mine?”

“The bulls have markings that Jason wrote down to identify them. And your herd has been branded. It won’t take much to identify them.”

Penny nodded her head.

“We should have a proper count by the end of the week,” Michael continued. “So next week, if we still have not found your herd, we’ll pay a visit to Baxter and see what he has.”

“You seem pretty sure the cattle are not on my land,” she offered.

Pat shook his head. “If they were, they would be more grouped together. And we would have seen more tracks.”

Penny nodded her head again. “Makes sense.”

Everyone ate in silence for a few minutes.

“I guess when you find the bulls, you’ll pick one, then head back to Round Rock.”

Pat looked from Michael to Penny. “I’m sure Conrad is wondering what’s taking so long.”

“I sent him a telegram last week,” Michael offered as he took another biscuit. “It takes time to cover the entire ranch. And I don’t want to accuse someone of taking the herd if they are in fact holding up in a gully somewhere.”

Pat looked at his friend. “Yea. Guess you’re right. But we would cover more area if you would stop riding off wherever for hours at a time.”

Penny looked up, saw the warning look Michael gave to his friend.

“Leave it,” Michael warned.

Penny was curious. “I guess Emilio and the others wouldn’t mind staying for awhile after you leave. To help with the herd.”

“I’m sure they’d stay. I can ask them, if you want.”

Penny shook her head. “I better start learning how to manage on my own. Maybe you can advise me on what a proper wage would be to offer them.”

Michael looked up, saw Penny pushing her stew around the bowl. “Sure,” he agreed. “No problem.”

The rest of the meal was eaten in silence. For some reason, Penny felt saddened at the thought of Michael and Pat leaving.

When the meal was finished, they all had another cup of coffee. As was their usual routine, Pat returned to the bunkhouse and Michael sat for awhile on the porch, looking off into the distance.

“It’s a beautiful night,” she whispered.

“I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of looking at the night sky and seeing all the stars.”

Penny looked up. “I guess they have names.”

“Some of them do.” He pointed to a bright star. “That star is called the North Star.”

Penny looked where he pointed. “Really?”

“Yea. Sailors know the stars so well, they can navigate on the water with no land around for reference.”

“What do they do if it’s cloudy?”

Michael shrugged his shoulders. “Guess they just sail in the current direction.” He pointed to a cluster of stars. “See those shaped like a dipper? Just over the mountain? That’s call the Big Dipper.”

“Really? Where did you learn about these?”

Michael shrugged his shoulders. “Some I learned in school, some I learned from listening to others talk.”

Penny looked up again at the vast array of stars in the night sky. “Even without names, I think they’re beautiful.”

Michael looked from the sky to the woman sitting beside him, her profile clearly defined as she gazed at the sky.

“Oh, before I forget. I got something for you.”

Penny abandoned the sky and looked at Michael. “For me?”

Michael gave a crooked smile. “Actually, I borrowed it.”

He reached over to his saddlebag, which was hanging on the porch rail, and opened one of the compartments. He pulled out a round hoop.

“That’s a . . . ,” she hesitated, thinking of the right word. “An embroidery hoop,” she finally remembered.

Michael handed the hoop over to her. “I hope you don’t mind, but I noticed you were having trouble with that quilt square, so I rode over to Mrs. Cutler’s today and asked if I could borrow one for you.”

“I’ve seen them in the store catalog, but I’ve never seen one before up close.”

“My sister uses one. That’s how I knew to ask for it. It’ll help to keep your material flat and tight while you sew.”

She inspected the two hoops held together. “I’ve never used one.”

“Here, let me show you how it works.”

She watched as he loosened the outer ring and separated the two hoops.

“You just put your material over this one and lock the top one in place.”

Penny looked up, then smiled as she quickly rose to get her square. “I’ll be right back.”

In no time, her square was being held in place, tight and flat.

“Now I can pull the string and not have the material bunch up on me.”

“It should make it easier.”

She looked up, her smile still in place. “Thank you, for thinking of this.”

All I Need Is You

Michael looked uncomfortable as he shook his head. “It was nothing.” He rose, taking his hat and his saddle bag off the porch rail. “Guess I’ll head in. Have a lot of area to cover tomorrow.”

He nodded his head, then walked toward the bunkhouse.

Penny watched him go, holding the hoop with her quilting square securely trapped within the hoops.

Chapter 14

Penny was leaning against the tree, her sketchbook laying on her knees as she drew another picture.

“They’re finding only a few of your herd,” she spoke to the grave. “As much as I don’t want to admit it, it appears that Baxter has taken some of your herd. Especially your three bulls.”

She laid her pencil down and looked across the land. “It’s hard to believe that someone with so much would still be unsatisfied. Mr. Bradley is convinced that he has the herd. He says there are not many places left to look, and all the tracks lead to Baxter.”

She turned her gaze back to the headstone. “He seems to be in a hurry to finish his job. I’m not sure if he’s worried about his brother-in-law or something else. Which seems odd.” She stopped and tapped the end of the pencil on her bottom lip.

“I mean, if they are in such an all fire hurry to get the bull and leave, then why did Mr. Bradley offer to take me to Mrs. Cutler’s this weekend?”

“You remember Margaret, don’t you? And Don? Seems Margaret accepted his proposal. And now the women are getting together to make her a wedding quilt. And can you believe it? I was given one of the squares to sew.”

She shook her head. "I know. If you were here, you would be rolling on the ground laughing. But Mrs. Cutler was insistent. I had such trouble keeping the material from bunching up, and I cannot tell you how many times I've had to take my stitching out."

She looked back to her drawing, deciding to add more detail to the horse Michael was riding.

"And then the man takes time away from searching for the cattle and goes and borrows a hoop!"

She decided to lay her pencil down before she ruined the picture. "I swear I will never understand you men."

"But, I finished the square last night. I'm sure my stitching is poor, but it was the best I could do. I even tried to sew my name in the corner, but I swear it looks like chicken scratch instead."

She took up her book and continued to draw. "You would like my cooking now. I can actually make a decent pan of biscuits. And I don't burn the stew anymore." She let her gaze drift over to the headstone. "I'm sorry I didn't learn any of that for you, though. You were just patient and ate what I made," she laughed. "Even if it was inedible."

"The three Mexicans are nice. Emilio seems to be the one who does the most talking. I think it's because he knows the most English. But he's always smiling. I hope they stay when Michael and Pat finally leave. I don't think I can run the ranch properly without some help."

She looked intently at the headstone. "What would you have me do?"

Michael watched as Penny sat against the tree near the gravesite of her deceased husband. He noticed she visited the gravesite several times for hours at a time.

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. It was evident that she loved Jason, even after death.

How did you compete with a memory?

For the first time in his life, he felt conflicted. He missed his sister and nephew. But he knew he would miss Penny when he finally left.

Penny Banks was a fine woman. Not only pleasing to look at, but she had a genuine good heart. It was evident that she had not been taught properly while she was growing up, but once Mrs. Cutler showed her a few things, Penny committed them to memory. He still remembered when she made that pan of biscuits at the Cutler's. She had been so proud.

All she had needed was someone to show her, to help her.

The first of the week he had walked by the house and heard her through the open window struggling with the quilt square. He heard her frustration level rise as she kept pulling out her stitching and started over again.

It occurred to him that Mrs. Cutler, when she offered Penny the chance to share in the making of the wedding quilt, had no idea that Penny did not have the proper tools to do the job right. After the third day, he told Pat he needed to run an errand and headed to the Cutler ranch to ask to borrow a hoop.

Mrs. Cutler had been surprised when she learned that Penny did not have one, and then was so apologetic about not offering one to begin with.

He had waited till the meal was over before giving her the hoop. He did not want Pat to see him. Pat would harass him so much about it that Michael knew he would end up knocking the man off his horse. And then there would be a real fight. He knew Pat would apologize later on. Pat never held a grudge. But he decided he wanted to avoid the whole situation to begin with. He did not want to think what Penny would think if she saw the two of them fighting.

Over a hoop, no less.

But she had been pleased with his gift. And her smile to him had been worth everything.

He looked on as she continued to sit. He wondered what she thought about, or talked about while sitting up there.

He mentally shook his head.

What was he doing? His brain surely must be addled. When Mrs. Cutler invited Penny to join the women this weekend for the

quilting circle, Penny had look so lost. He was surprised at himself when he offered to bring her.

What was he thinking? He needed to find the bulls and get back home.

But he knew where the bulls were. He knew the first day when he rode the Banks range. He told himself, and Pat, that he wanted to make sure. But he knew.

He wanted to spend more time with Penny Banks.

Chapter 15

The women gathered at Mrs. Cutler's house were so excited, they were talking over each other. Penny learned she did not have to worry about what to say. Everybody else was talking enough for her.

She had arrived early, before anyone else. She wanted to make sure Mrs. Cutler had time to help her with her name, and she did not want anyone else to see her poor work.

Pat had agreed to stay and finish the search on the eastern border with Emilio, Miguel and Alejandro. Michael harnessed Maggie to her buggy, then helped her into the buggy with her small satchel. She was not sure if she was supposed to bring anything, so she brought what little thread she still had, her needles, her finished quilting square, and the borrowed hoop to return to Mrs. Cutler.

On the drive up, Michael told her about his family, about his sister and her new husband, and his nephew, who could get into more trouble than anyone he knew.

"The boy is like a whirlwind," he confessed. "He talks all the time and never sits still. And he is curious about everything."

"I guess little boys are like that," she offered.

He turned to her. "I think little girls are like that, too."

"Could be. I was very curious."

He continued to look at her. "I can see that."

"But, I didn't talk that much."

His right brow rose. "Really? I find that hard to believe."

"Well, it's the truth."

"I thought all children are constant talkers, asking impossible questions."

She gave a laugh. "I'm sure they do that."

He looked at her again. "But not you?"

"Oh, I had questions. But I also had my chores to do."

Michael thought the answer odd. He felt Penny did not want to discuss the matter any further, so he changed the subject.

"Can you ride a horse?"

"No," was her quick answer.

"Do you want to learn how?" he offered.

"No, not really."

He turned to her again. "Why not? I understand that Maggie is old, but sometimes riding a horse is more practical."

Penny linked her fingers together in her lap. "I don't really like horses."

Michael paused a moment, wondering how to ask the question. "Was it because of how Jason died?" he ventured.

Penny shook her head. "No. I didn't like horses before that. But I will admit, since the accident, my dislike of horses has grown."

"Did you get thrown?"

She gave a chuckle. "No. Jason tried to teach me how to ride, but I was so afraid of them, they always skirted around so much."

"Horses know when you're afraid."

"That's what Jason told me. He took me riding once, I sat in front of him. I was so nervous that Jason had a hard time controlling his horse. He tried again another time, but he finally gave up."

"What is it about horses that frighten you?"

"They're big. With big teeth. And large hooves. And they're so tall, when you fall off, you get hurt. And they can step on you."

Michael nodded. "Yes, that's true. But when you earn the loyalty of the horse, there is almost no better friendship."

Penny smiled. "You make it sound like they're human."

“Not quite. But they’re loyal, and dependable.”

“Well, I’m quite fine with Maggie. She and I get along great.”

“You see, you already have the friendship and loyalty of her.”

Penny looked ahead at Maggie comfortably pulling the wagon, her ears turned back like she was listening to the conversation.

“I guess you’re right. I never associated what I have with Maggie with other horses. How long have you had your horse?”

“Bobby?”

“Why did you name him ‘Bobby?’”

“My nephew named him.”

“Tyler?” she asked, remembering the name.

“Yea. Ty has a habit of naming animals after people. He knew a boy named Robert, ‘Bobby’ for short. Bobby was very stubborn. Kept getting into trouble, never listening. When I was training my horse, Ty saw how stubborn the horse was, how he always tried to get around what I wanted him to do. Ty said he was like Bobby. The name stuck.”

“Bobby. How did you break his stubbornness?”

“Time and patience.”

“I’ve seen him come up to you when you walk to the corral.”

Michael smiled. “He likes his nose scratched.”

“I’ve seen you do that!”

“He’s really a big baby. Sometimes when we ride, I let him have the lead, let him just run for the joy of it. I’m just along for the ride.”

“Jason told me he knew a man who would whistle, and his horse would come to him.”

“Some horses do that. Bobby knows my whistle, but he responds better when he hears me digging in my pockets.”

“Pockets?”

“He associates the sound to getting a lump of sugar.”

She smiled. “Ah, so that’s how you train them?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m not really sure who trains who. Do I have Bobby trained to come when I dig in my pockets and offer sugar, or does he have me trained to offer him sugar so he will come to me?”

“Hmm,” she said out loud. “Interesting theory.”

“Well, here we are. Are you ready?”

Penny realized she had been so enjoying the journey, she did not have time to worry about later. But now, later had arrived.

“You’ll do just fine,” he promised as he helped her down. “Just let me know when you’re ready to leave. I’ll be with Mr. Cutler in the barn.”

Mrs. Cutler appeared happy to see her.

“My dear, I’m so sorry I never thought to ask if you had an embroider hoop. I was mortified when Mr. Bradley rode up and asked to borrow one. I should have thought of that.”

“Thank you for letting me borrow it. But I did have a problem I was hoping you could help me with before the other women arrive.”

“Of course. Let me get us a cup of coffee while we sit at the table. David,” she called to her son. “Take some coffee out for your pa and Mr. Bradley.”

“Yes, ma.”

Penny sat down and Mrs. Cutler inspected her work. “You did a fine job. It looks like you took your time.”

“I tried. But I couldn’t get my name to look right.”

“Ah, yes. Well, stitching letters is more difficult. Let me show you a little secret.”

Penny watched as Mrs. Cutler quickly pulled out her stitching, then took a pencil and wrote Penny’s initials on the corner. Then she showed her how to overlap the stitches to make a continuous line over the pencil mark.

“Try that.”

“Ok.” Penny took the square and began to follow the stitching. As she finished the ‘P’, she smelled apples and cinnamon.

Mrs. Cutler made a pie!

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think to bring anything?”

Mrs. Cutler waved her hands. “Honey, the women bring so much, it’s a sin. How are you doing?”

“I just have to finish the ‘B’.”

“Fine. When you’re done, I’ll show you how to make johnnycakes.”

It took her another fifteen minutes to finish her last initial. She looked at her work and was pleasantly pleased. She could clearly make out the 'P' and 'B'.

Mrs. Cutler then mixed corneal, flour, eggs, salt and water to make a batter. Then she dropped the batter into a hot skillet.

When she was done, she had a plate full of johnnycakes.

"You want to try?" she asked Penny.

Penny was nodding her head. She mixed the ingredients just as she had seen, dropping the batter into the hot skillet, turning them over to cook on the other side, then scooping them out. As one johnnycake left the skillet, she dropped another one until the batter was finished.

Mrs. Cutler carefully watched her, then reached up for a large jar. "Now, we'll just heat some molasses and we'll be done."

When the molasses was heated, they poured some in a bowl.

"Why don't you take this out for the men? This will keep them full until later."

Penny carefully carried the platter of food surrounding the bowl of warm molasses. Mr. Cutler saw her coming through the barn door, but Michael reached her first.

"Here, let me help."

He looked at the platter, then looked at her. "Did you make these?"

She grabbed her hands in front of her dress. "I made some of them."

"They look great. Thank you."

For some reason, that simple expression lifted her spirits. She turned when she heard another wagon pull up.

The men took care of the wagons as one by one, the house filled up with women.

"David, ask you pa to come and help lower the quilting beam for us?"

Penny watched as Mr. Cutler, Michael and David lowered the large loom from the ceiling, lowering it so it was practically resting in the laps of the women sitting in a circle."

Mrs. Cutler was right, the women brought a lot of food. Not that the men objected one bit. They kept coming in and helping

themselves to what was offered. Penny noticed every time Michael came inside.

Penny sat next to Mrs. Cutler as half the women laid the bottom piece, then the batting. The other women were quickly sewing the squares together to make one solid piece to place on top. She noticed her square was the second row down, the third row over. Just off center.

Comparing all the squares, she noticed her square did not look so out of place. She was afraid hers would stand out as inferior. But alongside the others, it looked like it belonged.

The women gossiped constantly as the needles flew across the quilt. She watched several women as, instead of jabbing the needle straight down, pulling the thread tight, then trying to aim the needle from underneath, the women were pushing the needle just slightly in, then bending the quilt with their fingers to push the needle right back through. The needle always stayed on top of the quilt.

It took several tries before she acquired the knack, but she finally learned how to do the same. She turned and saw Mrs. Cutler smile, then nod at her.

She smiled back.

Women were discussing what dress Margaret decided to wear for her wedding. Some were of the opinion that a Sunday best dress was just fine for a wedding. Others believed a special dress should be made.

“After all, you should only get married once,” Mrs. Caste claimed from the other half of the room. Mr. and Mrs. Caste ran the boarding house.

“Sometimes,” Mrs. Cutler spoke up, “a woman gets another chance.”

“Well, yes,” Mrs. Caste confessed. “If your husband dies, I guess so.”

“I’ve been married for thirty-three years,” another woman claimed. Penny looked up to see who had spoken. It was Mrs. Chase. Her husband ran the mercantile store.

“Margaret is going to just love this quilt,” another woman claimed as another section was finished. Penny could not

remember this woman's name. She would have to ask Mrs. Cutler later.

Penny would never have thought a quilt could be finished in a day, but it was. The women worked well together. The finished quilt indeed looked nice. She knew Margaret would cherish it.

As the women began to leave, Penny tried to help with the clean-up. There was a lot of food left over, and most of the women took their food back with them. Some left what was remaining, promising to collect their pans and plates later.

Penny was tired, but she had enjoyed herself so much. She made a promise to herself that she would go to these gatherings in the future.

"You did fine work," Mrs. Cutler offered as she made another pot of coffee. I saw you watching how the other women were sewing and quickly copied them."

"It was so much easier the way they did it," she confessed. "I enjoyed myself."

Mrs. Cutler smiled as she folded the now finished quilt. "Good. I'll find a nice ribbon to tie around it later."

She poured them each a cup of coffee, then sat at their kitchen table. "I hope you were not offended by what Mrs. Caste said."

Penny looked up, confused for only a moment. "Oh, no. I knew what she meant."

"You know, most folks around here think that a year is a proper time for mourning the loss of your mate."

"I've heard that."

"But we have to make adjustments for where we live. Out here, a woman needs a husband to help run a ranch. I'm not saying a woman can't run a ranch, but it's easier for a man."

"I never knew what Jason did before he died."

Mrs. Cutler nodded her head. "If I had to do all that Steven did plus all that I did, I'm not sure how I would do it. But do it I would, if I had to."

"I would think there are very few things you can't do."

Mrs. Cutler smiled, obviously pleased at the praise. "Still, it is a hard land." She went to pour them each another cup of coffee. "I like Mr. Bradley."

Penny looked surprised. "You do?"

Mrs. Cutler laughed. "Yes, I do. It's not every man who would travel all this way just to ask for an embroidery hoop for someone he barely knows."

Penny smiled, remembering when he gave it to her. "It was nice of him to do that."

Mrs. Cutler leaned forward. "Honey, he's a good man. You would do well to keep him. People already speak well of him. And this town could use more good men like him."

"Well, when he finds the bull he's looking for, he's heading back."

"Don't let him go."

Surprised, Penny looked up. "What?"

"Don't let him go. You do like him, don't you?"

Penny felt her cheeks redden. "Yes," she honestly answered.

Mrs. Cutler smiled. "That's what I like about you. You don't try to be coy."

"Well," Penny did not know what to say.

"Sometimes, we women have to be the first to say what's in our hearts. I know, all the romance stories say the man has to declare his feelings first. But sometimes, men can be clueless. And if we want to choose our own happiness, sometimes we have to speak out first."

Chapter 16

Michael turned as the buggy pulled into the yard. Pat walked up beside him as they both watched a young woman with olive colored skin and blue eyes slowly drive up. Small tendrils of black hair escaped her hat. Michael imagined her hair was long and pinned up.

Pat stepped forward, grabbing the reins as the buggy came to a halt at the front of the house.

“Hello,” Pat said.

The woman looked at Pat. “Hello.”

She turned her blue eyes toward Michael, her stare showing experience in reading people. “My name is Anna. And you are?” she asked, her voice soft and cultured.

Michael tipped his hat. “Michael Bradley.”

She slightly nodded, then turned to Pat.

Pat stood speechless until Michael nudged him. “Pat,” he answered as he tipped his hat.

Anna looked from the men before her to the small house behind her. “Is this the Banks home?”

“Yes.” Pat answered.

“And this is where Penny Banks lives?”

“Yes,” Pat answered again, still holding the reins.

Anna’s face turned from the house back to Pat “Is Penny

here?”

“Inside,” Pat informed her.

“Anna?”

Anna turned when she heard the familiar voice behind her.
“Penny!”

Anna dropped the reins and was out of the buggy before either Pat or Michael could offer their help. Both girls hugged each other fiercely.

“You look the same, but different,” Penny observed as they each stepped back to examine each other.

“You still have those freckles.”

Penny touched her nose as Anna laughed, then each hugged the other again.

“Come inside. Where have you been? Where did you go?”

Michael watched as both girls walked inside the house, asking questions faster than either could answer. Friends! He figured they would be talking for some time, so he turned to his friend.

Pat was still standing in the yard, holding the reins, and watching the doorway where the girls disappeared.

Michael leaned against the buggy, a large smile on his face.

“Never thought I would live to see this day,” he said.

Pat slowly dragged his head around and looked at Michael.
“What?”

Michael shook his head again as he walked toward the barn. Pat followed, leading the horse to the water trough.

“What?” Pat asked again.

“One word sentences and weak in the knees. I was wondering where all that ‘*charm*’ had gone.”

“Let me get us some coffee, then we can sit and talk,” Penny offered. As she ground the beans, Anna took the opportunity to look at the house.

“It’s comfortable,” she observed.

“I like it. Jason built it all by himself.”

Anna’s eyes found the pictures of herself and Alley hanging

on the wall. Anna walked over to the picture, carefully studying the detail in the picture. "Did you do these?"

Penny glanced at Anna studying the pictures. "I did those many years ago."

"Penny, these are good."

Penny smiled as she poured the water in the coffee pot. "Thank you."

"Your memory is very accurate."

"I remember many details, especially about you and Alley."

"Do you have others?"

"A few."

Anna looked around, her gaze resting back on her younger sister. "Are you happy here?"

Penny poured two cups of coffee, then placed the milk and sugar on the table. "It's mine."

Anna poured some milk in her cup, then scooped a spoon of sugar. "I've missed you."

"I missed you too. And I worried about you something fierce after pa brought Alley back."

"I hated leaving Alley behind. But we both knew when she tripped on the tree root, she was not going to be able to go."

"Anna, where did you go? What did you do?"

Anna took a deep breath. "I took the stage to Kansas. I wanted to be far away, in case Ben or Clara came looking for me. When I got to a small town, I convinced the General Store to hire me to help. I rented a room, and eventually helped the local seamstress with her work."

"Your sewing was always good."

Anna smiled. "I remember you were jealous that you did not know how to sew."

"Or cook," Penny added. "But I'm learning."

Anna smiled. "Good for you."

"Then what?"

"Well, I sewed for this one particular lady, who happened to run a lady's school. I offered to do some work if she would teach me how to be a proper lady."

Penny looked at Anna from head to toe. "I would say she taught you well."

“Believe me, it was not all easy. I hated walking around balancing a book on my head. But I was determined to better myself. When I saved up enough money, I hired a private investigator to help me learn who I really was.”

“What did you learn?”

“I have other relatives.”

“I thought there were no family members to take care of you.”

“That’s what we were told. But I found them.”

Penny smiled. “I’m happy you found them. What are they like?”

“I discovered my father was from Mexico, hence my dark skin. Mother was from California. Their names are Miguel and Grace Henderson. What’s so funny?” Anna asked as Penny gave a soft chuckle.

“Miguel/Michael must be a popular name. One of the men who works for me is named Miguel, and one of the men you met outside is named Michael. He’s from Round Rock, Texas.”

Anna smiled, then her expression turned serious. “Well, I also learned that Anna is not my real name.”

Penny looked surprised. “It’s not?”

“No. My aunt said my name was Hanna. Hanna Henderson.”

“Hannah,” Penny repeated softly, then shook her head. “You’ll always be Anna to me.”

Anna took a sip of her coffee. “I heard about Alley.”

Penny looked at her own cup, still resting between her hands. “Mr. Taylor was so mad when he learned you were gone.”

“I was not surprised when I heard he took Alley instead.”

Penny looked at her sister, remembering that night, and what Anna had said to Alley. “You *knew* Alley was going to get married.”

“I suspected. I didn’t learn about it until a few years later. When I saved enough money, I went to find her. But I was too late.”

“Too late?”

Anna nodded her head. “Alley died six months after she left with Mr. Taylor.”

“*What?*” Penny was surprised.

“I found where she was buried. But Mr. Taylor had already moved on.”

Penny was silent, allowing a moment to grieve her dear sister. “I never thought that Alley was gone.”

“I know.”

An hour later, Anna looked at the delicate watch pinned to her blouse.

“Oh my! I had no idea I’ve been here so long.” She looked apologetically at Penny as she stood up. “I came with friends, who are waiting at the hotel. We are traveling together, and I insisted on stopping here to see if I had indeed found you. Now that I know, I will for sure write to you. I want to keep in touch.”

Penny stood up also. “I would like that, and I promise to write back. I’m glad you found me. I never knew where to look for you.”

Anna hugged Penny. “I promise to write.”

Penny smiled. “And I promise to answer.”

Penny stood in her yard and watched the buggy leave. She heard Michael walked up beside her.

“She was my closest friend.”

She was the one who got away

Chapter 17

Jake Taylor had camped upon a hill behind some boulders and bushes for the past week. From here, he could see the front of the house. He could watch her as she did her daily chores.

He had already sent the telegram, although he need not have bothered. He knew it was Penny. He heard that woman in town call out to her.

It was her!

From here, he could also watch to see how long the men stayed inside.

It would not be wise to start a campfire here. For some reason, the men made him nervous. Especially the dark haired one.

There was something about the way he carried himself. He recognized the look. This was a man who knew how to handle himself, and others.

In a few days, Jake would have to leave for several weeks to take care of his special delivery. But he would be back. Besides, he needed to bring more supplies.

He saw the dark haired man walk across the front yard. Jake narrowed his eyes.

This one might be a problem. He may have to eliminate him. The second man too, he decided. No reason to leave witnesses.

Chapter 18

“Maybe we should make another check,” Penny offered as she wrung her hands together in front of her.

Michael shook his head. “We’ve been all over your land, and your cattle are not there. Plain and simple.”

“But, what if he causes trouble?”

Michael raised his gaze over his saddle, the tone of his voice low and steady. “They’re your cattle, not his.”

“Don’t worry,” Pat jumped in as he tightened his saddle cinch. “Michael can take care of himself. Besides,” he gave a smile, “I’ll be there to protect him.”

“We’ll be taking Emilio, Alejandro and Miguel with us,” Michael offered instead. “We’ll need them to drive the herd back.”

“Baxter doesn’t like being told what to do.”

Pat stopped working on his saddle. “Really?”

Penny recognized sarcasm when she heard it. “Maybe I should come along,” she offered.

Michael shook his head. “We can take care of this.” He pulled himself onto his saddle, checked his rifle and the gun on his belt. He was ready.

“We should be back by evening,” Pat called out as he followed his friend.

Five riders rode north.

“She’s worried about you,” Pat observed.

“She’s worried any of us could get hurt,” Michael corrected.

Pat shook his head. “No, she’s more worried about you.”

Michael looked from the trail to his friend. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure I do.”

“She’s still in love with Jason.”

“What?” Pat almost yelled.

“You heard me. I’ve seen her go to his grave and talk for hours. You should see her. It’s really quite touching.”

Pat shook his head. “And here I thought you had a measure of intelligence.”

“Pat, leave it alone,” he warned.

They traveled for half an hour when they saw a rider coming towards them.

Pat squinted his eyes. “Is that who I think it is?”

Michael was also narrowing his eyes. “I think so.”

The five riders waited as the lone rider came up alongside them.

“Well, hello there,” the man called out. “I was just looking for you.”

Michael took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. “Marshal Wade. Did Conrad send you?”

Wade smiled. “Not really. I was passing by and it was mentioned you might be having problems locating a certain bull.”

“And since you were coming this way, you graciously volunteered to ride by and see if we needed any help,” Pat added with a large smile on his face.

“Something like that,” Wade replied. He looked at Michael. “Your sister is worried.”

Michael shook his head. “My sister worries too much.”

“Well, you have to cut her some slack. After all,” Wade said as he began absently inspecting his fingernails. “She is in the family way.”

Michael’s face lit up. “She is? It’s about time.”

“Well,” Wade continued. “Don’t let on that you know. I think

she wants to be the one to tell you.”

Michael grinned as he shook his head. “Good for her, and Conrad,” he added.

“So,” Wade asked as he sat up straight and looked around. “Where is this legendary bull that you’re picking up for Conrad?”

Pat leaned forward. “We’re going now to retrieve him.”

Wade’s eyes widened at the implication. “Retrieve him?”

“Yea.” Michael looked behind him at the three new hands. “This is Emilio, Alejandro, and Miguel. They work for Mrs. Banks.” He turned back to Wade. “We’re heading to a neighboring ranch to ‘encourage’ her herd back to her land.”

“Encourage? I like that word.”

“That’s how another rancher described it. Thought it was appropriate.”

“Well, I am intrigued. Want some company?”

“I’m not sure which I’ll need more today, your gun or your badge.”

“Well, they are both at your disposal, if needed.”

“If Mrs. Banks has her way,” Pat offered, “we’ll be exchanging flowers and recipes.”

Wade frowned. “What?”

Michael gave a warning look to his friend.

“Well, she would,” Pat defended.

Michael slowly turned his gaze back to the Marshal. “Mrs. Banks, who owns the cattle, doesn’t want any trouble. She’s afraid he might retaliate somehow, after we leave.”

He noticed Pat’s quick glance in his direction.

“That’s a reasonable concern,” Wade offered.

“I promised to consider all options.”

Wade thought for a moment, then nodded his head. “Well, shall we?”

The six riders rode at a good speed. It would take time to herd the cattle back, so the sooner there, the sooner back.

An hour later, they were crossing over to Baxter’s land. The land was barren for the first part of the journey, but slowly vegetation and shrub began to be visible. They heard the cattle before they saw them as they crested a small hill.

Pat gave a whistle. “Man has a good size herd.”

As they rode toward the herd spread out over acres of land, several riders left their position to ride toward them. Michael saw Pat line himself on his right, Wade lined himself on his left. Miguel and Alejandro were next to Pat, Emilio was next to Wade.

They made a straight line of six. They kept riding forward.

Three riders rode at a full gallop, stopping their horses just short of their line. Michael kept his face straight. He knew they were trying to intimidate them. None of them flinched.

“Can I help you mister?” the lead rider spoke.

Michael and the others continued to ride forward, forcing the lead rider to step back. “I’m looking for Baxter.” After the three men had been forced to move aside, Michael stopped. The others stopped alongside him.

The man stared at Michael. “You that new fellow working for Banks?”

“I would be him.”

The man smiled. “You know, you’re on Baxter’s land.”

Michael smiled in return. “I’m so glad you know where the boundaries are. That will make my conversation with Baxter so much easier.”

Michael heard Pat cough, trying to hide his laugh.

The man looked confused. He turned and looked at his friends.

“I’ll get the boss,” one of the other two offered before turning his horse and riding hard back to the herd.

The first man looked at the six men lined up before him. Michael noticed his slight surprise when he saw Wade’s badge.

Wade took advantage of the hesitation.

“Let’s just go take a look. That way, Mr. Baxter doesn’t have to ride as far.”

The lead rider was unsure what to do, especially with a U.S. Federal Marshal here. So he let the six riders ride past him and his friend. No one spoke as they approached the herd.

Michael just sat on his horse and gazed at the cattle spread all over. He saw Baxter’s brand, and he saw Banks’.

He heard the rider approaching at a fast speed, but refused to turn his attention toward the new rider. Michael waited till the rider stopped practically in front of him.

Michael continued to scan the herd, deliberately ignoring Mr. Baxter.

“You’re that new fellow,” Baxter finally spoke.

Michael finally turned his gaze toward Baxter.

Baxter was in his late forties and a widow, from what the townspeople said. His hair was beginning to grey at his temples. His eyes were brown, creases along the edges from the constant squinting in the sun. He had a short beard which was also starting to show grey. He looked to be shorter than himself. Maybe closer to Miguel’s height.

Baxter ignored the Mexicans, looked at Pat, then looked at Wade.

“Marshal?” he asked, surprised.

“Marshal Wade,” he offered with a slight nod.

Baxter looked from Wade to Michael, then back to Wade. “What’s a Federal Marshal doing out here?”

Wade shrugged his shoulders. “You know how it is. My job is to make sure justice is served.”

Michael noticed Baxter’s eyes narrowed, just slightly. He knew the man was a leech, taking what was not his. No wonder Penny felt the need to keep a shotgun near her door at all times.

He had planned to call the man out, he deserved no less. Cattle rustling was a serious offense. And as Michael looked over the herd, the evidence was clear.

But Penny did not want trouble.

And he had promised to do what he could.

He made his decision.

“Mr. Baxter,” Michael finally spoke to the owner. Baxter’s gaze snapped back to him. “Mrs. Banks asked me to deliver a message.”

Baxter’s eyes narrowed. “A message?”

Michael looked to the herd. “Yes. She realizes that since her husband died,” he turned and looked directly at Baxter, “and the men employed by Jason suddenly left her . . .”

Michael deliberately waited for a count of five.

“. . .that she was unable to properly take care of her herd. She wishes to express her gratitude for your help in this matter. But now that she has help again, she would like her herd

returned.”

Baxter looked at Michael, his gaze shifting to the Marshal only briefly.

Michael lifted his head, scanning the herd. “I see the three bulls Jason bought. I would like to start with collecting those, if you don’t mind. My men can help, if you need it. And I see many of Banks’ herd, along with their calves.”

Baxter sat still, still wondering at the calm tone of the man before him.

Michael knew when Baxter realized what he was about. Baxter knew that they were aware they took the cattle without permission. Baxter knew that Michael saw the scattered herd with Banks’ brand, their young calves suddenly with Baxter’s brand.

Baxter thought he could swoop down and take what he wanted. After all, what could a lone widow do?

Michael hated men who tried to roughshod over innocent people.

“Cal,” Baxter called out to one of his men. “Cut the black bulls out. And Banks’ cattle.”

Michael looked at Baxter and smiled. “I notice the calves have your brand.”

Baxter turned around, as if noticing this for the first time. “Well, you know how it is.” He offered. “Sometimes, the men get, overanxious.”

“Yes, I know how it is,” Michael confirmed. “That’s the problem.” He sat up straight. “I’ll need a bill of sale from you transferring those calves with your brand back to Mrs. Banks’ name. After all, we wouldn’t want her accused of stealing your cattle, now do we?”

Baxter’s face showed a slight flush.

Michael just smiled.

The bulls were herded past them, and Pat, Emilio, Miguel and Alejandro kept them together. Soon, the air was filled with cows bellowing as they were being cut outside the herd, the calves naturally following their mothers.

Wade continued to sit next to Michael, silently observing.

“I’ve made a count of her herd, and compared it with Jason’s

records.” Michael removed the ledger from his jacket. “I know there are around eighty head missing, so what we don’t get today, I’m sure your men will locate the remaining within the next few days. I am going to guess that out of the eighty, about fifty are cows, with calves. So Mrs. Banks’ will be expecting a total of about a hundred and thirty, minus what we take today. Sound fair?”

Baxter looked at the Marshal, then back to Michael. “Fair.”

Michael turned to leave, then stopped. “Oh, and one more thing. After looking at the bulls myself and seeing the calves they produce, I can see why Jason bought them.” He turned and looked at the black bulls behind him. Their bellowing was starting to lessen once other cows joined them. He turned and watched as more cows and their black calves were ushered behind them. “Crossing the black bulls with native Texas longhorn cows seems to produce a large number of hornless black calves. I’m impressed with their size. They look like they’ll survive well on the winter range.” Michael turned back to Baxter. “I’ll even bet that the crosses will winter better and weighed more the next spring. What do you think?”

Baxter watched as several more cows and their calves were cut out of his herd.

“You’re probably right,” Baxter admitted.

“And since you’ve had the use of Jason’s three bulls for nearly four months, I would say a large number of your cows have been sired by them.”

Baxter looked from Michael to the Marshal to his herd. He said nothing.

“I think it would only be fair to pay Mrs. Banks’ a ‘stud fee’ for the use of her three bulls.” Michael turned to Wade. “Would you say that’s fair?”

Marshal Wade looked directly at Baxter, his face stern and unyielding. “I would say that’s more than fair.”

Michael turned back to Baxter. “I think it would be a nice, kind gesture on your part if you paid Mrs. Banks a visit, say this evening, and paid her a fair rate. And since I’ve already seen part of your herd, I have a pretty good idea how much it *should* be. Can I tell her to expect a call from you this evening?”

Baxter paused for only a moment. "I'll be by after dinner."

"Oh, and don't forget that bill of sale."

Baxter nodded, then turned and rode away, afraid of what else he would have to do.

Michael and Wade watched as a few more cows and calves were cut out. Pat rode up beside him.

"What's the count?" Michael asked.

"All three bulls, sixty-two cows and forty-five calves."

Michael nodded. "I'll make sure to mention to Baxter tonight that he still has at least eighteen cows and five calves of Mrs. Banks somewhere."

Pat looked surprised. "Baxter is coming over tonight?"

Michael turned and headed toward the small herd. "Let's get this herd to the southern pasture. I don't want Mrs. Banks to be alone when Baxter shows up."

Wade rode alongside the men, his hat waving through the air as he helped herd the cattle back home.

He rode up next to Michael. "I didn't know you had such a mean streak."

Michael continued to look ahead. "He deserved worse. I really wanted to shoot him on sight. The man knew exactly what he was doing."

Wade nodded his head. "Yea, he did. And he probably would have gotten away with it."

"That's what makes me angry."

"Well, you gave the man a way out, even in front of his men."

"I wasn't concerned with how he looked to his men."

"I know. But it was a nice gesture. At least you can tell Mrs. Banks you avoided trouble."

"I don't know what you mean," Michael responded as he kicked his horse forward.

Wade smiled at Michael's retreating back. "Remind me never to get on your bad side."

Chapter 19

Penny had been a nervous wreck all day. Ever since the men left before dawn this morning, she knew trouble was coming. To keep herself busy, she quickly milked the cow before letting her out to graze, then collected the eggs. She collected the milk in jars and carried them to the creek behind the house.

Jason had made a metal crate that lowered into the creek. Here, they kept things that needed to stay cool. There were already two jars of milk from last night. Penny pulled out the two jars and replaced them with the two new ones. Then she spent several hours up by Jason's grave leaning against the tree talking about all that could go wrong. She took her sketchbook, but could not draw for her nerves.

What if Michael was shot?

What if Baxter and his men shot all of them?

What was she supposed to do?

What could she do?

After several hours with no answers, she finally returned to her house and cleaned it from top to bottom. She found that keeping busy helped.

Somewhat!

She made another pot of coffee and sat at her kitchen table. She looked at Jason's desk, sitting against the wall all by itself,

waiting for someone to use it properly.

If Michael found the bulls, he most likely would choose the one he wanted and leave to go back home.

Don't let him go, she heard Mrs. Cutler again.

As if she could keep him.

She decided to try drawing again. With a fresh cup of coffee, she went to her front porch and sat in her chair. She opened the book to the picture she had not finished, the one with Margaret and Don. It had been several months since she had seen Don, but she saw him in town last week and had remembered enough to draw his likeness.

She knew Margaret would like the wedding quilt the women had made, and she was glad she had contributed to it. But she wanted to give Margaret a wedding gift just from her. And her drawings were all she had.

Margaret was standing against a tree, with her shoulder leaning against it. Don was behind her with his hands on her shoulders. She was looking up at him, and he was smiling down at her.

It was a tender moment.

Mind you, she had never seen them look at each other like that, but she could imagine. She had visited with Margaret enough to know her every expression. And Don's expression was what she imagined it to be. After two cups of hot coffee that kept turning cold, she decided the picture was fine. She drew a dress she remembered Margaret wearing during one of her last visits. The dress suited Margaret's frame rather well.

She smiled. She was rather proud of her picture.

She wondered how she was going to give it to her. Roll it up? Frame it?

Where did you get a frame? Did the mercantile have frames?

She would have to ask on her next visit.

When the sun started to go down, she began to start dinner. She did not have a recipe for beans yet, so she started the stew. She enjoyed the look when Michael had asked her if she had made the johnnycakes last weekend, so she decided to make another batch. She even found a jar of molasses. A cup of that warmed up would be just right.

The more the evening progressed, the more she worried.

Maybe she should ride over and make sure everyone was fine? Maggie did not travel very fast, but she would get there eventually.

She brought the cow back in and milked her, then took the jars of fresh milk to the creek. As usual, she took one jar to take inside. Maybe she should take two?

It was several hours and the sun was setting when she finally heard riders approaching. Not sure what to expect, she grabbed her shotgun as she went out the door.

Pat was the first to see her. He threw his hands in the air.

"I give up," he cried out loud. "Please don't shoot me again."

Penny had to laugh, he looked so comical. Actually, it felt good to laugh.

She saw Michael riding beside him and another man with them.

Her curiosity won out over manners. "Well, how did it go?" She noticed the three Mexicans were not with them. Did they get shot?

Michael saw her looking around and realized she was looking for the other men.

"We got most of them back. Your new hands are making sure they stay in the south pasture for now," he informed her

"And the bulls?"

"All three happily munching on thick grass and drinking clear water," Pat said as he dismounted.

"This is Marshal Wade," Michael introduced as he dismounted.

Penny looked at the newcomer. "Hello," she softly said.

Wade tipped his hat. "A pleasure to meet you."

Penny looked around again, saw none of Baxter's men chasing them.

"I have dinner almost ready." She turned to the Marshal, finally remembering her manners. "Would you care to join us?"

"Thank you. I'll just take care of my horse and wash up."

Penny nodded. "Fine. Come in when you're ready."

She was just finishing the last johnnycake when the men knocked on the door, then entered. As they sat around and

talked, she realized these men were friends.

“You’re from Round Rock also,” she asked.

Wade shook his head. “No. I was just passing through delivering some documents. Met Conrad and heard about the delay. Since I was not doing anything for the next few days, thought I would take some time and see Clearwater.”

“Well,” she offered. “There’s not much to see here.”

Wade raised his eyes to the woman sitting at the head of the table. “I would beg to differ.”

Penny noticed Michael stopped eating for some reason. Did she not season the stew right?

“I must admit,” Pat spoke out, drawing her attention. “I was surprised with the bulls, once I saw them. Most folks around here have Texas Longhorns. But those bulls are polled.”

Penny looked confused. “Polled?”

“They have no horns,” Pat explained. “Naturally. But they are a stocky lot. Their legs are shorter, but their body is deep. Real stocky indeed.”

Penny nodded her head. “When they were still young, they looked so cute. And all black. Their fur was not as coarse as the others.”

Michael took another johnnycake. “You won’t be petting them now. They’re bigger than any of your other cows, and very territorial.”

“Bigger?”

Michael nodded his head as he dipped his johnnycake into the warm molasses. “The calves they sired are large too. Most of them are black with white patches. They look to grow bigger, and weigh more. And they look very hearty. I’d not be surprised if they get through the winter better than the others.” He took a bite, enjoying the taste. “Conrad is going to be very pleased.”

Penny looked down. “I’m glad you think so.”

She heard a rider outside riding toward the house. Surely this was an odd time for a visit.

By the time she reached the door, someone was already knocking.

She answered the door and was shocked to see Baxter standing on her porch.

“Mr. Baxter, what a . . . surprise!”

Mr. Baxter looked inside and saw the three men sitting around the table.

“Would you care to come in and have some coffee?”

Baxter was shaking his head. “No, I-”

“I’ll help make another pot,” Michael offered as he rose and filled the coffee pot with water.

“Please, come in,” Penny offered as she opened the door wide and stepped aside.

Mr. Baxter had no choice but to come inside.

“Well, thank you,” he gruffly replied.

Pat moved his chair over and placed another next to him, silently inviting him to sit down.

Their dinner was done, but she still had a few johnnycakes left. She handed the platter to him. “Would you care for one with your coffee?”

“No, thank you.”

“They’re really good,” Pat confessed as he reached for another one, leaving only two behind.

Penny left the platter on the table in case he changed his mind. She was trying to figure out why he was there when he brought up the subject.

“I gather your herd arrived safely?”

Penny looked from Baxter to Michael, who nodded his head. “Yes,” she replied when Michael failed to answer. “From what I’ve heard, they are fine.”

Baxter nodded his head. “Good.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a piece of paper. “Here is the bill of sale for the calves.”

He handed the paper to Penny, who dutifully took the paper and read it, a frown slowly appearing on her face. “My calves have your brand on them?”

Baxter refused to look down. “You know how hectic it gets at branding time.”

Penny’s eyes narrowed. “I was given to understand that the calves sired by my bulls were mostly black. I fail to see how your men could make such a mistake. Do you have that many black calves on your ranch?”

Michael almost smiled. She had backbone!

Baxter looked from Penny to Michael, clearly confused.

Penny looked at Baxter, but addressed her question to Michael. "Are all Jason's cattle accounted for?"

Michael took out a small notepad from his shirt. He did not need to look, but he did just the same, for effect. "According to the tally, you are at least eighteen cows and five calves short." Michael put the notepad away. "And that is just guessing."

Penny noticed Baxter's confusion. Something must have been said when Michael went to collect the herd. Something she did not know, yet.

She nodded her head and went to get the coffee pot and a new cup. "Well, Mr. Baxter, when can I expect the remainder of my cattle to be returned?"

"My men were searching the herd the rest of the evening. I would think in two days, we should have them cut out and on your land."

"Two days. I think that sounds fair." She poured the coffee. "Milk or sugar?"

Baxter shook his head. "Black is just fine."

She held the coffee pot out to the others. Three cups rose as she filled each cup, then filled her own. She sat back down at the head of the table, next to Michael.

"Thank you for coming all this way just to give me this bill of sale, Mr. Baxter."

"It was nothing."

"You know, Mr. Baxter, you and I are going to be neighbors for some time. It would be nice if we got along and were able to cordially say hello when we passed each other in town. I think Jason would like that."

Baxter finally took a deep breath, realizing the situation was over. "That would be nice. And," he reached inside his pocket and pulled out a check. "I have a check for you, since while the bulls were mixed in my herd, several of my cows have already been sired by them."

Penny refused to look at Michael, for she knew he somehow managed to get Baxter to pay this. She opened the check and was surprised at the amount.

“I hope the amount is to your satisfaction?” he asked.

She had no idea if the amount was correct or not. Her first instinct was to show Michael the amount and ask him if the amount was correct. But she needed to establish her own rights here. If the amount was either correct or not, either way, the amount was larger than she had ever seen. She decided to accept it.

She folded the check and slipped it into her pocket. “I think the amount is just right. And thank you.”

Baxter nodded his head again.

“Please, Mr. Baxter, have a johnnycake.”

Baxter relaxed his shoulders, obviously glad the situation had been resolved without any trouble. Baxter took one of the johnnycakes, dipped it into the molasses, then took a bite. He actually smiled. “These are really good.”

Penny was not sure if she was more pleased with her cattle being returned and money paid for using her bulls, or watching someone obviously enjoying her cooking.

Chapter 20

Michael hitched up Maggie to Penny's buggy. With the check from Mr. Baxter and the check from Conrad for the bull, Penny decided she needed to go to town to deposit them in Jason's account.

She had wanted to make the trip alone, but Michael had been insistent.

"It's not safe to be riding alone, especially with two large checks."

"I've made the trip several times alone. I'll be alright this time."

Michael shook his head. He knew she carried a small fortune in those two checks, but he also knew she needed to do things alone.

Without him.

But he would not allow her to travel alone.

"Marshal Wade is heading back into town, and he can escort you at least to town. But either I go with you, or you can take one of the hands. There's no other choice."

Penny looked angry, but finally decided it really did not matter. After all, it would give her someone to talk with on the journey.

"Very well, I'll take one of the hands."

Michael turned his face, not wanting her to see how much he was disappointed.

“Emilio,” he called out. Emilio came running from the barn. “I need you to ride with Mrs. Banks to town.”

Emilio nodded his head, then ran back inside the barn. A moment later, all three Mexicans were talking rapidly in Spanish.

Penny patiently waited until Emilio lifted himself into the wagon.

“Make sure she stays safe,” Michael warned.

Emilio smiled and nodded his head. He took the reins from Penny, tapped the reins on Maggie’s back, then slowly headed the wagon toward town.

Marshal Wade finished saddling his horse, then led the gelding to the yard. “She’ll be fine. She has a good head on her shoulder.”

“I know. I just have this, feeling.”

“Feeling?” he asked.

“Yea. Something doesn’t feel right. And I don’t know what it is.”

“Ah,” the Marshal exclaimed. “Well, I have to head two towns over, but I’ll stop back by to check on her.”

Michael looked at Wade. “I don’t want you going out of your way.”

“Not a problem. Mrs. Banks is a lovely woman, and I would be honored to check in on her next week.”

Before Michael could respond, Wade lifted himself onto his horse and tapped it’s belly with his boot heels. The horse took off, and in no time was riding alongside the slow buggy.

This was going to be a long trip.

“I thought we would be heading back to Round Rock by now,” Pat spoke behind him.

“Not yet.”

“Conrad will be wondering what happened to his bull.”

“Conrad will get the bull when it gets there,” Michael snapped.

Pat raised his hands in defeat. “Ok, ok, don’t bite my head off.”

“I want to make sure Baxter sends the remainder of her

herd.”

Pat nodded his head. “Oh, is that the reason,” he whispered to himself.

Michael stood in the yard and watched the buggy and horse slowly ride toward Clearwater. After fifteen minutes, he decided he needed to do something to keep busy.

Alejandro made coffee in the bunkhouse, so the men had a constant supply during the day.

“How about we tackle that hole in the barn roof,” he mentioned to Pat and Miguel.

Pat found some old planks behind the barn that they used. Michael found the hammer and nails, and the three of them began their work.

They did a lot of work that day. Not only did they fix the barn roof, they moved the stove in the bunkhouse so the air would draft better. Then they found some paint and painted the barn wall that the three Mexicans had fixed when they first arrived.

The coral had a few boards missing, so Miguel fitted several to keep the animals in.

For lunch, Alejandro made burritos with beans and tortillas. Michael liked Mexican food, and Alejandro knew how to cook.

For the afternoon, Michael began watching for the buggy to return. He still could not shake the feeling of something wrong. Almost like someone watching him.

He looked around and saw no one. He shook his head. “I’m getting addle-brained,” he confessed to himself.

He went behind the house, located the axe and the pile of wood and decided to cut firewood.

The work felt good, his muscles moving with each swing, He stood a log on the stump, aimed, then swung the axe in a large arc.

The wood split easily.

He was not sure how long he was splitting wood, but he finally heard Alejandro yelling in the yard.

“Mr. Bradley, Mr. Bradley,” he kept yelling.

Michael came around the house as Pat was coming around the barn.

“Something not right. Maggie coming back.”

Michael indeed saw Maggie running for the yard, the buggy behind her scrapping the ground. Michael saw the problem at once: the right front wheel had come off, or broke off.

He reached for the mare as she came forward. He used soft words to calm the mare down.

Maggie was breathing hard, and she was lathered from her run. He inspected the damaged wheel and saw a piece of Penny’s dress wedged in a split piece of wood. There were supplies still in the back of the wagon.

Michael handed the reins to Miguel. “Miguel, take care of Maggie. Alejandro, we’ll probably need your horse too.”

Michael ran inside the barn, grabbed his saddle blanket, bridle, and his saddle. As he came to the corral, he whistled for his horse. He saw Pat and Alejandro with their stuff as well.

Michael quickly placed the bridle in the horse’s mouth, then over the ears. The blanket went over the back, followed by the saddle. Michael put his stirrups over the saddle horn to keep them out of the way as he tightened the cinch. He let the stirrups drop down and hesitated for a moment.

He ran into the bunkhouse and collected his rifle, wedging it in the scabbard under the stirrups. He heard Alejandro and Miguel talking rapidly in Spanish.

“Ready,” he called out as he mounted his horse. It would not be difficult to follow the tracks. But Michael did not know how far away Penny and Emilio were.

They rode quickly for over fifteen minutes when Pat raised his hands.

“Hear that?”

Michael listened. He could just hear a shot. He kicked his horse to a full gallop. “Let’s go.”

Alejandro easily kept up with them as they traveled another fifteen minutes. He suddenly pointed forward. “There!”

Michael saw Emilio sitting on the ground, and it appeared Penny was laying on his lap.

Michael was the first to dismount as he ran to them. “What happened,” he called out.

“Something spook Maggie. She run, and I not able to stop

her. Wagon hit a rock and broke wheel. Mrs. Banks fell out of wagon. She not wake up. I try to get wagon, but not want to leave Mrs. Banks.”

“You did fine, Emilio,” Michael reassured the hand.

Michael saw the cut on Penny’s forehead, the blood running down her face and into her hair.

“Penny,” he softly called out as he stroked her face. “Penny, sweetheart, can you hear me?”

She did not move.

Michael saw where the accident had happened several yards away, and how Emilio had moved Penny to the only bush that offered any shade.

“She not wake up,” Emilio said again, worry in his voice.

Michael reached for her. “Here, give her to me.” Michael lifted Penny in his arms, then walked to his horse. Pat followed. Michael handed her over to Pat while he mounted his horse, then Pat lifted Penny up to him, resting her in his lap.

“Pat,” he began as he tried to move her hair out of her face.

“I know. I’ll go get the doctor.”

Pat mounted and headed toward Clearwater. Emilio was talking to Alejandro in Spanish as the two rode together.

Michael kept softly talking to Penny, wanting her to open her eyes. But Penny did not move.

When they finally arrived back at the ranch, Miguel was watching for them.

Michael carried Penny inside her house and went to her room. He gently laid her on her bed, then stood up.

The doctor would need hot water when he arrived.

Michael got the stove going and had several pots and pans sitting on the burners. He took one and a towel from the kitchen and went back to her room. He gently wiped her forehead, cleaning her hair as best as he could. The cut was deep, but it had stopped bleeding.

That was something.

“Penny,” he called to her again.

Still, no response.

He went back to the kitchen and noticed for the first time all the supplies on her table. Miguel had unloaded the wagon.

Michael smiled. They were a good bunch. She could not do much better in hiring someone to help.

He decided he needed a cup of coffee.

He put the beans in the coffee grinder, then put the beans in the pot with water. It would not take long. He could already smell the beans he had ground.

He glanced inside her room again, confident she had not moved before he went back to the kitchen. Emilio was standing in the doorway.

“How is she?”

“Still sleeping.”

“She hit head hard.”

“The doctor will be here soon.” Michael heard the coffee pot finish. “Coffee?”

Emilio shook his head. “Alejandro make coffee in bunkhouse.”

“Tell Miguel thanks for unloading the wagon.”

Emilio nodded his head, then left the house.

Michael sat at the table, a cup of coffee in his hand and stared at the bedroom, willing her to wake up. He checked several times to make sure, but she was still sleeping.

Michael was never more relieved than when he heard the Doctor’s buggy pull into the yard.

“It’s about time,” he called from the doorway, his nerves frayed.

The Doctor came into the small house, extending his hand. “Name’s Grant.”

“Michael,” he responded as the Doctor took his hand in a firm handshake. “Guess you know Pat.”

Doc Grant turned around. “Yes. He caught me fixing up old-man Stiller’s leg.”

“She’s in here,” Michael directed as he opened Penny’s bedroom door. “If you need anything, we’ll be right here.” Michael closed the door, then took a deep breath.

“She’ll be fine,” Pat offered as he poured them both another cup of coffee.

“I know, but she was so cold.” Michael held his coffee cup, warming his hands, almost as if that small action could bring

warmth to the woman laying in the next room.

“I’ll take care of Doc’s horse.”

Michael barely heard the words as Pat left, the front door softly opening and then closing.

Michael was pouring his fourth cup of coffee when the bedroom door finally opened. “Is she alright?” he asked as he quickly set the pot back on the stove.

Doc Grant waved his hand. “I gave her something to help her sleep. She just needs some rest. She’s going to wake up to a mountain of a headache. But I’ll leave some pain pills that will help.”

Michael took a deep breath as he felt some of the tension leave his body.

She was fine.

“Would you like some coffee?” Michael offered. “Just made another pot.”

“Would appreciate that.” The Doctor placed his bag on the table as he pulled a chair out. “You work for Penny.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Not really. My brother-in-law bought a bull from Jason. My friend, Pat, and I came to collect it and take it back.” Michael pulled out another cup and filled it with the strong dark coffee. “Unfortunately, the bull was missing,” he added as he slid the cup across the table.

“Jason was trying to improve his small herd,” Doc said as he added sugar to his coffee. “He was always trying to better himself.”

“Mr. Cutler told me a little bit about him. Sounds like he was a hard worker.”

“He was. He never let anything or anyone get him down. Always saw the good in any situation.” Doc took a drink. “Good coffee. Many ranchers make it weak. Anyway, Penny’s had a difficult time since he died.”

Michael’s eyes automatically went to her bedroom door. “I think she has more problems than she’s even aware of.”

Doc nodded his head. “I understand both Baxter and Williams want to buy her land.”

“Yeah, they do. Baxter, though, is pushing harder.”

Doc took another drink. "Baxter is a man accustomed to getting what he wants, without asking permission."

Michael's eyes hardened. "I noticed."

"He's a good man. Just. . . determined. I feel some for Penny, Mrs. Banks. She's not had it easy these past few months. All her hands have either hired on with Baxter or left the county. She tried to hire some men, but none would work for a woman alone."

"Well, she's got three Mexicans that have been helping out."

Doc held his cup out, a silent request for more coffee. Glad to physically do something, Michael refilled both their cups.

"Now that you mention it, I think Cutler told me about seeing them on her land."

"She befriended them when they were passing through. They obviously had no place to go, so they decided to camp awhile and watch her land, sort of as payment."

Doc looked closely at Michael. "Seems she's found some workers after all."

Michael was not sure if he was referring to the Mexicans or himself. Michael smiled. "Figured, as long as I'm here, wouldn't hurt to help her with her herd too."

Doc stood up and placed his empty cup in the sink. "Sounds like a good deal on both ends. Penny should be fine in a few days. Tomorrow, she needs to take it easy. She'll wake up and want to return to normal work, but she should stay in bed for the day. Let the body heal itself. I'll stop by and see the Cutler's on the way back to town, ask Mrs. Cutler to come and stay with Mrs. Banks for the day."

"Pat and I are sleeping in the bunkhouse. I'll make sure to check on her until Mrs. Cutler gets here."

Doc studied the young man standing before him. Heknew it was improper for a man to be alone with a single woman. But there was no helping it.

"She should have only a light broth for the next day," Doc said as he headed toward the door. "I should be back in a few days to check on her. But I'm sure she'll be fine"

Pat had the buggy ready as Doc Grant stepped from the porch.

“Thank you for coming,” Michael followed Doc.

“If I know Steven, he’ll bring his wife over first thing in the morning”

“That will be fine.”

As Doc rode off, both men returned to the house.

“Guess its beans and biscuits,” Pat suggested as both men began to fix supper. “I think there were a few biscuits left from this morning.”

“You ate them,” Michael corrected.

“Oh, yeah. I Forgot.”

Michael chuckled as the two men worked together as quietly as possible. When they finished supper, Michael slowly opened Penny’s bedroom door, cautiously peeking inside. He saw Penny sleeping peacefully.

He watched her even breathing for a minute before quietly closing the door and returning to the kitchen.

“Everything ok?” Pat asked.

“Yeah. Doc says she needs rest for the next few days.”

“Any coffee left?”

“I’ll make another pot.”

Both men were quiet as Michael quickly started a new pot of coffee.

“She’s good,” Pat spoke when Michael put the pot on the stove.

Michael turned to Pat, his face showing his confusion. “What?”

Pat pointed to the different drawings hanging on the walls. “Her drawings. She’s good.”

Michael looked at the three sketches that had been framed and hung. He walked up to the first one, a sketch of two young girls in their bedroom together. He noticed the picture was not signed.

“Think she did these?” Michael asked.

“Yep.”

Michael turned to Pat.

Pat saw the question in his friend’s expression. “I’ve seen her sitting on the porch drawing in a sketchbook. I saw these the first day we came inside, but I had no idea *she* did them.” Pat turned

to look at another one. "She draws a lot of detail."

Michael was thinking the same thing. Looking at the two girls, he could make out the small pattern of their dresses, the different shade of their eyes and hair. The picture was not cluttered with images of the furniture around the room. Only the two girls sitting on their beds. All the focus was on the girls.

The darker haired girl was holding a book and reading it to the other girl. Looking closely, he could see the individual pages of the book, the mouth of the darker haired girl formed to show she was reading. He could just see her teeth as she formed a word.

The other girl was laying on her stomach, her legs bent at the knees, her feet crossed, almost touching her backside. Her hands were cupping her chin as she listened. Again, the detail was there in her attentive stare, her fingers with her short nails.

Michael frowned. There was something familiar about the dark haired young girl.

In another picture, the lighter haired girl was smiling as she was trying to hold a kitten in her lap. Again, the girl was drawn in detail: her shoes peeking out from under her dress, her dress crunch up around her legs as she sat, her hands holding the squirming kitten, and her smile at the obvious fun she was having.

Even the kitten was drawn in detail. It was a light colored kitten, his eyes dark, one ear forward and one back, his long whiskers brushing against her arms. You could almost imagine the kitten wondering if he could possibly escape.

The last picture was of the darker haired girl again. Standing by a well, she was looking into the distance. Penny caught the longing in the girl's face as the wind blew her skirt around her calves. With her right hand resting on the wall of the well, her left hand held the bucket.

Michael's eyes widened. "Anna!" he said, recognizing the woman from the other day.

Michael was impressed.

Pat poured himself a cup of coffee, then sat in a chair. Michael did the same. Both men were quiet as they enjoyed the hot brew.

“Well, I’m heading to the bunkhouse,” Pat announced as he headed toward the door.

“I’ll be there later. I want to make sure Penny sleeps ok.”

Pat nodded his head. “See ya.”

Alone in the room, Michael peeked into Penny’s room, satisfied that she was sleeping and breathing evenly. He sat down in the kitchen, looking around the small house. He finally saw the sketch books Pat referred to in a small bookcase.

There were several sketchbooks, he noted. Taking the first one, he placed it on the kitchen table and slowly looked at each picture Penny drew.

There were a variety of pictures. Again, all in detail. He saw one of Mrs. Cutler in her kitchen cooking with Dovie helping. Another was of a half-circle of women quilting.

Then he noticed there were several pictures of him, some alone, some with Pat. He was riding his horse, he was leaning against the corral talking with Pat and Mr. Cutler, he was leaning against a post in town. They were all done with the same amount of detail as the pictures on the wall.

The next picture was of a woman and man standing side by side against a tree. He recognized the woman as Margaret, Penny’s friend that was getting married in three weeks. The man was Don. He had met him only once in town, but the likeness and detail was superb. He realized this picture had been done recently, so he wondered if Penny drew it for a gift.

He smiled. They would be very happy at her work.

He briefly wondered how she was going to give it to them, as a loose picture, or was she going to frame it?

The next sketchbook showed several pictures of a man working around the yard. This was obviously Jason, her husband. He saw the smile of the man when he was looking at her, his concentration when shoeing a horse, his contentment when sitting on the porch after a long day of work.

Penny had captured every expression.

Another book showed more drawings of the girls on the wall at various ages.

Then he noticed some pictures that were different. They were of a woman sitting in a chair. But unlike the other pictures,

these pictures were vague, and lacking detail. One picture showed the woman's long hair hanging over her shoulder, another with her hair in a loose bun at the nape of her neck.

The eyes were there, but the detail and emotion was missing. Compared with the others, these pictures seemed incomplete.

Another picture was of the same woman sitting with a man, the two of them holding hands. The man, like the woman, was vague. Even the furniture was non-descript.

Michael finally closed the books, returning them to the shelf.

There was something not right about the drawings. He could not put his finger on it, but something was . . .off.

He looked one last time on Penny, making sure she was sleeping soundly.

He left the house and headed to the bunkhouse to join Pat.

The feeling of something wrong followed him. But he knew he would eventually figure it out.

Chapter 21

Penny woke in her own bedroom. She heard something, or someone.

Someone was softly singing in her kitchen.

“Hello,” she called out as she sat up. The sudden move made her close her eyes and hold her head at the sudden intense pain. She felt the bandage on her forehead. Before she could put it all together, she saw her bedroom door slowly open.

Mrs. Cutler peeked her head around the door.

“I thought I heard you call out,” she said as she stepped into the room, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Mrs. Cutler,” Penny began, her surprise evident in her voice.

“Ester, remember?”

“Yes. Ester, what are you . . . I mean,” she looked down and saw she was in her underclothes. “What happened.”

“Doc Grant says you’ll be fine. You just need to rest for the day.”

“Doc Grant?” Penny’s hand reached up and touched the bandage again.

“Do you remember what happened?”

Penny remembered laughing at something Emilio had said, and then Maggie suddenly bolting. Emilio had tried to stop her,

but Maggie would not respond. She remembered feeling the jolt as the wagon wheel hit something, then heard the wood crack and splinter as she was thrown from the wagon.

“Emilio, is he ok?”

“The man is fine. In fact, he should appear in the next half hour.”

Penny was confused. “Oh?”

Mrs. Cutler shook her head as she straightened the blankets. “I assured him that you would be fine, but the man comes to the door every hour, all day long. At least he says why he comes.”

Mrs. Cutler stood up, her hands held together in front of her as she looked directly at Penny. “Mr. Bradley, though, comes by as often, but only politely asks for a glass of water. He thinks I don’t notice him looking at your bedroom door when I turn my back.”

Mrs. Cutler smiled as she shook her head again. “Men! Would you like to get up, maybe sit in the kitchen with me?”

“Yes.” Penny again looked at her underclothes. “My clothes. How did I . . .” her voice faded out, embarrassed to ask.

Mrs. Cutler knew what she was asking. “Steven brought me over early this morning. Mr. Bradley had left you in your bed, and Doc Grant had to put a few stitches in your head. When I arrived, you still had your shoes on, and your torn dirty dress. I removed them so you could sleep better, and as far as anyone needs to know, I’ve taken care of you the whole time.”

Penny smiled. “I never thought *I* would ever need to worry about modesty and propriety.”

“Well, we need to guard ourselves whenever possible, and keep others from gossiping.”

“Thank you.”

Mrs. Cutler helped her up and into clean clothes. As they slowly made their way into the kitchen, Mrs. Cutler squeezed Penny’s arm. Penny turned, saw the older woman smiling.

“He’s right on time.”

As she sat down, she saw Emilio walk up to her doorway, his hat held by both hands in front of him. He saw her before he could ask the repeated question, and Penny saw his face break out into a smile.

"You awake." He nodded his head, as if to accentuate his statement. "Good. You look good."

"Thanks. And thank you for taking care of me until help arrived."

Emilio took a deep breath, then quickly let it out. "I let others know."

She watched as he backed out of the doorway, turned, and jammed his hat back on his head. Then he ran across the yard.

"I won't be surprised if Mr. Bradley doesn't make a visit soon," Mrs. Cutler predicted. "How about some beef broth? Doc said you need to eat light your first day up."

"A cup of broth sounds fine. I really can do it myself," Penny tried to argue.

Mrs. Cutler waved her hand through the air, like swatting at a fly. "Nonsense. This is what neighbors are for."

Penny was halfway through her cup when Michael showed up. He walked up to the door, removed his hat, then knocked on the door.

"Good to see you up and around," he finally said as he stepped inside. He turned to the older woman and nodded his head. "Mrs. Cutler," he addressed her.

"I made a fresh pot of coffee if you would like to share a cup with Penny."

Michael tried to hold back his smile as he sat at the table. "Coffee sounds good."

"Mrs. Cutler won't let me lift a finger to help in my own house," Penny complained with a smile as she watched the woman move in her kitchen.

"Doc said you need to take it easy the first day."

"Yes, I keep hearing his orders."

Michael smiled again as he wrapped his hands around the hot cup.

"How's Maggie," Penny eagerly asked after he took his first sip."

"She's fine. She was still spooked when she arrived, but I think the way the wagon was dragging behind her kept her jittery. She was fine by evening."

Penny nodded and smiled. "That's good."

They talked small talk until Michael finished his cup.

“I really need to get back to work,” he offered as he stood up and turned to Mrs. Cutler. “Thank you for the coffee.”

“Mrs. Cutler is making dinner tonight. You and Pat are welcome to join us, if you want.”

Michael smiled again. “Thank you. I’ll let Pat know.”

Penny watched as the man casually walked off the porch, across the yard, and back into the barn.

She smiled. She was happy. She was positive that Michael Bradley cared a little for her.

Even after having stitches in her head and her wagon broken, *This day can’t get any better*, she thought to herself.

Mrs. Cutler suddenly placed a large bowl and rolling pin on the table.

“How would you like to help me make a few apple pies?”

Chapter 22

Michael finished staining the frame he spent all morning making. It looked rather nice, he thought as he inspected it all around.

He was hoping Penny would like it. Of course, he would have to confess how he knew she needed a frame in the first place, but he would cross that bridge when it came.

“How’s it going?” Pat asked from the barn door.

“Finished.”

Pat looked it over. “Nice work.”

Michael looked to see if his friend was being sarcastic.

“Really!” Pat said, seeing the doubtful look.

“Just making sure you were not taking a crack shot at me. Again.”

Pat smiled as he rocked on his feet, his hands in his back pockets. “I know when to play, and when to not strike when a man’s down. I can tell from your expression that Mrs. Banks is finally awake.”

“She is. She’s invited us both for dinner.”

Pat rubbed his stomach. “As good as Mrs. Banks is getting, Mrs. Cutler is still one of the best cooks I’ve ever met. I’ll never pass up one of her meals. What are you looking for?”

Michael was rummaging through various items Jason had

obviously stored.

“I want to fix the wagon. I’m looking to see what there is that I can use.”

Pat looked at the damaged wagon. “Can you fix the wheel?”

Michael shook his head. “I don’t know how, but I’ll take it to the blacksmith later this week.”

“Good idea. The axle looks pretty straight forward in fixing.”

“That’s what I thought.” Michael looked through several more items, selecting wood that would match.

“I was thinking we would be heading back to Round Rock this week.”

Michael paused, looked at Pat and then back to the wagon. “I wanted to talk to you about that.”

Pat leaned against a stall and crossed his arms over his chest. “Oh?”

“I’ve already talked with Emilio and Manuel, and I think I’ll send you and Manuel back to Round Rock with the bull.”

“You’re staying?”

“Baxter hasn’t returned the remaining cattle yet, and I want to make sure he doesn’t cheat her.”

Pat gave a lopsided grin. “Yea, sure. I’ll bet you’re also planning on taking her to that barn-raising next weekend.”

“The thought has crossed my mind.”

Pat gave a heavy sigh. “Very well, we’ll leave in the morning.”

“Good. I’ll make sure you both have enough supplies for the trip.”

“I gather my Spanish will definitely improve with this trip.”

Michael looked through another pile of wood in the back of the barn. “Once you get back, Miguel is to ride back here. I made sure he has enough money for the return trip.”

Michael suddenly became still as his eyes widened. “Look at this!” he cried out as he moved more boards.

Pat gave a whistle as he beheld the sight.

“Thank you, Jason,” Michael whispered in the air.

Standing side by side against the barn wall were two complete wheels for the buggy.

“Man planned ahead,” Pat observed as he rolled out one

wheel, Michael rolling out the other. “They look in good shape, too.”

“This will save a lot of time.”

Pat looked around, then decided to head back to the bunkhouse. “Since I’m leaving in the morning, I’ll just take what’s left of the day and rest up. See you at dinner.”

Pat shook his head as he watched his friend so committed to his task.

“Yep! I’d better start brushing up on my Spanish,” he said to no one in particular.

Chapter 23

Two days after Pat and Miguel left, Baxter sent word that the final part of her herd had been cut out. Michael and Alejandro rode out and met the men driving the cattle over Banks' land. Mr. Baxter was one of the riders.

There were almost fifty head.

"I see you found more than I expected," Michael observed as he watched the herd pass him by.

"I made sure my men made a thorough check of the herd."

Michael continued watching for another minute, then turned toward the older man. He thought he finally saw what Penny saw in Baxter when he was sitting in her kitchen.

This man was her neighbor, and they needed to get along.

"Thank you for your diligence. I'll be sure to tell Mrs. Banks."

Baxter took out a piece of paper from his shirt. "Here's a bill of sale transferring ownership of the twenty-seven calves here."

Michael took the paper, quickly read it, then put it in his own shirt. "I'm glad we were able to resolve our problems."

Baxter grunted as he watched the last cow pass by. He saw his men turning and heading back to his ranch.

"I realize this situation could have ended, differently," Baxter confessed.

“Yes, it could have,” Michael agreed. “I know you want this land, but I’m pretty sure she’s not going to sell it. But I will tell you this,”

Baxter looked directly at Michael.

“The pond in the southern pasture is a natural underwater spring, and there’s more than enough water for her and you. As long as there’s water, Mrs. Banks will never dam up the pond.”

Baxter narrowed his eyes, wondering if he could believe the young man before him.

Michael looked around. “I just wanted to reassure you so Mrs. Banks won’t have to worry about suddenly losing her men again.”

Baxter took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. “You get right to the point,” he said.

“I find it cuts down on a lot of miscommunications.”

Baxter replaced his hat. “I would like to be good neighbors,” he offered. “Show how I should have acted long ago.”

Michael smiled as he held out his hand. “I’m sure she’d like that.”

Chapter 24

“You were right,” Penny said out loud she sat beside Jason’s grave again, her sketchbook in her lap. “Those bulls are already improving the herd, just like you wanted. Michael says we need to thin the herd down, though. Obviously the cows are going to start calving again in several months, He suggests we sell the calves that Baxter already branded, that way we get them out of our herd.”

She took her book and opened to a new page. A few strokes later, she had the outline of Michael working on her wagon.

“Baxter has sure changed his tune,” she continued. “I would like to think he had a change of heart, but, we’ll see.” She turned to look at the headstone. “You always did see the good in people.”

She spent the next hour discussing in detail what she had learned from Mrs. Cutler and about the barn raising that weekend.

“I’m actually excited about going. Michael said he and Alejandro would take me. He fixed my wagon. You would like the quality of his work.”

She looked again at the headstone. “I know you would want me to be happy, and for several months after you died, I thought I would never smile or laugh again. But, for the first time since you passed away, I can see a future. Mrs. Cutler says it’s not

wrong to want to be happy.”

She was quiet as she finished the picture, then closed her book.

“I’m just not sure if what I need to be happy is the same thing Michael needs. Mrs. Cutler says I’ll figure it out.” She gave a final look at the grave, then rose. “I sure hope she’s right.”

Michael watched from the barn as Penny spent almost another two hours at Jason’s grave. He was seriously wondering what was wrong with him. He needed to get back to Round Rock.

But his gaze kept returning to the woman at the gravesite.

It was so evident that she still loved her husband. Hardly a week would go by that she did not make the small trek, then spend hours either talking or drawing or just staring off into the distance.

How long would she be in mourning?

Could he wait that long?

Would he wait that long?

Chapter 25

Penny could not believe how much went on at a barn-raising. The men were everywhere, the children were playing, and the women were cooking.

Penny loved it!

The first day was spent with the men measuring, making frames, then fastening everything together. Whenever she had the chance, she would look out the window and look for Michael. She always found him talking or laughing with the other men. Clearly, he felt at ease around these people. Even Alejandro was enjoying himself as he worked alongside everyone else.

The women kept a pot of coffee brewing the whole day. The women took turns taking the pot around the men, offering a cup to whoever wanted one.

Penny learned the names of several more townspeople as she took her turn to serve coffee. Many of the men had nodded their head to her, offering their condolences for Jason's death.

She thought it was a nice gesture.

When lunch was ready, she was surprised when Mr. Chase from the mercantile store, called the men together.

“Gentlemen, as you can smell, it’s time for lunch. But before we dig in, we have before us twelve stumps of wood. You know the game. You each have ten penny nails and a hammer. First one who hammers all ten in, wins! If you bend a nail, you will be given another in its place. So, who’ll step forward?”

Penny watched as several men stepped forward to a stump, took the hammer in one hand and gathered the nails in their other hand.

She saw Michael encouraging Alejandro to participate. Alejandro was nodding his head and smiling as he took the last position.

Mr. Chase called for quiet as each man made ready the first nail. He raised a small gun, pointed in the air, and then fired.

Suddenly the men began to move. They were frantically hammering and the rest of the crowd was shouting. She watched as Alejandro swiftly tapped the first nail in place, then with the hammer, hit it so hard it sank right in. Two hits.

She looked up and down, seeing the men with two, then three, then four nails in. One man had three very bent nails. But he was still going.

The game ended as suddenly as it ended. She heard Michael call out, “Finished!”

She turned and saw him raising his right arm as he stood in front of Alejandro.

The other men stopped as Mr. Chase walked over and carefully counted the nail heads.

“Ten perfect nails.” He looked up to Alejandro. “I do believe we have our winner.”

Alejandro was nodding his head as he continued to smile as Michael kept slapping him on his back.

“And for the prize of winning this little game,” Mr. Chase held out a fork. “You get first dibs at the food table.”

Several other men grumbled.

“I’ll never get a piece of that pie now,” one man complained.

“I sure hope some of that cornbread is left,” another called out just loud enough for others to hear. Penny smiled. He was probably warning others to leave some cornbread and not take it all.

“Mr. Chase plays these games before every meal at barn raisings,” Mrs. Cutler said beside her. The men can be very competitive. Especially when it comes to food.”

“I’m glad Alejandro won. He’s a hard worker.”

“I saw Mr. Bradley encouraging him on. Come on,” she said as she turned back to the house. “Let’s bring out the rest of the food.”

The men had sat all around the yard in different clusters. The noise in the air had changed from yelling, grunting, sawing and hammering to softer talking, forks scraping on plates, and laughter.

By the end of the first day, the walls were up. Tomorrow the men would finish with putting on the roof.

The second day was as active as the first. Penny knew what to expect this day.

She watched as Mrs. Chase made a pot of beans.

“I never could get my beans to come out right,” Penny awkwardly confessed to the older woman.

“How are you fixing them?” Mrs. Chase asked.

Penny told her.

Mrs. Chase looked alarmed. “Well, no wonder they never come out right. Here, let me show you how to do it properly.”

Penny watched, then followed the instructions she was given.

“Now you just let them stew for a few hours, and they’ll be just fine.”

Penny smiled. “Thank you, Mrs. Chase. I was not sure who to ask to help me.”

Mrs. Chase patted her on her shoulder. “Child, you ask anytime you need. I’m always glad to help.”

Penny kept an eye on the beans, stirring them every now and then. She even took a spoon and tasted a sample.

“Good, aren’t they?” Mrs. Cutler whispered beside her.

Penny quickly lowered the lid as she wiped her mouth. She saw the laughter in Mrs. Cutler’s eyes.

“Yes, they are. Mrs. Chase was kind enough to show me how to make these.”

“I thought I saw her talking with you.” Mrs. Cutler turned to look at the woman in question. “Mrs. Chase is not known for freely sharing her recipes.”

Penny looked over her shoulder. “Really?”

“You must have made a good impression.”

When the day was finally over, Michael drove the buggy with Penny sitting beside him and Alejandro sitting in the back.

“I had a wonderful time,” Penny spoke out loud, a smile on her face. She was secretly recalling how Mrs. Chase made that delicious pot of beans and could hardly wait to try it herself.

Michael looked at her and smiled too. “So did I.”

Penny turned around. “Alejandro, I forgot to congratulate you on winning the penny nail contest.”

Alejandro smiled and nodded his head. “Thank you.”

“You are fast. Several of the men were surprised that Mr. Williams didn’t win. I gather he wins most of the times.”

“There’s a new penny nail champion in our midst,” Michael cried out.

Penny turned back toward Michael. “Why didn’t you enter the contest?”

“Didn’t need to.”

“Oh?”

“I knew Alejandro would win. His family is in the carpentry business.”

Penny's eyes widened and she turned back to Alejandro. "Really? Your family are carpenters?"

Alejandro nodded his head. "Emilio better than me."

"Emilio? Our Emilio?"

Alejandro nodded his head again. "We brothers."

Penny looked surprised. "Brothers? I never knew. I just thought you three were friends."

"Emilio my brother, Miguel my nephew."

"You're all three related! How nice to have family around."

Half an hour later, her small house came into view.

Home. It had such a different sound to it lately.

"Looks like you have company," Michael said, bringing her mind back.

"Company? Who could be visiting me?"

As they rode closer, Penny saw the wagon. At first, she refused to believe what she was seeing.

It couldn't be!

No, it couldn't be!

How did they find her?

"Penny, are you alright?" Michael asked. She was unaware how much her face drained of color. "Do you know who it is?" he asked.

As they rode up to her yard, they passed the wagon. It was almost exactly as she remembered it those years ago.

Michael stopped the buggy the same time a woman stepped out of her house and onto her porch. Michael looked at the woman, then to Penny.

"Do you know her?"

Penny swallowed. "Ma," she barely whispered, her eyes automatically seeing the discipline strap still faithfully hanging from her belt after all these years.

She could almost swear it was the same strap.

“Well, it’s about time you showed up,” the woman called out. “Your pa and I were wondering where you were at.”

Michael helped Penny out of the wagon.

Penny kept looking from the woman to the wagon.

They were here.

She took a moment to collect her wits, then took a deep breath. Better find out what they wanted and why they were here.

“Alejandro and I will take care of Maggie and the buggy,” Michael said beside her.

She turned and stared at Michael.

“Are you going to be alright?” Michael asked, worry in his voice.

“Yes,” she whispered. “It seems ma and pa have come for a visit.” She reached up and placed her hand on his arm for a moment. “I’ll talk with you tomorrow.”

Michael stepped back and allowed Penny to walk forward.

“Hello ma,” Penny greeted as she climbed the step to her front porch.

“Penny. You’re looking better than I thought you would.”

Penny just walked inside and saw many items had already been brought in from the wagon. She could smell the beefsteaks and potatoes ma had obviously cooked in her absence.

“Anymore coffee, Clara?” Ben called out from the table.

“Coming up,” Clara said as she grabbed the pot off the stove.

Penny turned to her pa. “Hello pa.”

“Penny girl” he replied. “Good to see you again.”

Penny looked around. A young girl was sitting in the corner. She could only be about thirteen or fourteen.

“Hello,” Penny said

“This is Rose,” Clara introduced as she pulled the young girl into the kitchen. “We’ve been taking care of her since her parent’s untimely death.”

Penny saw the wince of pain cross Rose’s face.

“Hello Rose. I’m Penny.”

Rose was shy.

“We’ve already ate,” ma said.

“That’s fine. I already ate too.” Penny saw the makeshift bed in the corner. Clara and Ben were obviously staying the night.

“What brings you to Clearwater?”

“Your pa and I wanted to see how Jason was treating you,” Clara offered.

Penny looked at her pa, saw that the subject did not interest him.

“Jason died a few months back,” Penny volunteered. She figured they would find out anyway.

“We know,” Clara confirmed. “Folks in town told us.”

“A nice town,” Ben said as he drank another cup of coffee.

“Are you heading someplace?” Penny asked hopefully.

“Not sure,” Ben replied as he sat back and let out a belch.

“Your pa and I are looking for a new home,” Clara said.

“A new home? What happened to the other home?”

“The rancher next to ours wanted to buy the land and expand his range. Your pa never could get anything to grow on that land, so we sold it.”

And here you are.

“Well, you’re welcome to stay as long you need,” Penny offered. “The house will be a little crowded, but I’m sure we can manage.”

“I’ll unload the rest of the wagon tomorrow,” Ben said. “Maybe I can get one of those Mexicans to help.”

“Their names are Emilio and Alejandro,” Penny said just short of correcting her pa.

“And who is the other fellow,” Clara asked.

Penny looked to the closed front door. “His name is Michael Bradley. He came to buy a bull Jason was selling.”

She wondered if she should have said that. She decided she really did not want to face all this right now. She needed some time to herself. “I’m really very tired. I’ve had a busy few days. I

see you've already made your place in the corner." Penny walked to her bedroom, then paused and turned.

"Rose, my bed is big enough if you want to—"

"Rose will stay with us," Clara interrupted.

Penny looked from ma to Rose.

Remembering.

"Very well. I'll see you in the morning."

Chapter 26

Penny opened her eyes. It was still dark outside. All was quiet. She raised herself on her elbows and strained to hear what had awoken her. Then she heard the crying.

Rose.

Rose was crying.

Then she heard ma.

“Stop crying, Rose. You’ll wake up Ben.”

Rose would become silent, but several times during the night, Penny would hear Rose crying again. Each time, ma snapped at the young girl to be quiet.

When the morning finally arrived, Penny dragged herself out of bed. She knew she needed to be strong. This was Jason’s place.

Her place.

Putting on her work dress, she crept into the kitchen. Ben, Clara and Rose were still sleeping in the corner.

Penny tried to be silent as she began to make a pot of coffee. She stirred the fire in the stove, added more wood, then placed the pot on the hot side of the stove.

She heard movement and turned to see ma rising. Penny turned her attention back to the stove to give her ma some privacy.

A few moments later, Clara walked into the kitchen. “Good to see you don’t waste the day away,” she commented.

As Clara walked past her, Penny glanced down.

The discipline strap.

It was old and worn.

Penny gave an involuntary shudder at the memories.

Penny watched as Clara took the pot she had brewing and poured out the semi-brewed coffee.

Penny was shocked. “I was just making that!” she said as Clara began to refill the pot and put more ground beans inside.

“Your pa likes his coffee a certain way,” was all she said.

Penny just knew the day was going to get worse.

Which it did.

Penny tried to make breakfast, but Clara stepped into the kitchen.

“You’re not doing that right,” she snapped as she watched Penny mixing her biscuit dough. “Here, let me do it.”

Penny reached for her ingredients, but Clara brushed her away.

“It’s just easier if I do it myself.”

Penny stood back as Ben finally made his way to the kitchen. Rose was folding the blankets and setting them in the corner.

“Rose, come make the eggs,” Clara called out. Rose stood before the stove, getting the skillet out. “Remember how I taught you,” Clara said.

“So, Penny,” Ben said as he sat at the kitchen table. “I saw the bill of sale for that bull. I have to admit, that was a pretty good price you got for it. What did you do with money?”

Penny quickly looked at Jason’s desk. “You went through Jason’s desk?”

Clara corrected Rose when she flipped the eggs. “You need to pay attention, girl. Keep the eggs whole, don’t break them.” She turned to Penny. “Of course he did. How else can your pa help if he doesn’t know what’s going on?”

Penny looked from Clara to Ben. Ben was still waiting for an answer.

“I put the money in the bank.”

“The bank, huh?” Clara said as she pulled the biscuits out of the oven. “Well, there are worse places. Ben, when you get a chance, you need to go to the bank and have your name put on the account.”

“Sure thing,” Ben agreed.

Penny just watched. It was like she was a little girl again, trying to prove herself to these two people. Instead of feeling like she was standing beside her ma, adult to adult, she was suddenly a child again, child and parent.

It happened so fast.

Penny decided she was not going to argue with them. She was sure they could not touch Jason’s money. But she would take a trip to town and verify that fact. Soon.

“I see that you have two more bulls,” Ben continued. “The same as the one you sold.”

Penny tried not to stab at her plate of eggs. “Yes, I’m going to use them to improve the herd.”

“And just how big would that be?” Clara asked as she filled hers and Ben’s coffee cup.

Penny got up and poured her own coffee. The brew was strong.

“Small, according to some ranchers,” she offered.

“Well, you’ll need someone to watch over the herd for you.”

“I already have someone doing that.”

Clara looked up. “Who, the Mexicans?” she laughed. “They’ll steal you blind.”

Penny shook her head. “Emilio and Alejandro are good workers.”

“You probably need to get rid of them. They’re just costing you money. Ben can take care of things from now on.”

“No,” Penny declared. “I hired them, and they’re staying.”

Clara’s eyes narrowed as she looked at Penny. “Are you correcting me?”

Penny refused to show her fear. “No. I’m just saying that I hired them, I’ve been more than pleased with their work, and I want them to stay. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to check on my animals.”

For three days, Penny held her patience. Clara had told Ben that they were low on several items and Ben took her wagon and went into town. She had refused to inform them about the shortcut through Williams land. Ben had to travel all the way around.

She ended up trying to keep as far away from ma as she could. She heated her own laundry water and washed her own clothes. Clara did theirs when Penny was through.

She knew they had already gone through Jason's desk, which bothered her more than she could have imagined. While Clara was finishing with the laundry, Penny took what papers she thought were important and moved them to her room.

Penny had tried several times to cook the meals herself, but Clara always told her she was doing it wrong.

"Ben doesn't like it that way," she constantly said.

She found Michael in the barn, working on his saddle.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"About as expected," she honestly replied.

"Who's the young girl?"

"Rose? Her parents died and they're taking care of her."

"She's very shy?"

"Yea. Sometimes it's best that way," Penny whispered.

She walked toward Maggie, making a wide sweep around Michael's horse.

"You know, anytime you want, I can teach you how to ride," Michael offered.

Penny continued around the stall, keeping out of reach of the hooves. "Thanks, but the horses and I have an understanding."

"Oh?"

"I don't try to ride them and they don't try to kick or bite me." She reached Maggie's stall where she petted the old mare on her nose. "It's a mutual understanding, and so far we've both greatly benefited." She turned her gaze to Michael. "Neither of us gets mad at the other."

Michael smiled. "Well, the offer stands if you change your mind."

Penny scratched Maggie between the ears. "Thanks."

Michael looked from Penny to the house. He set aside the saddle and walked over to Penny, taking her hands.

"You know, if you need anything, anything at all, you only need to ask."

She smiled. "I appreciate that. But I really hope they'll be leaving soon."

"They don't sound like they're thinking of leaving."

"One can only hope. Sorry about you not joining me for the meals. It get's rather, tense, sometimes."

"I can imagine. But don't worry. Emilio and Alejandro are both pretty good cooks. Although I do miss your biscuits. Tortillas are just not the same thing."

Penny smiled again. "I'll see about bringing you some from the kitchen. How's that?"

She watched as Michael checked her face, looking for something. He finally nodded his head. "Sounds great."

The next day, Penny tried to help Rose with the ironing.

"She can do it herself," Clara snapped. Penny almost stood at attention.

During dinner, Ben mentioned he would like to see the herd.

"We need to make sure the tally count is right," he said.

Penny nodded her head. "The count is right. I've already had that done."

She was not going to tell them that Michael and Baxter had done the actual counting.

Ben looked surprised. "You did? So how many cattle do you have?"

"Jason kept a hundred head. He said the land would only hold a small herd."

Actually, Michael had said that.

"Still," Clara joined in. "Ben should check the herd. Make sure they are all accounted for."

Penny enjoyed another biscuit. "Like I said, the herd is already being looked after, and they have been counted." Penny

reached over and collected a few more biscuits to give to Michael later.

While Rose was washing the dishes, Clara was looking around the house.

“This house needs another room.”

Penny automatically looked around. The house seemed fine to her. At least it did.

“The house is just fine for me,” Penny said.

“Well, it could use some expanding. Ben, how difficult would it be to add a room or two to the back?”

Ben looked at the back wall. “We could build the addition behind the house, then cut doors and leave the back wall intact.”

Clara smiled at the idea. “That would keep us from running into each other all the time.”

Penny rose and went to help Rose. “Let me dry,” she offered.

“Rose can do that herself,” Clara snapped again.

“I know she can. But since this is my house and my dishes, I feel like I should help.”

Without asking, Penny took a towel and began to dry the dishes.

A small victory.

Two days later, Penny decided she needed to make her trip to town. She rose before anyone else and crept out of the house. Maggie was glad to see her. She whinnied when Penny approached.

“Are you ready for a trip to town?”

She was comfortable harnessing the mare to her wagon. She had done it for several months, grateful that Jason had insisted she learn how to herself.

Penny quietly left the ranch and headed to town. She needed to know for sure that her place was safe.

Michael watched the wagon go. He knew Penny was under a lot of stress right now. He had passed the open window several times and heard how Clara talked to her.

No wonder Penny never learned how to do anything. The woman would not let Penny do a thing. And if Penny did, Clara found a reason to complain about how it was being done and pushed Penny aside.

Clara gave Michael the impression that it was not worth her time to teach Penny anything.

He wondered why Penny was heading to town so early in the morning. He had been making a pot of coffee in the bunkhouse when he heard her enter the barn. He had crept out and saw her harnessing Maggie to her wagon.

He wanted to go with her, but he knew if she needed him, she would ask.

Besides, he wondered if part of her was embarrassed by Ben and Clara.

Penny arrived in town just as the town began to stir. She had a few minutes before the bank opened, so she rode over to the mercantile.

“Hello Penny,” Mrs. Chase called out behind a counter.

“Hello, Mrs. Chase. How are you today?”

Mrs. Chase finished dusting a shelf, then turned toward Penny. “I’m just fine, and thanks for asking.”

“I wanted to thank you for helping me with the bean soup recipe. I cannot tell you how bad the beans were before.”

Mrs. Chase smiled at the compliment. “Dear, it just takes practice and experience. And I think you’re a quick learner.”

Penny smiled. “I hope so. I have a few items I need.”

Penny handed her list over and Mrs. Chase nodded her head. “We have everything you need in stock.”

“Hello Mrs. Banks,” Mr. Chase called as he entered from the back of the store.

“Mr. Chase,” she returned the greeting. “I have never been to a barn raising, and I very much enjoyed the penny nail game before the meals.”

Mr. Chase smiled with pleasure. “I find it makes a day easier if you add an element of fun into it.”

“I failed to see the seriousness of the game until I saw how quickly many food items disappeared. Being first to choose what you want is indeed a prize.”

“I’m glad you see it that way too.” He looked at his wife placing items in a basket. “I meant to talk to you when I saw you next about your father.”

Penny felt her smile leave. “Ben?”

“Yes, that’s him. I hope you don’t mind, but your father was here a few days ago and was insistent that the items he selected be charged to your account. I informed him that I couldn’t do that, not without your permission. After all, I’ve never met the man before. He is your father?” he asked in a questioning manner.

“Ben and Clara adopted me, but I will not be responsible for any bills that they incur with you or anyone else. They are only visiting.”

“Ah,” he gave a sigh of relief. “He was very upset about having to pay for his things.”

“Thank you, Mr. Chase. I will talk with him.” She turned when Mrs. Chase joined them at the counter.

“I had everything you asked for,” she said as she boxed up her items.

Penny paid for the items, then allowed Mr. Chase to place the boxes in her wagon.

Next, she headed for the bank.

Mr. Keene was the banker at Clearwater Bank. He had been very helpful when Penny discovered she did not know anything about Jason’s account. After the funeral, when she came to town, she had quietly asked Mr. Keene to explain how the accounts worked.

Mr. Keene had been very helpful. He had shown her Jason’s ledger, how every time he deposited money, it showed up in one column. When he withdrew money, it showed up on another

column. Penny had studied the ledger in detail. Mr. Keene did not seem to mind how much time she took. She remembered several times Jason had said he was going to deposit a certain amount. As she scanned the column, she saw every amount she remembered, including several others. The withdrawal column was different. She could not remember any specific amount Jason had said he was paying.

Mr. Keene had showed her how she could charge her items at the mercantile store, then at the end of the month, authorize the bank to pay the amount owed. Or, she could withdraw what money she needed to spend as she went.

After her first meeting, she had trusted Mr. Keene and the bank.

Now, she was hoping her trust had not been misplaced.

"Mrs. Banks," Mr. Keene greeted as she entered the lobby.

"Mr. Keene, how are you today?"

"I am fine. And thank you for asking. I enjoyed seeing you at the barn raising."

Penny smiled. "I enjoyed being there. I learned a lot."

"It's good when a community comes together and helps where they can."

"I agree. I hope to attend other functions when I can."

Mr. Keene nodded his head as he took on his *'bank manager'* face. "How can I help you today?"

"I'm actually just checking on my account."

Mr. Keene's face froze. "Oh dear. This has nothing to do with the incident the other day, does it?"

Penny looked up, a feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. "What incident?"

"When your father came here demanding to see your ledgers and have his name put on your account. I told him that was illegal, and that even with a written authorization, I could not do as he asked without you personally filling out a consent form."

Penny took a deep breath, then narrowed her eyes as his words sunk in. "What written authorization?"

"Why, the letter you wrote authorizing this bank to add his name to your account."

Penny blinked. "He had a letter from me?"

Mr. Keene looked confused. “Yes, but like I told him, there are proper procedures one has to follow.”

“Mr. Keene,” she asked. “Is there any way Ben or Clara Singer can gain access to my account?”

Mr. Keene shook his head. “Not without the proper documents. I tried to explain, but the man was angry by then. He finally stormed out of the bank. Upset all the clients that were doing business.”

Penny reached out and took Mr. Keene’s left arm. She needed to take a moment to catch her breath.

“Please don’t worry, Mr. Keene. I came today to make sure that neither Ben nor Clara can ever gain access to Jason’s money.” She shook her head. “I mean, my money,” she corrected.

Mr. Keene looked relieved. “I know what you meant. And no, only you have access to your account.”

Penny nodded her head, satisfied. “Thank you. That’s all I wanted to verify today.”

On the ride back home, many things were crowding her mind.

Ben and Clara obviously were planning on moving in.

They wanted to take over her place.

They wanted control of her money.

Chapter 27

The yard was quiet as Penny made her way to the barn. She found Emilio inside grooming his horse.

“Hello,” he said as he hung the brush on the wall. “You want me take care of Maggie?”

Penny allowed Emilio to help her out of the buggy. She did not want to go inside right now. “No, I’ll take care of her.” She looked around. “Where is everyone else?”

“Alejandro watching herd. Bradley in bunkhouse.”

“Ok.” She lifted the first box and Emilio ran to get it for her. “Just leave it by the barn door. I’ll take it inside later.”

He lifted the other two boxes and placed them beside the first box.

Penny unhitched Maggie from the wagon, then led the mare to her stall. Penny gave her an extra handful of grain. Then she began to brush her mare, same as Emilio was doing. The two worked in silence until Emilio was done first.

“I have dinner on stove. I go now.”

“Thank you, Emilio, for all your help.”

When she finished brushing Maggie, Penny took the hayfork and began to move fresh hay into her stall.

She was still wondering what she was going to do. She stopped and leaned her head against her hands on the hayfork

handle.

“Is it wrong to want them gone?” she asked no one. She felt the first tear slide down her cheek.

She quickly wiped it away as she sniffled. She would be strong. She would protect what Jason left. She would—

Penny suddenly lifted her head when she heard the faint scream coming from the house. Letting the hayfork drop against the back wall, Penny ran to the house.

Rose was crying.

And Clara was yelling.

Penny came to the porch when she heard the crack, the familiar sound she had grown up to hate.

Opening the door, she saw Rose huddled on the floor, Clara with her arm raised, the dreaded strap held high.

“STOP IT,” Penny screamed as she quickly stood between Clara and Rose.

Clara took a step back, surprised.

“What are you doing,” Penny asked as she reached down to Rose.

“The girl disobeyed me.”

Penny helped the crying girl up and sat her in a kitchen chair. “What could she possibly have done to deserve the strap?”

“She disobeyed me,” Clara repeated.

“Well, I’m sure there’s . . .” Penny looked around and saw many of her things from her bedroom in the kitchen. “Why are my things out here?”

Michael was finishing rubbing saddle soap into his saddle when Emilio walked into the bunkhouse. Michael looked up and saw the concern on his friend’s face.

“What’s wrong?” Michael asked.

Emilio responded in a rapid flow of Spanish. He caught the word ‘casa’, which meant house, and then Emilio stopped, puffed out his cheeks, threw his arms in the air and said ‘kaboom’.

Kaboom in the house? Explosion in the house?

Michael suddenly stood up, grabbed his rifle and ran toward

house. No one saw him crouching under the window, hearing the exchange.

Nobody saw his expression change as he silently went to the back of the house where he knew a window was open.

Clara stood tall, the strap clamped in her hand. “Your pa’s back is bothering him sleeping on the floor. He’d sleep better in your room.”

Penny looked at all her things. “So you just decided to move me out of my own room without asking?”

“Your pa deserves better than sleeping on the floor.”

“You have a wagon. Go sleep in it,” Penny reasoned.

“You are so ungrateful,” Clara almost screamed. “After all we’ve done for you!”

“Done?” Penny shouted back, her voice rising with anger. “What have you done?”

Clara’s eyes narrowed. “You owe us.”

Penny straightened up, her eyes wide in confusion. “Owe you? Is that what you think? Is that why you took me in, so I could owe you?”

Clara snorted. “Of course not. Why would you think that?”

“Because, when I look back, I feel justified in saying, You’ve been paid in full!”

“Paid? . . . Whatever—”

“Jason told me how much he paid you. You sold me!! To the highest bidder!”

Clara’s eyes narrowed. Penny instinctively took a step back as she watched the anger build in the woman before her.

“We took you in when no one else wanted you,” she sneered.

“And you’ve taken every opportunity to remind me.”

Clara took a step forward, trying to regain control. “I took care of all three of you. Gave you a roof over your head, food in your bellies, and a bed to sleep in at night. I taught you to obey your parents, like the Good Book says you should.”

“I did obey you, even when you sold me.”

“How dare you talk to me that way!”

Penny could see the anger building in Clara. She saw her hand tighten on the strap in her hand.

“I want you to leave!”

Penny spoke in such a soft and controlled voice, everyone in the house stopped. She took advantage of the confusion and reached for the shotgun behind the dresser.

“What?” Clara asked.

“You heard me. I want you to leave, immediately.”

Clara turned to her husband. “Seems she’s forgotten her manners.”

Penny raised the shotgun as Clara took the strap and casually slapped it against her free hand. “Maybe I need to remind you.”

“Leave, now!”

Both Ben and Clara began laughing, then stopped when they saw Michael standing behind Penny. They noticed the way his hat was lowered on his forehead, almost hiding his eyes. And the way he held his rifle, as if he was casually holding it while having a polite conversation.

Suddenly, they were unsure of themselves.

Penny noticed the change and wondered what caused it. Inside, she was shaking, both from anger and fear. “I won’t ask again,” she spoke aloud.

Ben looked from Michael to Penny, each holding a gun. But it was the way the man calmly held the rifle behind Penny that worried him the most.

“I think it’s time to leave,” Ben said to no one in particular.

Penny was surprised at how quickly they had agreed to leave. Holding the gun the way Michael had shown her, she stepped with them as they began to head to her bedroom.

“Leave your things.”

Clara’s head snapped around. “I need to pack our stuff.”

Penny was sure they would take more than they arrived with. “I’ll pack your stuff and leave everything at the hotel in town. You can pick up your belongings tomorrow.”

Clara looked around, clearly confused. It was apparent she did not want to wait, but the rifle Michael was holding behind Penny made her rethink her situation.

“Rose, help your pa get the wagon ready,” she told the young girl.

“Rose stays.”

Again, Clara’s head snapped around. “What?”

“Rose stays. You’re not going to do to her what you did to Anna, Alley and me.”

Clara sputtered. “You can’t do that. She’s ours.”

“She’s not yours. Maybe you need to reread that Good Book of yours. It says that children are an inheritance, not a possession.”

Penny never lowered the shotgun.

“But, not Rose. I . . . I . . .”

Penny’s eyes narrowed in understanding. “You’ve already sold her, haven’t you?”

“Well . . .”

“She’s not for sale.”

“But, he’s already paid!”

“That’s your business, not mine.” Penny looked at Rose. “Or hers.”

Clara’s eyes narrowed, her anger knowing no bounds. “Ben, get the wagon,” she almost shouted.

Penny watched as Ben quickly harnessed the two horses, then helped his wife on the wagon. With a frosty look, Ben sent the whip across the horses rump. The wagon gave a lurch, then the pair drove off.

Penny lowered the shotgun, then placed a protective arm across Rose’s shoulder. Rose, she noticed, was silent. She was sure the young girl was confused about what had just happened.

Penny heard Michael behind her. She realized he must have been in the house and heard everything.

“You know,” his voice was gentle as he stepped beside her. “They’ll probably try to take her when no one’s looking.”

“They might.” She squeezed her arm around Rose. “But they won’t have her!”

Chapter 28

For the next several days, life was peaceful at the Banks ranch. Michael continued to have his meals with Penny and Rose. And Penny was learning she actually liked having Rose around. It took two days before Rose finally smiled.

For Penny, it was milestone.

Michael had made sure the house always had two of the hands around. He also wanted to make sure Penny was always ready.

“Follow me,” he said one morning after they finished breakfast.

Penny looked around, wondering what was wrong. Rose was putting her dishes in the sink.

“Rose, would you mind milking the cow and collecting the eggs?”

Rose turned. “Ok.”

Penny followed Michael behind the house. She watched as he took out a gun he carried behind his back.

“I want you to carry this whenever you leave the house.”

Michael held out the gun to her.

“It’s a gun,” she said.

Michael smiled. “I know it’s a gun. It’s one of mine.”

Penny looked up. “One of yours? How many do you carry?”

“Enough to always defend myself. Now take the gun.”

Penny was hesitant. “I don’t need a gun. I have my shotgun.”

“That’s exactly why you need this. That shotgun will not always be in grabbing distance. This you can carry in your skirt pocket. And,” he pulled the hammer back. “It’s easier to fire.”

Penny looked, then shook her head. “I don’t know how to shoot that.”

“That’s the beauty. You don’t have to know.” When Penny continued to hesitate, he changed tactics. “Raise your hand and pretend it’s a gun like kids play.”

Penny looked at her hand and made the play gun, her pointer finger pointing, her thumb up and remaining three fingers closed into her fist.

Michael watched her, then turned to the field. “See that bush?”

Penny looked. “Yes.”

“Point and aim at it with your make-believe gun.”

Penny did as Michael asked.

“That’s all you need to do.” He held out the gun to her. “You don’t have to worry about hitting anything. You probably couldn’t hit anything if you tried. But that’s not the point.”

“It’s not?”

“When you’re pointing a gun at someone, you get their attention. They’re wondering if you’re bluffing, or if you can really hit something. If you need to, just aim at the largest part of the target and shoot. Don’t worry about anything else. The shotgun only has two cartridges. This gun has six.”

Penny looked up, finally understanding. “You think they may come back for Rose.”

“They might. Best you be prepared at all times. Now, you can fire without priming the hammer, but it will be easier for you if you pull the hammer back before you aim. Use your thumb to pull the hammer back as you’re pulling the gun out. That way, your first shot will be the easiest. And believe me, the person on the other end of this gun will see that it’s primed and ready. It will make them stop and think. After that, if you need to shoot again, you can either reach up and pull the hammer back, or get used to the trigger pulling the hammer back. Your choice.”

Penny listened carefully and practiced pulling the hammer back with her thumb as she raised the gun, aimed and fired.

“Good,” he finally said. “Remember, never leave the house without it in your skirt.”

Penny nodded her head. “Got it!”

Later that night, Penny awoke suddenly. For a moment, she lay in bed, wondering what it was that woke her. She felt Rose’s slim body beside her jerk. She looked at the young girl, wondering what she was dreaming about when Rose screamed out loud.

“Rose?” Penny whispered, not wanting to wake her if not necessary. Rose curled her body into itself, like a ball, and Penny could hear the soft crying.

“Rose?” she called again, this time nudging her shoulder. It was obvious her dream was not a pleasant one.

“Rose, dear, wake up.” She nudged again when the girl continued to cry.

Rose suddenly sat up. “Joel?” she cried out.

Penny sat up too. “Rose, are you alright?”

It took a few seconds for Rose’s eyes to focus on the present. She looked around, finally recognizing where she was.

“I’m sorry I woke you,” Rose apologized.

Penny began to rub the young girl’s back. “No problem I’ve had a few dreams that woke me up too. Who’s Joel?”

“My younger brother.” Rose rubbed her nose as she gave a snuffle. “I miss him.”

“Is he alive?”

Rose nodded her head. “He left school first. I had to stay behind and finish a test. I was on my way home when I heard about ma and pa.”

Penny was not sure if it was wise to bring up bad memories right now, but it was obvious Rose was ready to talk.

“Rose is such a pretty name.” Penny began to run her fingers through Rose’s hair. “I bet your mother loved flowers.”

Rose smiled. “She did. She always liked color in front of the house.”

“How did you hear about your parents?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Singer met me on the road. They told me about ma and pa. Mrs. Singer said they were told to take care of me. I wanted to see Joel, but they said another family was taking care of him, and that we all needed to work together until ma and pa were properly buried.”

Two more tears fell down the young girl’s cheeks.

“I never got to say goodbye to Joel,” she whispered.

Penny was thinking. “Do you know if the family that took Joel stayed in town?”

Rose shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. Mr. and Mrs. Singer took me, and I never saw Joel again.”

Penny reached over and gave Rose a hug. “You know how much I love you, and that I would love to have you stay with me. But, if you have aunts or uncles or cousin’s about, maybe they could take you *and* Joel, so you could be together.”

Rose looked up, a look of hope in her eyes.

“In fact,” Penny continued, “tomorrow, let’s write a letter to the sheriff and see if he can help.”

Rose sniffled again, wiped her nose with the sleeve of her gown and gave a smile. “Ok,” she finally said.

“Good. Now, let’s see if we can get some sleep.”

Penny held Rose in her arms until she felt the child relax.

Penny was wondering how you wrote to a sheriff in a strange town and ask about someone you had never met.

She finally fell asleep still holding the frightened young girl.

The next day, after breakfast, Penny and Rose sat at the kitchen table and drafted a letter to the Sheriff of Juniper Springs.

“We need to find out who’s taking care of Joel and if you have any relatives about,” Penny said as she wrote.

Since she did not know the name of the sheriff, she left that part blank. “We can ask the sheriff from Clearwater if he knows the sheriff there.”

In the letter, Penny introduced herself and offered condolences to Rose’s family.

“What is your last name?” Penny stopped and asked Rose.

“Tanker.”

“Ok,” she continued to write, condolences to the Tanker family.

She asked in her letter if anyone knew of the family that was taking care of Joel Tanker, and if the sheriff knew of any relatives about, aunts, uncles, or cousins.

She then wrote about taking care of young Rose, and how much she missed her younger brother. She hoped the two could be reunited again, and if there was any information, to please write her at Clearwater, Texas.

“How does that sound?” she asked when she finished.

Rose smiled. “Fine. Will we send it today?”

“First I need to talk with our sheriff and get the name of your sheriff, if possible. Then, we send the letter on the next stage out.”

It was ten o’clock when they arrived in town. Michael had decided to follow them. The girls took the wagon and he rode his horse.

Penny guided the wagon to the sheriff’s office.

“I just need to ask a question first.”

Michael looked around. “I’ll wait out here with Rose.”

Penny locked the wheel and secured the reins before dismounting. She walked up to the Sheriff’s Office door and was unsure if she should knock or walk in. Deciding this was a place of business, she opened the door.

Sheriff Johnston was leaning back in his chair, his boots resting on his desk. When he saw her walk in, he quickly took his boots down and sat up straight.

He nodded his head. "Mrs. Banks, good to see you this morning."

Penny watched as he placed his arms on his desk, a casual gesture.

"Thank you," she replied. "I have a question for you, if you don't mind?"

Sheriff Johnston smiled. "I like answering questions."

Penny smiled, thinking the sheriff was trying to put her at ease. It was working.

"I was hoping you knew the sheriff of Juniper Springs?"

Johnston cocked his head. "Gary Browning?"

"Is that his name? Do you know him?"

"We've met in passing from time to time. I'd know him if I saw him, and would probably share a cup of coffee with him. But I wouldn't say I know his life story." He looked closely at Penny. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"Right now, I only need the sheriff's name."

Penny removed the letter she and Rose had written that morning. She unfolded it and wrote Sheriff Gary Browning at the beginning of her letter. Then she looked at it, satisfied that it looked right and refolded the letter.

"If I address this to Sheriff Gary Browning at Juniper Springs, Texas, will he get it?"

Johnston watched the scene with interest. He nodded his head. "Yes ma'am. The letter will go directly to him."

Penny addressed the envelope to Sheriff Gary Browning at Juniper Springs, Texas. She stood up, her work finished.

She smiled at the sheriff. "Thank you for your time and information."

She turned to the door and heard Johnston follow her. Outside, Rose was still sitting in the wagon and Michael was still sitting on his horse.

"All finished?" Michael asked.

"All finished here," she clarified.

Michael saw Johnston walk behind Penny. Michael tipped his hat. "Sheriff," he greeted.

The sheriff put his hat on and nodded in return. "Bradley. I see you're escorting these ladies."

“Just keeping them company,” Michael corrected.

“Again,” Penny spoke from the wagon. “Thank you for your help, Sheriff Johnston.”

“Any time, ma’am.” He tipped his hat to the young girl with them. “Miss,” he greeted.

“This is Rose,” Penny introduced. “She’s staying with me for awhile.” She turned to Rose. “We’ll head to the post office now.”

Penny turned her buggy and stopped it in front of the mercantile.

“I just need to post this. Why don’t you go into the mercantile with Mr. Bradley and look for a ribbon for your hair. And when I get back, we’ll all try to decided on which penny candy to get.”

Penny was pleased with the smile Rose gave her. She looked up to Michael. “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

Michael dismounted. “I’ll take her inside so she can look around.”

Penny walked a few stores down to where the Post Office was located.

“I need to mail this letter. Has the stage left already?”

The man behind the counter had small round glasses, like he read a lot.

“It leaves in an hour. Where’s your letter going?”

“Juniper Springs.”

The man looked behind him and checked his schedule. “Juniper Springs is directly on the route. It’s the fourth stop. Should get it by tomorrow morning.”

Penny was surprised. “That soon. So I can expect a reply soon?”

The man shook his head. “No ma’am. The stage will make a complete circuit, take almost five days. Then, if your party responds, they’ll have to wait for the stage to return, which will be when it comes through again. Then you have to wait for the stage to finish the circuit back here.”

Penny frowned. “Oh. So it may be several weeks?”

“Depends if the party picks up their mail regular, and if they respond.”

“I see. Well, I need to send this.”

Penny paid for the postage and the man placed her letter in a bag.

She had done all she could.

She met Rose and Michael at the mercantile. Rose had decided on a light blue ribbon. Then Penny bought a bag of candy for all three of them.

Sheriff Johnston watched as the small wagon and rider rode across the street. He watched as Mrs. Banks went to the Post Office while Bradley and Rose went into the mercantile.

He was curious about why Mrs. Banks wanted to write a letter to Browning. He knew if she was hoping for a response, it would take some time.

He almost offered to take it to Juniper Springs himself. The past month had been slow. The altercation he had been expecting between Baxter and Banks never happened. Marshal Wade had rode through and explained how Mr. Bradley had given Baxter a chance to settle the differences without any trouble.

Baxter was wise to choose it.

Baxter was a cagey old man. He usually got his way, and expected others to get out his way.

Johnston watched as the girls came out of the mercantile and got back in the wagon. Bradley remounted his horse.

He liked Michael Bradley. He had a calm and level head. After what Marshal Wade said, he realized the altercation was avoided because of Bradley.

Towns needed more men like that.

He had heard Bradley and a friend had traveled here to buy a bull from Banks. It was obvious the bull was nowhere around. Johnston knew Baxter had it. It was in Baxter's disposition. He heard several people talking about Bradley and his friend searching her land.

He had prepared himself for a feud.

Which never happened.

When the bulls were recovered, to everyone's satisfaction, he expected Bradley and his friend to leave. But that was over two

weeks ago, and Bradley was still here. He had heard that his friend and another of Mrs. Banks' hands took the bull back.

But Bradley stayed. He wondered why. But today, looking at Bradley with Mrs. Banks, he knew.

The man was interested in her.

Mrs. Banks was a fine woman. Her land was not prime, but she had water in one section, which meant she could handle a small herd.

And she was pleasant to look at. Not small, like other women were. She had form, his father used to say about woman who were not small, but had curves where a man wanted them to be.

Indeed, Mrs. Banks had form.

Since Jason died, she had held on to the ranch, struggling against Baxter's interference. It was time she found someone. Someone who could take care of her ranch.

Someone who could take care of her.

Someone like Bradley.

The buggy and rider rode out of town, the young girl giggling as she opened a bag and was searching through it. Probably choosing a piece of candy.

When the buggy turned out of town, Johnston gaze went to the Post Office.

He sure did wish he knew what was in that letter!

Little did he know his wish was soon to come true.

Michael kept his eyes alert while they were in town. But he saw no evidence of Ben's wagon, nor of Ben or Clara.

Still, he kept a look out.

He thought he saw someone watching them, besides Sheriff Johnston. Johnston was standing in front of his office watching them. Michael knew he was curious about Penny's movements. He was too. He only knew she wrote a letter looking for any relatives for Rose.

Still, he felt someone watching from the barber shop. When he looked closer, he saw no one. Maybe a shadow, but nothing

definite. When Penny snapped the reins and her wagon headed out of town, he followed, looking around one more time.

Was that a shadow?"

Jake Taylor rode into Clearwater an hour before, tired and dirty. He paid for a hot shave at the barber shop. Feeling almost human again, he stepped outside the shop and stopped still.

Riding right by him was Penny. She had a young girl with her, and that dark haired man riding beside them. As they passed, he casually walked back into the barber shop and watched from the window.

Penny went to the Sheriff's office.

He almost panicked. Had he been found out?

No, there was no way Penny could know.

Could she?

He watched as Penny left the Sheriff's office and parked her buggy in front of the mercantile. The dark haired man and the young girl went inside while he watched Penny walk right past him to the Post Office two stores down.

She had been so close!

It was only a few minutes when she walked past him again. He kept himself close against the wall, in case she looked inside.

But Penny headed to the mercantile, and several minutes later all three came out. He noticed how the dark haired man kept looking around, scouting.

He needed to make another delivery, but he figured he had a few days to hide in his secret camp and see what Penny was up to.

Jake Taylor smiled.

In a few weeks, he would meet her again.

Chapter 29

Penny filled the next days with as much fun as possible for Rose. Rose was smiling more and laughing. Penny let her help in cooking, and Emilio was showing her how to braid a lariat.

Rose already knew how to ride a horse, so Michael let her borrow Alejandro's horse, which was the smallest, and Emilio and Alejandro were instructing her how to hold the lariat, how to twirl it above your head, and how to cast it.

Penny watched from her kitchen window as Rose rode by a post and kept trying to get the lariat around it.

Rose never seemed to tire of the game. She was so excited when she first lassoed the post. Penny watched her excitedly wave her hands in the air in triumph.

It was five days since she had sent the letter to Juniper Springs. She wondered if the sheriff had received her letter yet. Was he even there?

She would have to wait.

This coming weekend was Margaret and Don's wedding. She realized she still did not have a frame for the picture she drew. She had forgotten to ask Mr. Chase. Well, she could always roll it up, let them decide what to do with it.

Penny was finishing the dinner dishes. As usual, Michael had joined them for dinner, both of them listening to Rose's excited replay of the day.

"She's tired," Michael whispered as Penny placed the last cup on the shelf. She turned around and saw Rose's feet laying on the end of her bed. Rose was obviously asleep.

Penny softly shut the bedroom door. "She had a busy day. Now that she knows how to lasso things, she's been riding all over the yard, lassoing each post around the corral, the bushes growing nearby, even the water trough."

"Yea, she's really picked up how to use that rope."

Penny smiled as she gathered two cup and grabbed the pot of coffee. "But the best thing I saw her lasso was you!"

Michael laughed as he held his cup out for coffee. "I knew she was all over the yard practicing, but when that rope flew over my head, I was shocked."

"You should have seen your face. When she pulled that rope tight around your waist, you would have thought she won Grand Champion at a rodeo."

"I'm sure it was sight."

"It was."

In fact, Penny had stopped work right then and grabbed her sketchbook. She spent the next two hours working on that particular scene. She wanted to remember it always.

"By the way, I made something for you."

Penny's attention came back to Michael. "For me?"

Michael stepped outside to the porch, was gone for less than a minute, then returned.

He held a frame in hand.

"I saw the pictures you drew on the walls, and I see you draw now and then. I just thought that, maybe, you would want to frame one of them, if you had a special one."

Michael placed the frame on the table. Penny lifted it and held it at arms length.

"You made this?"

"Well, the wood was already yours."

"Thank you," she whispered as she inspected the craftsmanship. "You did a fine job."

Michael shrugged his shoulders. "I'm glad you like it."

Penny gently laid it on the table. "And I have the perfect picture to put in it."

Penny smiled, already imagining the picture inside. It was going to look beautiful.

"Well, I'd better be off. Lots of work to do tomorrow."

Penny walked Michael to the door. They each stood on the porch, looking at the last rays of the sun across the sky.

"Goodnight," Michael said as he placed his hat back on, then walked to the bunkhouse.

Penny stood, her arms around the porch post. "Goodnight," she softly replied to his back.

Penny had barely returned to the house and pulled out her sketchbooks when she heard riders approaching. She went outside and saw Sheriff Johnston riding alongside another man. Alongside them was a buggy with a man and woman. She noticed the man next to Sheriff Johnston also wore a badge.

Had she done something wrong?

Sheriff Johnston stopped in the middle of the yard along with the rest of the group. He tipped his hat as Penny walked into the yard to greet them.

"Mrs. Banks," he greeted.

"Sheriff Johnston, how nice to see you."

Sheriff Johnston turned to the man riding next to him. "This is Sheriff Browning,"

"Browning," Penny whispered to herself. Where had she heard that name?

"Sheriff Gary Browning, from Juniper Springs," Johnston clarified.

Penny's eyes widened.

Her letter!

Well, she surely did not expect the Sheriff to appear himself. Then she gazed at the man and woman sitting in the buggy.

These must be an aunt or uncle.

Penny turned to Browning. "And what brings you to my ranch, Sheriff Browning?"

The Sheriff leaned his arms on his saddle horn. "Well, to tell the truth, I rode here to arrest you."

“Arrest her?” Michael asked from behind her. She turned as Michael walked around her, then stood just in front of her, between her and the two Sheriffs.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Sheriff Johnston said. “He’s not going to arrest you.”

Penny looked from Johnston to Browning. “He’s not?” She almost sounded disappointed.

Browning’s horse shifted on his feet. Browning settled the animal back down. “Ma’am, you are Mrs. Banks?”

Penny nodded her head. “Yes.”

Browning pulled a piece of paper from his vest. “And did you write me this letter.”

Penny did not need to see the letter. She knew it was hers. “Yes.” She looked to Johnston, then back to Browning. “I thought you would be the best person to ask.”

Browning refolded the letter and replaced it in his vest pocket. “Ma’am, do you have a young girl by the name of Rose Tanker?”

Penny was confused. “Yes.”

Penny heard the soft cry from the woman. Her attention darted from the woman back to Browning, who was still talking. “And how long have you had Rose Tanker?”

Penny quickly thought. “About a week and a half.”

“Told you,” Johnston said to Browning.

“What’s this about?” Michael asked as he continued to stand between Penny and the two Sheriffs.

Browning nodded his head in agreement to Johnston.

Penny placed her hand on Michael’s shoulder. “I was looking for any relatives of Rose. Since her parent’s death, she has missed her brother.” She turned to the couple in the wagon. “Is this an aunt or uncle of hers?”

“That’s what was confusing about your letter, Mrs. Banks.” Browning said. “You see, Rose’s parents never died, like you wrote. This is them.”

Penny turned to the couple. “But, you died in a fire.”

“And who told you that?” Browning asked.

Penny dragged her eyes away from the couple and back to Browning. “Rose told me.”

“No!” the woman softly cried. The man was holding her shoulders.

“Can I ask how you came to take care of Rose?” Browning continued.

Penny was trying to keep up with the direction of the conversation. “My parents came by for a visit, and Rose was with them.”

“Your parents?”

“Well, they are actually my adoptive parents, but yes.”

“And how did you get Rose from them?”

“Well, uhm, my parents had overstayed their welcome, so I asked them to leave. I had insisted that they leave Rose behind, with me.”

“And they just left her, with you?”

Penny smiled. “I really gave them no choice in the matter.”

Browning looked at Johnston, then back at her. “Were you ever aware that Rose Tanker was kidnapped eight months ago?”

Penny felt her breath catch. “What?”

“Eight months ago, Rose was taken while she was walking home from school. We’ve been searching all this time, looking for who took her. I can’t tell you how shocked I was when I received your letter about Rose. We were all surprised about the death of her parents in your letter, as that was untrue. I was sure you were the kidnapper and were finally asking for a ransom of some kind.”

Penny instinctively placed her hand on her chest. “Me?” she almost squeaked.

Browning almost smiled. “Well, that was what we thought. As soon as I received your letter, the Tanker’s and I rode straight here. We met with Sheriff Johnston this afternoon, who continued to claim your innocence.”

The woman leaned forward, her face in tears. “Do you have my baby?” It was obvious she had been told to say nothing, but her worry over her lost girl won out.

Penny looked back at the house, then back to the woman. “Yes. She’s just inside. But she’s asleep. If . . . if you’ll give me a few minutes, I’ll bring her out.”

Penny looked at both of the Sheriffs, for some reason making sure neither would shoot her if she left. Sheriff Johnston nodded his head for her to go on.

She felt Michael squeeze her shoulder before she left. He continued to stand, like a silent barrier.

Penny went to her bedroom and quietly opened the door. Rose was laying on the bed, a small smile on her face.

She's still happy about lassoing.

Penny went and gently nudged the young girl. Rose opened her tired eyes.

"Rose, I need you to get up right now."

Rose blinked a few times as she sat up. "Do I need to do something?"

"No. Do you remember that letter we sent to Juniper Springs?"

"Looking for my relatives."

"Yes, that one. Well, it appears you do have family about."

Rose rubbed her eyes. "I do?"

Penny was not sure how to explain everything, so she decided to let Rose find out herself.

"I see you forgot to change into your nightclothes again."

Rose look down at the wrinkled dress. "I'm sorry."

"Not to worry. Now, let's stand up."

Penny took a moment to brush out the wrinkles with her hand, then quickly brushed Rose's hair.

"You want me to wear my new ribbon?" Rose asked.

Penny felt the tears forming in her eyes. "That would be nice. The color you chose looks so lovely in your hair."

When Rose was presentable, Penny led Rose through the house and to the porch. She stopped Rose on the porch and looked at her, wondering how to say what she needed to say.

Rose's mother did that for her.

"Rose?" she called out.

Rose turned around, either at her name being called or remembering the voice. Or Both. Rose blinked a few times, as if trying to believe what she was seeing.

"Mama?"

Mrs. Tanker climbed out of the wagon as Rose ran to her mother. Rose hugged her mother, who fiercely hugged her back. Mr. Tanker protectively wrapped his arms around the both of them.

Everyone was silent during the family reunion.

“Well,” Sheriff Browning spoke. “I need to get this family settled in town for the night.”

Mr. Tanker turned his family toward their wagon.

“Wait!” Penny cried out. She turned and ran to the house. She quickly grabbed her sketchbook and turned to her last picture. Penny stared at it, burning the image in her mind. But in truth, she did not have to. She knew she would forever remember the scene; the expressions, one of excited victory and the other of shocked surprise. She would redraw the picture later.

Penny gently tore the page out, then grabbed one of her few ribbons and tied it around the rolled picture.

Rose was still standing between her parents, a solid wall protecting her from both sides.

Penny walked up to Rose and handed her the picture.

Rose looked surprised. “One of your pictures?”

Penny nodded. “You can open it later. I just want to make sure that you take a happy memory of this place with you.”

Rose looked at the rolled up picture. “Thank you.”

Penny reached out and tucked a strand of Rose’s hair behind her ear. She could almost feel the mother force herself not to yank her child back.

“I hope, when you get home, you will write me a letter and let me know how your family is doing.”

Penny looked at Mrs. Tanker. “We’ll see,” was all she would commit to.

“Come along,” Mr. Tanker said as he ushered his family to the wagon.

“I’m still looking into who kidnapped little Rose here,” Sheriff Browning said, breaking the awkward silence. “Which is why I hope you understand, I need to talk to you about your adoptive parents.”

The buggy turned around and was leaving. Penny smiled when Rose turned around and waved.

Penny waved back.

“Maybe you can meet us at the hotel restaurant in the morning?” Sheriff Browning offered.

“She’ll be there,” Michael assured him as Penny kept watching the buggy leave.

“See you tomorrow,” Sheriff Browning said as he turned his horse and followed the buggy.

Sheriff Johnston tipped his hat. “Ma’am, Bradley,” then he too turned and left.

Penny was not sure how long she stood and watched as the buggy slowly disappeared. She knew Michael was still standing beside her.

“They won’t let me see her tomorrow,” Penny thought out loud.

“You don’t know that.”

Penny turned and looked at the man beside her. When did he become a rock she could hold on to?

“I saw her mother’s face. She thinks I’m the one who took her daughter.”

“Both Sheriff Johnston and Browning are sure you were not involved.”

“That doesn’t matter.” She nodded to the direction the buggy had gone. “They think I did.”

They were quiet for a few more moments.

“Do you think they took her like that? Just kidnapped her?”

Michael knew who she was talking about. “I don’t know.”

“How can someone do that? Just take someone’s life away?”

“I don’t know,” Michael repeated.

Penny shed a few more tears. “Thank you for your company and support.”

Michael stopped her as she turned toward the house. He gently lifted her chin. “If you need anything, anything at all, I’m here.”

If you need anything . . .

If you need anything, be sure to let me know. . .

Penny remembered the words at Jason’s funeral.

How did you ask someone for help when you were unsure of what you exactly needed?

“Thank you,” she said as she walked to the house.

Michael sat in the doorway of the bunkhouse, watching. He was not surprised when he saw Penny leave the house and walk to the gravesite. He had been expecting it.

He heard the soft whispers from her conversations, heard her cry from the heart.

He wanted so much to comfort her, to hold her tight while she cried on his shoulder, to wipe the tears away. But it appeared she sought comfort somewhere else.

With someone else.

Michael knew his own heart was hurting. He had never felt for another person like this. Watching Conrad and Toni, his sister, together, they were always laughing and talking. He never remembered this anguish.

He waited for over two hours, silently sitting and watching over the woman by the grave until she finally rose and went back to her house.

For now, he knew he would be there for her.

For now.

But he also knew his heart could not take much more!

Chapter 30

Michael rode with Penny in her wagon, Maggie taking her time as they made the trip to town. They were both silent, each thinking their private thoughts.

When they arrived in town, Sheriff Johnston was sitting in front of his office, waiting for them. He tipped his hat to them.

“Good morning.”

Penny wanted to say, *‘that’s debatable,’* but refrained.

“Browning wants to meet with you in the hotel restaurant.”

Michael headed the buggy to the hotel while Sheriff Johnston casually walked across the street, watching both sides, watching the people.

Penny let Michael help her down, then straightened her dress while Michael tied up the buggy. With a firm light touch to her elbow, he escorted her inside.

The restaurant in the hotel was the only place to eat in town, so many of the tables were occupied. Michael saw a large table in the corner and guided Penny toward it.

Once Penny was seated, Michael and Johnston sat down.

“Had breakfast yet?” Sheriff Johnston asked.

“A little,” Michael replied. “But I could get a plate.” He turned to Penny. “Want anything?”

Penny shook her head. “I’m not that hungry.”

Michael leaned over to whisper to Penny. "I know you didn't eat this morning, and you need to keep sharp. At least have a small plate, please."

Penny looked at Michael, then nodded her head. "Fine. I'll have some eggs and a biscuit."

Michael smiled. "Good." He raised his hands to signal the server then ordered. "I'll have a breakfast plate, she'll have a small plate of eggs and a biscuit, and a pot of coffee, please."

The server nodded. "Fine." Then he turned to the sheriff. "Anything for you, sheriff?"

"That breakfast plate sounds good. And coffee."

The server nodded then left.

Sheriff Johnston stood up. "I'll just go let Sheriff Browning know you're here."

Penny watched the sheriff disappear up the stairs.

"I'm going to miss her," Penny finally said.

Michael patted her hand. "I know. She's a gutsy little girl."

Penny smiled. "She is."

The server returned with a pot coffee and three cups.

A few minutes later, Sheriff Johnston returned. He sat down and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Browning said they've already had breakfast, and he'll be down in a bit. Should give us time to eat our meal first."

The eggs were good and the biscuit was hot. Penny ate her meal, only because she knew Michael was watching her. He and Sheriff Johnston kept up small talk about towns and the problems one usually runs into.

When the dishes were removed, they sat drinking more coffee. Penny looked up when she saw Sheriff Browning coming down the stairs.

Alone.

"Morning," he nodded as he sat in one of the empty chairs. "Think I'll have a cup of that coffee, if you don't mind."

Another cup was brought to the table and he poured himself a cup.

"Mrs. Banks," Browning started. "I only have a few questions for you."

"I'm not sure what I can tell you. What I said before was what Rose told me."

Browning nodded his head. "I've already talked to Rose. She's a smart kid."

Penny smiled again. "She is."

"Well, first of all, let me assure you that I find no evidence that you were involved in the kidnapping. None at all!"

Penny nodded her head. "Thank you."

"But, like I said last night, your adoptive parents had her. And I need to know as much as I can. Can you tell me why they left Rose with you?"

"I said before, I really gave them no chance."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, they had come for a visit—"

"And when was that?" Sheriff Browning interrupted.

Penny was thinking. "Maybe two weeks ago?" She turned to Michael for confirmation.

"It was the last day of the barn raising for Matthew Stall," Michael said. "They were there when we returned."

Penny nodded. "Yes, they were."

Sheriff Johnston leaned back. "That was almost two weeks ago."

"And they had Rose at that time?" Sheriff Browning asked.

"Yes," Penny answered. "Rose was with them."

"And you had no idea then that Rose had been kidnapped?"

Penny shook her head. "No. Actually, while they were here, they never discussed how Rose came to them. I just figured they had adopted her, like me."

"Do you know of any others this couple has adopted?"

"Well, Anna and Alley. They were my sisters."

"Your real sisters?"

"No, each of us was adopted."

"Were they younger or older?"

"Older. But they were only a few months apart in age."

Browning nodded his head. "So why did they leave her with you?"

"Like I said, I gave them no choice. They were not taking her."

“Why not?”

Penny wiggled in her seat. “I was afraid they would do to her what they did me.”

“And what was that?”

Penny swallowed. “They sold me.”

Both Browning and Johnston kept their expression from showing their surprise. “They sold you?” Sheriff Browning asked.

“Jason told me later on that he had paid Ben and Clara. A month later after his visit, they put me on a stage to meet him and marry him.”

“Jason is?”

“Jason was my husband. He died several months ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

Penny nodded. “Thank you.”

Browning looked around the table, collecting his thoughts. “And you believe they were going to sell Rose?”

“I know they were.”

“You do? How?”

“I asked them. They said they had already been paid. I said that was not my problem, nor Rose’s.”

“And they just left?”

Michael leaned in. “It may have more to do with the shotgun she was holding at the time.”

Browning quickly looked from Michael back to Penny. Browning actually smiled then nodded his head. “Well, according to Rose, this Ben and Clara are the ones who took her eight months ago, and she’s been with them until you. I hate to say it, but it’s looking like they are the culprits. Do you have any idea where they are?”

Penny shook her head. “They had a house in Middleton where we lived. But they said they sold it to a nearby rancher. Now, they’re living from their wagon, looking for a new place.”

Sheriff Browning looked down, then turned and looked at Sheriff Johnston. “Mrs. Banks, I hate to ask this, but are you sure you were adopted?”

“I have no reason to doubt it. I remember Anna and Alley one day went through ma’s papers and found our adoption

papers. We were reading them, trying to find out where we were from.”

“Are you sure the papers were real?”

Penny looked confused. “Why would they not be?”

“Just asking. How long did you live with Ben and Clara?”

Again, Penny thought. “I don’t really remember a time not being with them. I was sent off when I turned fifteen.”

Browning took another drink of coffee, then stood up. “I appreciate your time, Mrs. Banks.”

Penny also stood up. “Are the Tanker’s going to bring Rose down?”

Browning looked sad. “I would like to say they might, but to tell the truth, they won’t.”

Penny let out a sigh. “Well, I was expecting that.”

“I’m sure in time, Mr. and Mrs. Tanker will realize the truth.”

Penny looked from the sheriff to the restaurant window. “If you don’t mind, I boxed what things Rose left behind. They are in the back of my wagon.”

Browning nodded. “I’ll get them and take them up.” He turned and headed to the hotel door.

“And Sheriff Browning, would you do one more thing for me?”

Browning stopped and turned to Penny. “If I can.”

“Will you tell Rose that I said good-bye?”

Browning smiled. “I will.”

Chapter 31

Penny selected her best dress, then took time to brush her hair. She debated whether or not to wear it up in a bun, or down tied back with a ribbon.

She wanted to look nice.

Today, after church services, was Margaret and Don's wedding. She really liked Margaret, and had enjoyed the days visiting. Don seemed like a good man. She only just knew him, but the folks round town spoke well of him. He seemed to adore Margaret.

Feeling that her attire was satisfactory, she went to the kitchen and pulled out her sketchbook. She briefly looked at her recent pictures, but then selected the picture of Margaret and Don. She examined the picture, making sure she had the details right.

She smiled.

The picture was fine.

Penny looked at the stove and frowned. The sugar cookies she had tried to make were ruined. Mrs. Caste has told her a *foolproof* recipe for sugar cookies.

Penny had spent all last night trying to make a proper pan of cookies to take to the wedding. But none of them came out fit to eat. She was still upset with herself over the loss, but there was

nothing to do about it now. She would quietly explain to Mrs. Cutler when she got the chance. Maybe she would show her what she did wrong. She seemed to remember better if she saw something being made rather than being told.

She rolled her picture up in some packing paper Mrs. Chase had given her. She twisted the ends then tied a pretty red ribbon around the roll. Red was Margaret's favorite color, and Penny had found some red ribbon at the mercantile.

She carefully placed the rolled picture in her carpetbag. If she turned it diagonal, it would just fit. She did not want the paper to get crushed and trampled.

She heard Michael outside with the buggy.

It was time to leave.

Michael was just bringing the buggy to the front door when Penny walked out.

"I'm ready," she called out as she walked toward the buggy.

He offered his hand as she stepped up into the wagon, then sat down and straightened her dress.

Michael looked around. He only saw a carpetbag that was folded in half on her lap.

"Do you have everything?" he hesitantly asked.

"Yes."

Michael looked around again. He saw nothing the size of the frame he made. Had she changed her mind about the picture? Surely not. The picture looked great.

"Are you sure? Aren't you supposed to bring some food, or a gift?"

Penny patted the folded carpetbag on her lap. "All I need is here."

Maybe she did not like the frame!

That was something he had not considered. Maybe she was ashamed to put her picture inside it. Maybe he should have asked Emilio or Alejandro to make it for her. For some reason, he was disappointed.

On the ride, they talked of Rose and how she was doing. Penny was hoping Rose would eventually write. Every trip to town she would head to the Post Office and ask if anything had come for her.

So far, nothing.

“You have to give the parents time to adjust,” Michael said.

“I know. But, I do miss her.”

“I know.”

The wedding was a simple event. The whole town was there to witness the joyous event.

Penny saw how happy Margaret was. So much different from when she arrived and met Jason at the stage. They had gone straight to the small church and had the local preacher marry them. The preacher’s wife and the gardener were the only ones around. They had been her witnesses.

Penny watched as everyone enjoyed the food that was brought. She silently moved next to Mrs. Cutler.

“I’m sorry I didn’t bring anything, but Mrs. Caste told me a recipe for sugar cookies, and they were awful. I’m not sure what I did wrong.”

Mrs. Cutler smiled as she set out another pan of chicken. “Dear, Mrs. Caste means well, but she hates to give away her recipes. She probably left out a key ingredient. But don’t worry. We have more than enough food here.”

Penny looked at all the food and agreed. “Thank you.”

After everyone ate, it was time for the couple to open their gifts. Mr. and Mrs. Chase gave the couple a lovely set of dishes, and others gave them a dutch oven, new sheets, and various food items to get them started.

When Margaret unwrapped the quilt, she lovingly looked over every square. Seeing each initial, Margaret would then look up and search for the person, a silent ‘*thank you*’ and a smile was given to each woman. When Margaret found Penny’s square, her eyes widened as she looked up. Margaret smiled and mouthed ‘*thank you*’ to her.

Penny was glad she had become part of the quilting circle. It was worth it to see Margaret so happy over it.

Then Margaret finally opened her gift. With Don by her side, she carefully unrolled it, then just stared at it. Don looked at it, then took it in his hands to study it. Margaret got up and ran toward Penny, hugging her fiercely.

“It’s beautiful. However do you do that?”

“It’s what I see when I look at the both of you,” Penny confessed.

“Thank you, Penny. It’s so lovely.”

Penny was almost embarrassed. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it?” Margaret hugged Penny again. “I’m going to hang it in our main room, for all to see. I’m so glad you came here to Clearwater.”

Penny smiled back. “So am I.”

Later in the afternoon, a patch of ground was cleared and Mr. Chase grabbed his fiddle, sat on a barrel and began the music. People danced for several hours.

Penny watched Michael as he danced with Dovie. When another square dance started, Michael walked up to her.

“Want to dance?”

Penny shook her head. “I’ve never danced before.”

Michael took her hand and led her to the group. “Just follow my lead, and do what the other women do.”

Penny was laughing as she was pulled this way and that, skipping under arms and holding hands with Michael. She tried to listen to the fiddler calls, but eventually just followed everyone else. Soon, she was anticipating the moves.

Penny had never laughed so much nor had such a good time.

Michael stood in the bunkhouse doorway and watched as Penny made another trip to the gravesite. He wondered what she said up there, what she did. He saw her many times take her sketchbook and draw. He wondered what she drew. What was she thinking?

All I Need Is You

She always spent several hours at the grave. Sometimes, he could just hear her voice as she talked. Sometimes, she said nothing as she just stared off or drew.

He wondered what it would be like to have someone love you that much. That, even after death, they were still a part of you.

Could she ever love someone else like she loved Jason?

Chapter 32

Michael enjoyed the early part of morning, before the sun rose. He was saddling his horse when he saw the rider.

“Marshal Wade,” Michael called out. “Surprised to see you back so soon. Thought you had business a few towns over?”

“Finished my business. Thought I’d stop by and see how everything turned out.” Wade looked around. “Where’s Pat?”

“Sent him and Miguel back to Round Rock with the bull.”

“Conrad’s going to be pleased with it.”

“I’m sure he will.”

Wade looked around again. “So, where are you heading?”

“South Pasture. I want to check on the herd.”

“I thought Mrs. Banks had three work-hands.”

“She does. With Miguel gone, Alejandro is watching the herd and Emilio is checking the area.”

Wade’s expression turned serious. “You expecting trouble?”

Michael stopped and looked up, resting his arms on his saddle. “Not really. Baxter has been behaving himself.”

“So, where’s the problem?”

Michael shook his head. “I don’t know. I just feel... something’s not right, in my gut.”

“Is this the same feeling you had my last visit?”

“Yea.”

"I've learned to trust those feelings."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Wade sat up straight in his saddle. "Well, how about some company for a few days?"

Michael smiled. "I'd enjoy it."

"Besides, I'm curious about the land that's keeping you from heading home already."

"It's not the land," Michael confessed as he finished tightening the cinch.

"Marshal," Penny called from the porch. "How good to see you again."

Marshal Wade tipped his hat. "Mrs. Banks."

"I've made a fresh pot of coffee. Would you like a cup?"

Wade turned to Michael. "A cup before we head out?"

Michael nodded. "Sure."

An hour later, Wade was riding beside Michael as they came into view of the south pasture. Wade came to a stop and whistled.

"Men have been known to do many things for a piece of land like this!" he said.

"Mrs. Banks has had her hands full trying to keep it up. Williams to the east has been pleasant, but Baxter was leaning pretty heavy."

"I remember."

"I do believe Mrs. Banks and Baxter have reached a mutual understanding."

"That's always nice to hear."

"Come look at the underwater spring."

Wade followed Michael as they rode through the herd. "Has it ever dried up?"

"I've check around, and no one remembers the creeks drying up."

Wade looked at the two creeks, one heading east and one heading west. "You're right. This is the reason Baxter wanted it."

"I've assured him that there's plenty of water, and that there is no reason to worry about Mrs. Banks damming it up."

"That had to be a big relief. He has a large herd."

"This little piece will be sufficient for a small herd."

"Mrs. Banks will never be able to maintain a larger herd."

“She doesn’t need a large herd.” Michael sat in his saddle and surveyed the sight before him.

Both men were silent for a few minutes, enjoying the peaceful sight.

“A man could live a comfortable life on a piece of land like this,” Wade whispered to himself.

“Yea,” Michael agreed.

After checking with Alejandro, the men began the ride back. Half way to the ranch, Michael saw Emilio riding hard toward them.

Michael kicked his horse to meet him.

“Mr. Bradley, you must come see. I find camp.”

Penny was outside hanging the laundry. It was a beautiful day and it was good to be outside. She wondered when Miguel would return.

Marshal Wade showing up was a surprise. She had enjoyed making coffee and johnnycakes for both him and Michael before they left to check the south pasture.

The ranch was finally running. She was still not sure how it happened, but everything was running smoothly.

Her herd was back with her two bulls. She even had calves she was unaware of. She had three new helpers who appeared to be staying.

She hung up her last dress.

She knew it was all because of Michael Bradley. He had stepped in when he did not have to and set her ranch right.

She knew she needed to go through Jason’s desk and organize it better. She needed to know all she could about this ranch. She needed to—”

“Hello, little one,” a deep voice said behind her.

Emilio led Michael and Wade to the western side and up a large hill.

“I check area, like you say. I find tracks over there,” he pointed to a path that lead down behind the hill.

Michael was looking at everything as they rode up the hill.

How far away is the ranch?

Why was someone camping out here?

When they almost topped the hill, the brush became thicker. Emilio dismounted, the others following, as he led them through bushes.

“Here!”

Pennystood still, frozen, her face ashen.

She immediately remembered being seated at the kitchen table, Anna and Alley seated next her as Jake Taylor sat across from them. Several times he had asked for the biscuits, or the bowl of beans.

“Pass them biscuits, little one,” he had said.

The voice was the same.

Penny turned around and faced Jake Taylor.

He looked the same, only older. His eyes were still cruel. And as Anna would have said, he was still fat, sweaty, and stank.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten me?” he said, as if they were long lost friends.

“What do you want?” she asked. *Her shotgun was inside the house.*

“Why, I just stopped by for a friendly visit.”

She noticed his smile revealed discolored teeth. “Where’s Alley?” she asked, wondering if he would answer truthfully.

His eyes slightly widened in surprise at the question. Then she saw his pasty smile return. “Didn’t ya hear? Alley caught a fever and died. I did all I could for her.”

Sure you did, she thought to herself.

“What do you want?” she asked again instead. She knew Jake heard the tone of her question. She was not going to be hospitable.

“I was just riding through town and happened to see you. I understand your husband died.”

Penny did not want this man to know she was alone. “Yes he did, but friends of his are staying with me, helping me out.” *Was stretching the truth the same as lying?*

“Yea, I saw ‘em.”

Now Penny’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You know,” he continued as he took a step toward her. He seemed unconcerned when she took a step backward. “You should be thanking me.”

“Thanking you? For what?”

“I was the one who suggested to Jason to go have a look at you.”

Penny’s brows drew together. “You what?”

“Yea. I met Jason before when I rode through about five years ago. He wanted to get married, but none of the girls would have him. I suggested he visit your place.” Jake took his time as he looked her up and down. “Seems he did fine.”

Penny was unsure what to say. “Why did you do that?”

Jake laughed. “I guess you never knew of the business arrangement I had with Ben and Clara.”

Penny was so confused, she did not notice when Jake took another step closer. “Business arrangement?”

“Yea. The first time I came to your home, I knew they were not your real parents. You all looked so different. She wanted kids, but she found out real quick just how much trouble kids really were, always crying and getting into things. That was when I had,” he paused for a moment, “a *business* opportunity for all three of us, an opportunity where we could all make money. It didn’t take much to talk ‘em into it.”

Penny tried to keep the disgust from her voice. “What opportunity?”

“Haven’t you noticed? Women are scarce out here. Men will pay good money for a proper wife.”

During her first year of marriage, Jason had told her how much he had paid Clara and Ben for her. She had been appalled at the amount when he told her, but he told her it had been worth every coin.

“I see you grew up. I can understand why Clara’s only looking for older girls now.”

Her eyes darted back to Jake.

“Now?”

“Sure. You don’t think Clara and Ben just happened to drop by, did you? They been scouting around, looking for other girls. They had one already to deliver, but it appears you stepped in, somehow. The buyer was not happy about that. But knowing Clara and Ben, they made another arrangement for him. I do know they found a nice young girl just south of here. A pretty blonde thing.”

Dovie?

“Should fetch a good price in California,” he continued.

“You can’t just take someone like that!” Penny tried to reason.

“Sure you can. In fact, she may already be on her way.”

Penny wanted to scratch the smile off his face. Then she felt the gun in her skirt pocket.

“I was even thinking that, since you’re no longer married,” Jake continued, “I might just include you. But I decided you would be my final payment.”

Penny lowered her head, her confusion evident. “What final payment?”

“I paid good money for Anna. But then she up and left. I took your sister instead, but she wasn’t what I paid for. The last time I saw you, you were a little plain. But I see now you grewed into a real pretty thing.”

Penny was determined to hold her ground. In the past, other people had run her life. But now, her life was her own.

“Mr. Taylor—”

“Jake,” he interrupted.

“Jake, I can understand you were disappointed when Anna disappeared. You may not know it, but Anna came by a several weeks ago. She even left something for you.” She turned, as if to walk back inside the house, her hand slipping into her pocket. “Would you mind if I get it?”

Jake’s face lit up. “She did?”

Penny wrapped her hand around the pistol, using her thumb to pull the trigger back as she lifted it out of her pocket, just like Michael showed her. She turned back around until her right

Charmain Callaway

shoulder was facing Jake, the pistol cocked and aimed at Jake.

Chapter 33

Emilio led them to the small hidden camp he had found.

Michael was the first to dismount. Wade followed as both men examined the camp carefully.

“Looks like someone had been here for several days,” Wade observed out loud.

Michael looked the camp over, then stood up. “I can see the house from here,” Michael observed as he looked above the bushes. “In fact, I can just see Penny standing beside the porch.”

“I think she talk with someone,” Emilio observed as he also looked down to the house.

Michael could not see who, if anyone, Penny was talking to. He looked back down at the small camp they were standing in. He bent down, observing the worn patch of ground. Someone had been here for several days. From the deep impressions, he would say the person was large. Very large.

Who was here?

And why?

The shot of a pistol made him jump up and look back toward the house. Penny was aiming at something, or someone.

“What in the—” he began as he watched Penny walk out of sight.

“I think she shot someone!” Wade spoke to Michael, but

Michael was already heading toward his horse. Emilio and Wade quickly followed as Michael raced down the mountainside.

Michael was riding into the yard when he heard the yelling and screaming. He pulled his rifle out as he rode around to the front of the house. When the man saw Michael ride up, he began anew.

“She *shot* me! I can’t believe it. *She shot me!!*”

Michael dismounted as he looked at the large man laying on the ground. He was holding his thigh, frantically trying to stop the bleeding. Michael knew this was the person that had been spying from the hideout. Michael looked around.

“Where’s Penny?”

The man looked up as he pulled his bandana from his neck to wrap around his thigh. “She stole my horse—”

“She *what?*”

“She stole my horse.”

Michael looked from the man to the barn. Why would she steal a horse? Penny did not like horses. What would make her take a horse she was unfamiliar with instead of hitching Maggie to her buggy?

Penny must have been in a hurry! Or she was really frightened!

“Where is she?” Michael asked again. The man looked up, his eyes narrowing as his anger simmered from a boil. “She shot me, then stole my horse. I’ll have her arrested—”

Michael was not listening. He looked around and saw the dust from where Penny had ridden out.

“Emilio, keep an eye on him.” Michael quickly slid his rifle back into the saddle scabbard, then quickly mounted. He looked from where he was sure Penny had ridden off back to the man on the ground. “If he tries to move, shoot his other leg.”

The man looked up and sneered. “Don’t think I’ll forget this,” he promised.

Michael looked at the man, then Emilio. Emilio grabbed his rifle from his saddle, then nodded back to Michael.

“I’m coming with you,” Wade said.

Michael took off, Wade riding beside him. He pushed his horse as fast as he could. He could hear his beating heart

matching the rhythm of the pounding hooves.

Where was she going?

What had happened?

Who was the man at the ranch?

Why did she shoot him?

Where was she going?

The rode curved several times but Michael did not slow down. He had ridden several miles when he caught sight of her. He felt a lump in his throat as he realized the horse she was riding was a very large horse.

How did she get on it?

He pushed his horse faster.

He could tell she was having trouble keeping herself on the saddle. It was obvious that her feet were not in the stirrups. She probably could not even reach them. He watched as her body swayed to the right. She somehow managed to right herself.

She disappeared as she went around a curve in the road lined with trees. He panicked until she was back in his sight. The horse she was riding was definitely larger than his, but he was quickly gaining on her. If she had been a better rider, he would never have caught up with her. It took another mile before he was able to ride up beside her, Wade flanking her other side. She was so intent on staying in the saddle that she was unaware of either man beside her.

When the horse made a small jump over a boulder, she started to slide off the saddle again. Michael reached over and grabbed Penny by the waist, lifting her off the saddle and settling her in his lap. Wade reached over and grabbed the reins.

"I have to get there," Penny began yelling as she reached out for the horse. "Let me go. I have to get there!"

"Penny, what are you talking about?" He slowed his horse to a halt. He saw Wade slowing both his and the larger one.

"Michael, I have to get there."

"Get where?"

"They're going to take Dovie!"

Michael saw the fear in her eyes. Without anymore explanation, he knew what was happening. The Cutler ranch was several more miles away. It was obvious that speed was essential.

He knew if he carried Penny with him, it would slow his horse down. And there was no way he was going to leave Penny stranded out here. Then he saw the larger horse.

Michael dismounted, handing the reins to Penny. "You ride my horse. Can you reach the stirrups?" He checked to make sure her feet reached the stirrups. "I'll ride this one. I'll have to ride faster." He turned to Wade. "Follow me to the ranch."

Wade nodded as Michael gracefully mounted the larger horse. He turned it around, gave a kick to its belly, and the large horse shot forward. Michael felt the power of the horse as he let him run. He leaned down along the horse's neck, giving the reins just enough slack. He could feel the muscles as the long legs stretched.

He could see Mr. Cutler in his yard. Mr. Cutler looked up when he heard the rider approaching. Michael could see his surprised expression as he rode fast into the yard.

"Whoa, there son." He reached to grab the reins as Michael came to a sudden stop. "What's the hurry?"

"Where's Dovie?"

Mr. Cutler's surprised expression disappeared. "Dovie?"

"*Where is she?*" Michael almost shouted.

Mrs. Cutler came out of the house. "Steven?"

"She went to the pond to join David fishing. She took the side road."

"How long ago?"

"About half an hour ago," Mrs. Cutler spoke up as she joined her husband.

Michael did not have time to explain. He turned his horse in the direction Mr. Cutler pointed and again kicked the horse in the belly. The horse again shot forward.

It was another fifteen minutes before Penny saw the familiar wagon. She pulled back on the reins and almost fell off the horse. Marshal Wade dismounted first, then helped Penny dismount. It took a few moments for Penny's legs to stop trembling. When she did, Penny ran to the wagon, Ben and Clara

standing beside it.

“She’s not here,” Michael said as she approached them.

Penny stopped. “Are you sure?” she asked before looking inside the wagon herself, then walking around it.

“I searched the wagon too. Dovie’s not here.” Michael looked beyond the wagon. “She was on her way to meet her brother at the pond. I could ride there and see if she’s there,” he suggested.

Penny looked at the wagon, then to Ben and Clara. She saw the smug look on Clara’s face. “I know you took her. Jake told me.”

Clara remained quiet. Her face showed confidence and amusement, like she knew a secret.

A secret!

An old memory swirled around her head.

“Are you sure no one knows about it?” Jake had asked.

“No one’s ever found it,” her pa had replied. “And I always have a secret panel in my wagon.”

She remembered the words outside her bedroom window after Anna left.

A secret panel.

“No, Dovie’s here,” she called as she ran to the back of wagon. “Dovie,” she called out as she began to move items around. “Dovie?”

Not finding her again, he went outside and walked around the wagon, looking at the dimensions from the back, the side, the front. It took several times walking around the wagon and comparing each side and board before she finally saw the slight difference.

The right side of the wagon looked deeper.

Penny was back in the wagon, throwing things out.

“Stop it!” Clara screamed as she ran to the back of the wagon. “You can’t do that.”

Penny was not listening.

“You’re ruining my pans,” Clara screamed louder as Penny threw out several pans. “Those are my things!”

Penny searched the floor, looking for something that was different. She compared both sides and finally found the odd board.

She pulled it out and saw the crumpled form of a young girl.

“Dovie!” she cried out as she tried to get the remaining boards off. Michael came around the back and saw her trying to lift the young girl.

“Here, let me,” he offered as he reached for Dovie.

Dovie was still.

He saw the rag in the bottom of the box and knew Ben and Clara had drugged her.

Michael was just lifting Dovie from the wagon when Steven frantically rode up.

“Dovie?” he asked as he saw his limp daughter held in Michael’s arms.

Michael was lightly slapping her face and calling her name. Finally, Dovie groaned, then opened her eyes.

Dovie looked around, and saw a familiar face. “Pa?”

Michael handed Dovie over to her father, who started to cry. Penny brushed Dovie’s hair away from of her eyes.

“Take your daughter home,” Marshal Wade told Steven as he stood guard over Ben and Clara.

Penny waited until Mr. Cutler was out of sight before she turned toward Clara. She saw Clara clutching the discipline strap hanging from her belt. Clara made a move toward Penny, but stopped. Penny reached out and pulled it off her belt. She tried to mangle it, but the strap was made of old leather.

She hated this strap!

From behind her, a hand reached out holding a very sharp knife. Penny looked at the knife, then at the strap. She took the knife as Michael, still standing behind her, took the strap and stretched it tight. With both hands, she took the knife and sawed her way through it.

The knife was very sharp and did not require much effort on her part.

When the strap was cut in half, Michael held each piece tight, allowing her to slice the strap into as many strips as she needed to. When she was done, she bent and collected the pieces, then walked up to Clara, held the pieces out and let them drop, one piece at a time.

“You will never use this on anyone ever again.”

Finally, she felt free of this woman.

She turned to Marshal Wade. "Jake Taylor, who is at my ranch, had a business arrangement with these two to steal girls and sell them to men looking for brides."

Marshal Wade narrowed his eyes as he looked at Ben and Clara. "I've had several reports over the past four years about young girls disappearing."

Penny's eyes widened as she turned to Clara. "How many?"

Clara was silent, her head down.

Penny turned to Marshal Wade. "How many?"

"Last count was fourteen."

Penny turned back to Clara, "Fourteen?"

Clara remained quiet.

Marshal Wade grabbed a rope and began tying Ben and Clara's hands behind them. "I hope you understand you are both under arrest!" He turned to Michael. "I'll deliver these two to Sheriff Johnston. He'll probably send someone to pick up Jake Taylor."

"That'll be fine," Michael said as he replaced his knife in his boot.

Marshal Wade tied his horse to the back of the wagon, then put both Ben and Clara in the back. Penny watched as the wagon made its way to town. She turned around and looked at Michael.

"Thank you."

"No problem."

She looked at the horse and wondered how she was going to get on.

Michael mounted the large horse, then held his hand out to her. "Come here."

She hesitated for only a moment, then reached for his hand. He sat her behind him, her arms tightly wrapped around his waist. Grabbing the reins of his horse, he began the ride home.

"Are you going to tell me how you rode this beast?" he finally asked.

He felt her chuckle behind him. "I'm not really sure. I remember shooting at Jake, then walking over to his horse. I grabbed his reins, pulled his head down to my level, and told him I was going to ride him, and that I didn't want any trouble from

him, so he had better behave himself. Then I climbed the coral so I could reach his back and jumped on.”

Michael was chuckling at the image. As afraid of horses as Penny was, her concern for Dovie overruled her fear.

It was later in the day when a posse of three men came to collect Jake Taylor, who was still shouting about Penny shooting him and stealing his horse.

Chapter 34

Michael paced in the bunkhouse. He had sent Alejandro and Emilio out to check the east side. He needed time to think. He walked around the stove, then decided to pour himself another cup of coffee.

He continued his pacing. He knew what he had to do. It was time.

Penny was adding a few more spices to her stew. She took a sip and smiled.

It was good.

It was amazing how far she had come in just a few months. Anna would have been proud of her.

Penny looked up at the picture hanging on her wall, the one of Anna standing in the wind, looking off into the horizon. She remembered asking Anna what she thought of when she stared off like that.

“I want to see my future,” she would say.

“Your future?” Penny had asked, confused.

Anna had looked back at her. “Don’t you ever wonder what you’ll be doing years later?”

Penny looked at the horizon, like the empty expanse held the answers. "I thought we'd be together."

"We will be. I'll keep us together."

Two months later, Jake Taylor visited.

Penny looked out the door, across the land that was now hers. What future did she see? Years later, what would she be doing?

She turned when she heard the footsteps approach. Michael walked up, his hat in his hands. His face looked solemn.

She went to the doorway. "Hello. Want some coffee?"

Michael stopped at the edge of her steps, his hat still in his hands as he shook his head. "No, thanks." He put his weight from one foot to another. "I need to talk with you."

Penny stepped onto her porch. "Ok."

She watched as he looked down at the ground, then back up at her.

"I just wanted to tell you I'll be leaving in the morning."

Penny felt like someone had suddenly punched her in the stomach. "Leaving?"

Michael nodded his head. "I need to get back to Round Rock. Conrad is probably wondering where I am."

Penny looked down at her hands. "Oh."

"I've made sure Alejandro and Emilio know how to keep the herd in the south pasture. And Miguel should be back soon. The three of them will work your range fine."

"Well, uh, thank you," she stuttered.

He was leaving!

"And I don't think you'll have any trouble from Baxter anymore," he continued. "Sheriff Johnston said he would keep an eye on him."

Penny walked down the step. "I guess I always knew this day would come. I mean, you only came to pick up a bull. Not fix my ranch and run it."

Michael gave a half smile and nodded his head as he looked at Penny. "It's a fine ranch. One any man would want to run."

Then why are you leaving? she thought to herself.

"I do appreciate everything you've done for me," Penny said instead as she took a step closer.

Michael gave a short laugh. "I actually enjoyed doing it."

Penny forced a smile. "Thanks."

Michael looked up and walked the two steps that put them facing each other. He took his hand and cupped her chin, then lifted her face.

"I want you to know, if you need anything, anything at all, you know where I am. Send me a telegram."

Penny lowered her eyes, remembering the day of Jason's funeral.

If you need anything, someone had said.

Be sure to let me know if you need anything.

"I mean it," Michael's voice came back, insistent. "If you need anything."

Michael let go of her face, put his hat on, turned around and began to walk back to the bunkhouse.

He's a good man, she could hear Mrs. Cutler telling her.

You would do well to keep him.

If we want to choose our own happiness, sometimes we have to speak out first.

Don't let him go!

Penny took a step forward and called out. "Michael?"

Michael stopped several steps ahead of her. She saw his head lowered, his fists clenched at his side.

You would do well to keep him.

"Michael," she said again as she tentatively took another step.

Don't let him go!

She swallowed hard. "The only thing I need," she paused, "is you."

She saw Michael lift his head, his fists unclenching as he slowly turned around. She saw the confusion in his eyes.

Don't let him go!

He looked at her with troubled eyes. "What about Jason?" he whispered.

Penny's brows came together in confusion. "What do you mean, what about Jason?"

"I," he paused. "I didn't think you could ever love anyone else the way you loved Jason."

Penny slightly shook her head. "I can't, and I won't."

Now Michael looked confused. "But, you're always . . ." he paused, confused.

"When I married Jason," Penny began, "I had no choice. But I felt like he," she took a deep breath, "rescued me. He saved me from a horrible place. And I was grateful. I'm not sure if I would have ever been able to leave any other way."

Penny looked at the ground, gathering her thoughts. "Jason gave me the means to escape, and provided me with the strength and support I needed. And I loved him for that."

Penny looked up at Michael, trying to find the words to explain. "When Anna and Alley ran away and left me behind, I felt afraid of being alone, wondering what I was going to do, what was going to happen to me. I felt the same way when Clara left me on the stage platform to meet Jason. And I felt that again when Jason died." She shook her head, feeling the tears pooling in her eyes. "I don't want to love someone because I had no choice, or they rescued me, or because I was grateful, like I loved Jason. I want to love someone because I chose them, and because I feel that my life would be complete with them, and they with me."

Penny suddenly felt her face held in Michael's hands, his lips soft and warm as he kissed her. She closed her eyes, her unshed tears falling down her cheeks as she wrapped her arms around the solid body.

Michael finally pulled back, his arms wrapped around her soft form. "I love you," he declared.

Penny smiled back. "And I love you," she answered.

Michael lowered his head and rested his forehead on hers. "I don't want to waste anymore time," he said as he took a moment to catch his breath. "Penny, will you marry me?"

Penny smiled. "Mrs. Cutler said I should keep you."

Michael's eyes slightly widened. "She did?"

Penny slightly nodded her head, not wanting to break the physical contact. "She said I would be a fool to let you go."

Michael smiled. "I knew she was a smart woman."

Penny stood up straight and looked directly at him. "I would be honored, Michael Bradley, to marry you."

Chapter 35

Michael and Alejandro were riding back to the ranch, returning from checking the gully in the northwest section of the range. None of Baxter's cattle had been spotted. Michael was pleased that Baxter was becoming a decent neighbor.

As they approached the house, Alejandro called out, pointing to the horizon.

Someone was coming.

A small group of about six or eight.

As they came closer, it was clear only two of the horses had riders. Michael squinted, then smiled. He recognized Pat riding in the lead. Miguel was beside him.

Pat and Miguel rode into the yard with a string of three horses each. Alejandro opened the coral door and the men led the horses inside. Miguel quickly untied them, and the horses quickly trotted to the water trough.

"What are you doing?" Michael asked as he closed the coral door. "Delivering horses for Conrad now?"

"Sort of," Pat said as he dismounted.

Michael looked at the group. "They're fine horses. Where are you taking them?"

"They just got delivered."

Michael looked at Pat. He could hear Alejandro excitedly welcoming his nephew back. "Here?" Michael asked.

Pat took his hat and slapped at his legs, getting the loose dust off. "When Conrad heard how Mrs. Banks only had Miguel and his two uncles working for her with no extra horses, he told me to deliver these." Pat looked around. "What have I missed?"

Michael smiled. "Penny and I are getting married."

Pat stopped and looked up, then smiled. "In that case, Conrad says these horses are your wedding gift."

Michael's eyes widened. "Well, I'll be . . ."

"And your sister told me to tell you, that if you even consider the idea of getting married without letting her know, you would rue the day." Pat looked up into the sky. "Rue, I like that word." Pat looked at Michael. "I think that will be my new word for the week. Rue."

"Don't worry. I sent a telegram three days ago. They're on their way."

Pat nodded his head. "When's the day?"

"Next weekend."

Pat whistled. "Wasting no time!"

"Nope."

Penny was busy trying to ready the house for company. Michael told her that his sister, brother-in-law and nephew were most likely on their way. She was not sure what to expect. She was more worried about the sister than anyone else. She wanted to make a good impression.

The horses that Michael's brother-in-law sent were beautiful, with long necks, straight backs, and long tails. Michael explained how hard it is to ride the same horse all day, everyday. The work hands needed to trade horses, to let them take turns resting.

It made sense to her.

The day after Michael proposed, Penny had driven her buggy to Mrs. Cutler and invited her to the upcoming wedding.

“Honey, I *knew* you were good for him,” Mrs. Cutler said as she poured them both a cup of coffee. “If I may ask, what plans have you made so far?”

Penny looked up. “Plans?”

“Well of course. Next weekend will be here faster than you think.”

“I didn’t want it to be a really big affair. After all, I’ve already been married.”

Mrs. Cutler hugged her. “But when you married Jason, you didn’t give the community a chance to welcome you properly.”

Penny looked surprised. “I never considered what the town thought.”

“Honey, in small towns, people live so far apart they look for any reason to gather together.”

By the end of the visit, Mrs. Cutler volunteered to take care of informing the women.

“Every woman has their favorite dish, and weddings are the best time for everyone to do their best cooking.”

Penny had to smile. “I remember Margaret’s wedding and all the different dishes there.”

“Believe me, since we just had Margaret’s wedding, watch and see how many different dishes the women bring. No one likes to be called out bringing the same dish.”

Penny giggled. “You make it sound like a competition.”

“In a way, it is.” Mrs. Cutler sat up straight. “It’s our pride at stake!” Then Mrs. Cutler grinned. “You’ll see.”

Three days before the wedding, Michael found Penny in the barn with Maggie. Penny turned to him, her expression concerned.

“Something’s wrong with Maggie,” she said as she stroked the mare’s neck. “I’ve noticed it takes her longer to get to town lately.”

Michael stood on the other side of Maggie and ran his hand across her back.

“Do you know how old Maggie is?” he gently asked.

Penny shook her head. "I know she's an older mare, but I don't know how old."

Michael reached over the stall and grabbed the brush. He began to slowly brush her back, down her flanks, then down her neck. "Most horses don't reach the age Maggie has. Maggie's just tired."

Penny watched as Michael slowly brushed Maggie's coat. "So what am I supposed to do?" she finally asked.

"You need to let her go."

Penny considered the thought, then her eyes widened. "You don't mean to put her down?"

Michael quickly shook his head. "No. No. What I mean is you need to let her live out the remainder of her life. Let her be comfortable."

Penny frowned, wondering what Michael meant. Then suddenly, she knew.

"You mean let her loose in the south pasture?"

Michael smiled as he nodded his head. "That's where I would put her. Alejandro or Emilio or Miguel would always check on her. And she could socialize with the different horses the men ride each day."

Penny scratched Maggie's long nose, her large brown eyes blinking as she enjoyed all the attention.

"I guess that would be best," Penny confessed.

"I could take her out today, or tomorrow, if you want."

Penny's expression became serious. "I'll worry about her."

"You can go out and see her anytime you want."

"How? Without Maggie, I have no horse for my buggy?" She turned and looked at the six new horses in the coral.

"We'll think of something," Michael promised.

"Will she like it in the south pasture?" Penny asked.

"She'll enjoy herself. She can run whenever she wants, or she can eat grass all day long."

"What about when winter comes. Won't it be hard on her?"

Michael did not want to tell Penny that Maggie probably would not live to see the winter.

"I'll take care of her," he promised instead.

Penny looked at Michael, saw the determination. She knew she needed to start trusting this man.

The next day, Michael's sister and her husband arrived.

Penny stood on the porch as their rented buggy pulled into the yard. Michael came out of the barn, smiling when he saw them.

"You made it," Michael called out.

The woman, Toni, held her husband's hand as she dismounted. She walked up to her brother, a stern look on her face.

"What sort of telegram do you call this?" she asked as she waved it in front of Michael, then read it:

GETTING MARRIED NEXT WEEKEND STOP GET HERE OR MISS IT STOP MICHAEL.

Penny was surprised. Was *that* the message Michael sent to his sister? *Get here or miss it?*

The woman looked up at her brother. "Well?"

"I wanted the message to get to the point."

"I think you accomplished that," Conrad said behind his wife as he reached his hand to Michael. "Congratulations!"

Michael shook Conrad's hand. "Thanks. And thanks for the horses. They're a good lot."

"Glad you like them."

Michael turned back to his sister. "Glad you made it, sis."

He picked her up and both began laughing.

Penny took a deep breath.

Michael looked up and saw her standing on the porch. He turned to his family. "Come meet Penny."

Chapter 36

Penny fell in love with Michael's family. They were easy to talk with, and made it a point to include her in the conversation.

"I'm surprised you didn't bring Ty with you," Michael commented after dinner.

"I left him with Sam and Gladys," Toni said.

"I thought he would want to come and see me."

Toni took a sip from her coffee. "Sorry, but you lost out to sugar cookies."

Michael rolled his eyes. "Ah, that explains it."

Penny listened as Michael caught up on life back at Round Rock. She watched as Toni walked over to the picture of Anna on the wall.

"These are really good," she said out loud.

"Penny drew those," Michael proudly confessed.

Toni turned around. "You have talent. I can only draw men that look like sticks."

"Crooked sticks," Michael whispered.

Toni glared at her brother. Michael smiled back.

Penny was intrigued with the exchange. It felt . . . natural. She loved it.

That night, Conrad and Toni slept on the floor in the house. Penny had offered her bed, since they were a couple and were her guests, but they would not hear of it.

“We have enough blankets here,” Conrad had insisted. “We’ll be fine.”

With Michael, Pat, Alejandro, Emilio and Miguel in the bunkhouse and Conrad, Toni and herself inside the house, the ranch felt . . . comfortable.

The day before the wedding, Michael was outside working on the tack. Pat was grooming his horse. Bobby, Michael’s horse, came to the edge of the coral and whinnied.

Michael looked up, then looked around.

A rider was coming.

Baxter!

And he was leading another horse.

“Pat?”

Pat came from around the barn and saw the rider. “Baxter?”

“Yea. Check to see if we’re missing any horses.”

“Sure thing.”

Michael finished what he was working on, then put the tack aside as Baxter rode into the yard. Pat came around and shook his head at Michael. No horses missing.

“Hello,” Michael greeted.

“Bradley,” Baxter greeted in return.

Penny came out of the house, followed by Toni. Both were wiping their hands on towels. Baxter turned to the women. “Ma’am,” he said as he nodded his head.

“Hello Mr. Baxter,” Penny said from the porch. “It’s good to see you.”

Michel could tell Baxter was relieved at the greeting.

Penny stepped down and walked toward Michael. “My future sister-in-law and I are making cookies. Would you care to sample a few?”

Baxter smiled. “Thank you.” He dismounted, still holding the reins of the second horse. “I came to ask a favor,” he began.

Penny looked from Baxter to Michael, then back to Baxter. "How can we help you?"

Baxter looked at Penny, then turned to the horse. "This is Sadie. I've had her for several years, but she's getting too old for doing ranch work. Mind you, she still has many years left, but the hard ranch work is getting too much for her. Usually I would just sell her to the livery stable and be done with it. But Sadie is special. I want to make sure she's with someone who will care for her." Baxter turned to Penny. "She's already trained for a harness and buggy. I just don't have any use for her now, and I was thinking, maybe you might have a place for her, here."

"That's nice of you," Michael commented.

"Feel free to check her out," Baxter offered.

Michael walked around the mare, checking the legs, hooves, checking her mouth. "She looks sound."

"She just needs a slower pace than what she's used to."

Michael watched as Penny looked at the mare, the large eyes looking around. She carefully walked up and offered her hand. Sadie smelled her, then allowed Penny to scratch her long nose.

Michael stood behind Penny. "Well, do you want her?"

Penny turned around, her eyes brimming with unshed tears.

"I think she's beautiful."

She turned to Baxter. "I'll take good care of her," she promised.

Baxter smiled. "I had no doubt."

Pat stepped up and held his hands out for the reins. "Why don't I show Sadie her new stall why you folks sample those cookies?" Pat turned to Conrad standing on the porch. "And I want a few for myself."

Conrad smiled. "No guarantees."

Toni nudged her husband in the ribs. "There are plenty, Pat," she offered.

Half an hour later, Baxter remounted his horse and turned for home.

"Baxter!" Michael called out.

Baxter stopped and turned around.

"You probably already know, but tomorrow after Sunday Service, Penny and I are getting married."

Baxter nodded his head.

“We’ve invited friends and family. Penny and I would be pleased if you came too.”

Michael could see the surprise in Baxter’s eyes.

Baxter smiled, then touched the brim of his hat. “I’ll be there.”

That evening, Michael hitched Sadie to Penny’s wagon to make sure she was not jumpy or hard to control. He did not want Penny using Sadie until he knew for sure Penny could handle her.

“How does she look?” Conrad called from the edge of the barn as Michael made another turn with the buggy.

Michael stopped in front of Conrad and jumped down. “She’s a fine little mare. She’s not jittery, and she responds well to the reins.”

Conrad walked over and scratched Sadie’s nose. “Didn’t trust Baxter?”

Michael shook his head. “No. Just cautious.” He turned to his brother-in-law. “Would you let Toni ride any horse someone just gave her?”

“Point taken.” He gave Sadie a final pat on her withers. “But don’t tell her that.”

Chapter 37

The day of the wedding proved to be flawless. The sky had just enough clouds to make the day feel pleasant.

Penny wore a dress she had bought at the mercantile last week. It was fancier than her Sunday dress, but she felt pretty in it. She thought the little pearl buttons added a touch of elegance to the dress. Toni helped her with her hair, which Penny insisted on wearing down.

Michael hitched up Sadie and drove her buggy to town. Pat, Emilio, Alejandro and Miguel followed, each riding their own horses.

A little later, Conrad loaded his wagon with their things, then drove his wagon with Toni and Penny. After the wedding, Conrad and Toni were spending the next few days at the hotel.

Penny could not remember much about the Sunday sermon. But when she stood before the preacher with Michael, she remembered every detail:

The way Michael smiled when he saw her in her new dress.

The way Michael's hands shook as he held her hand and gently slipped the ring on her finger.

The way Michael gently held her face as he kissed her for the first time as Mrs. Michael Bradley!

The reception was busy and fun. The food was superb, just as Mrs. Cutler said. After everyone ate, they opened their gifts.

She was not sure what everyone would give them, since she already had a house with what she needed inside. Mr. and Mrs. Caste gave them a beautiful tablecloth, and Mr. and Mrs. Chase gave them a matching set of dishes. Several people gave them a modest amount of money.

Penny opened a large package and was surprised to see a bridal quilt inside. She looked up at Mrs. Cutler, who was sitting just in front of her.

“How did you do this? You only knew for about a week?”

Mrs. Cutler smiled. “Honey, I knew you two were going to get hitched the day he rode over and borrowed my embroidery hoop for you!”

Everyone laughed at the story. Penny lovingly ran her hands over every square, finding the initials sewn in each corner. And like Margaret did a few weeks before, she looked up and silently thanked each person.

When she found Margaret’s square, Penny ran to her friend and hugged her.

“You didn’t think I was going to miss out on making this, did you,” Margaret had kidded.

Conrad and Toni had given them kitchen curtains that Toni had crocheted. Penny had spent one evening watching as Toni worked the single thread into lovely patterns that looked like lace.

“I started these when Pat came back with Conrad’s new bull and told us about you,” Toni told her later. “I just knew Michael was going to stay. So I started right away.”

Toni handed an envelope to Michael when the presents had all been opened. Inside was a check from his parents and a note.

Penny watched as Michael read the note. He looked at her and smiled. She knew he would tell her about it later.

At first, Penny felt uncomfortable being the center of attention. But after awhile, she realized these people just wanted to share in her joyous day.

This is what Mrs. Cutler said the town missed when she quietly married Jason.

The town wanted to welcome the new couple properly.

As evening began to set, Toni and Conrad loaded their wagon with their gifts. Michael located his new bride and whispered in her ear. Penny smiled and began to tell everyone good-bye.

“Are the work hands coming back?” Penny asked as they began the drive back home.

“Nope,” Michael answered. “Pat’s staying in town at the hotel. Emilio, Alejandro and Miguel are going to camp in the south pasture and keep an eye on herd.”

“So, we have the place to ourselves?” Penny asked.

Michael turned to his bride. “For the whole night.”

Penny saw him smile as he turned his attention back to the road. They talked about who came today, and the different gifts they received.

“What did the note from your parents say?” she asked.

“Mom sprained her ankle last week so Dad had to stay with her. They were sorry they couldn’t come, but hope to come out for a visit later.”

“That would be nice. I would like to meet them. I really like your sister. Do you have any other siblings?”

“Another brother, Jesse. He’s the oldest. He runs the ranch with my dad.”

Penny listened as Michael told of his family and how close they are.

“Something dad always taught us. We look out for one another.”

Penny nodded her head and smiled. “I like that.”

Before she knew it, her ranch came into view.

Their ranch, she corrected herself.

Michael dismounted and helped Penny down. Then he began unloading the wagon. “We’ll just put these inside for the

night,” he said as he brought the first armload in, “and I’ll take care of Sadie and the wagon.”

Penny made room on the kitchen table for the items.

“There’s even some food here,” Michael said, surprised.

“That would be from Mrs. Cutler.”

“Like I said, that woman is smart.”

Michael gave Penny a kiss, then stepped back.

“Let me take care of the wagon. I’ll be right back.”

Penny watched as he almost ran out the door. She moved the items from the table to the floor in the corner. She would go through them and put them in their proper place tomorrow. For now, she grabbed the quilt and headed toward her room.

Their room.

She heard Michael as he stomped his boots on the porch. She watched the door as it opened, Michael standing in the doorway with his hat in his hand.

It occurred to her that Michael was as nervous as she was.

She walked over and placed her hand on Jason’s desk.

“I thought... I mean... I was hoping you would go through the desk and sort through the papers there. Collect the papers we need to keep and discard whatever needs to be. Then maybe, you can use it to keep your records.”

Michael laid his hand on hers resting on the closed desk.

“You want me to do that right now?” he playfully asked.

She smiled. “No, but I did want you to see how our new quilt looks on our bed.”

Michael followed Penny into the room. Penny stood at the edge of the bed. “Doesn’t it look lovely?” she asked as she ran her hands over the squares.

“You looked lovely today!” he answered.

Penny turned around and Michael took her in his arms. She felt beautiful.

Michael turned so that his legs were against the bed. He looked at her, his eyes wanting to remember every detail.

This was a woman made to be loved.

He leaned down and gently kissed her. He did not want to frighten her. When he lifted his head, he put his arms around her.

Then he looked at the wall.

“That’s where it is,” he said out loud.

Penny turned around, surprised. “What?”

“The frame I made for you. I thought you didn’t like it.”

Penny looked shocked. “Why would I not like it? It’s beautiful.”

“But, you didn’t give it to Margaret.”

Now Penny looked confused. “Why would I want to give a gift you gave to me to another woman?”

“But I made it for you for your picture to Margaret.”

Penny looked surprised. “You did?”

“Yes. I knew you had a picture without a frame. So I made one so you could frame it before you gave it to her.”

“Oh. Well, Margaret has to get her own frame. This one’s mine. Besides, I already had a picture for it.”

“I see,” Michael said as he looked at the picture. “I thought you gave that picture to Rose.”

“I did. But I redrew it that night.”

It was the picture of Rose victoriously lassoing Michael in the yard.

“Thank you,” Michael said as he kissed her again.

“For what?” she whispered.

For not calling it ‘Jason’s’ desk, he wanted to say.

For calling it ‘our’ quilt and ‘our’ room.

For keeping the frame.

“For not letting me go!”

Chapter 38

Penny watched from the window as Michael saddled his horse. He wanted to ride across the property, make sure any strays were herded back to their proper range. She waved as he rode by. He smiled and waved back. Her gaze went to the lacey curtains hanging in the window. Penny was still amazed at how they were made. They looked so delicate.

Two days after the wedding, Michael and Penny drove back to town to have breakfast with Conrad and Toni before they boarded the stagecoach heading home.

“I wish you could stay longer,” she heard Michael say to his sister and Conrad.”

“I do too,” Toni replied. “But Conrad and the other members of Round Rock sent an advertisement out to the major towns, looking for a suitable schoolteacher. We got a response right before we received your telegram.”

Penny looked thoughtful. “A schoolteacher? Isn’t it late in the year to be looking for one?”

“Yes,” Conrad answered. “But we’ve not had one, and the town decided it was best to get one now and not wait for another year. The children get further behind as long as we don’t have one. She should be on her way right now, and we want to be there to welcome her when she arrives.”

“Ty is excited about starting school again,” Toni said. She turned and leaned over to Penny. “I do hope you can come visit us,” Toni said. “After a few more months, I won’t be able to travel very far.”

Penny watched as Toni placed her hand on her stomach. “When are you due?” Penny asked.

“In about six months.”

“Well, I’m sure I can talk Michael into visiting.”

Toni leaned forward and smiled. “Unless you can’t travel for the same reason!”

Penny gave a small gasp, then smiled.

“Something wrong?” Michael asked beside her.

Penny looked, her eyes wide and innocent as she shook her head. “No. Not a thing.”

Michael looked from his wife to his sister. “Hmm,” he said as he narrowed his eyes, looking at the slight flush on Penny’s face.

They left an hour later on the stage, with both Toni and Penny shedding tears as they hugged each other.

“I know what *my* wife’s problem is,” Conrad joked as he followed his wife inside the stage. “I’m not sure about *yours*.”

That was almost a month ago. Now, things were back to normal. Pat had decided to stay on a bit and help out. Emilio, Alejandro and Miguel were still working for them, spending most of their time in the south pasture, or wherever Michael sent them on the range.

During the first week of their marriage, Michael had opened the desk and slowly went through each paper. There were only a few that Michael wanted to keep. The rest were piled up.

“These are mostly receipts for past purchases,” he told her. “Nothing we need to keep.”

She made it a point not to go through the discarded papers. She wanted to show Michael that she trusted him.

Penny was milking the cow as the sun was setting. She heard Michael ride up, dismount and open the barn door.

“Good evening,” she called out.

“Evening,” he replied. “I see you’ve been busy.”

Penny laughed. “And how was the ride?”

Michael uncinched the saddle, then lifted it to the stall.

“Everything is where it should be.”

“No extra cattle roaming around?”

“Nope. Everything is peaceful.”

“Good.” Penny finished milking then stood up. “She’s been giving less milk again,” Penny commented out loud.

“She needs to be bred.” Michael said as he brushed his horse.

Penny looked at her cow. “She does?”

“Sure. That’s why she gives milk, because she has a calf. You don’t take as much as her calf would.”

“Well, that makes sense.”

Michael finished brushing his horse, then closed the stall door. “We’ll take her tomorrow to the herd. Give her a week with the bulls, then bring her back. With those bulls, she should be bred in no time. She’ll continue to give milk until she calves, just less and less.”

“But, what if she doesn’t get bred in the week?”

Michael laughed. “I really don’t think that’s a problem. She’s probably already in season. Those bulls have already sired all the cows in the herd. When this cow shows up, they’ll be fighting over who’s turn it is.”

“Well, I guess a girl like it when the men fight over her.”

Michael grabbed Penny around the waist. “They do?”

Penny looked up, her eyes wide and innocent. “Of course we do. We like to know we have a selection, a choice.”

Michael leaned down and nibbled on her neck.

Penny laughed as they fell in the hay in the spare stall.

Penny hesitated before leaving her bedroom. She was sure it was somehow blasphemous wearing the pants Mrs. Cutler helped her make.

“I can’t wear pants!” she had said when Mrs. Cutler suggested she sew a pair.

“And why not?” Mrs. Cutler asked as she stopped cutting the material on her kitchen table. “I have a pair of pants I wear when I need to.”

Penny looked shocked. “You do?”

“There are things that need to be done on a ranch that are difficult to do while wearing a dress,” she logically explained. “Don’t you remember when you rode that horse?”

Penny made a face. “I’m trying to forget that day!” Penny honestly admitted.

“Well, I understand why. But riding a horse in a dress is very difficult. For one thing, your dress bunches around your legs, showing more than you should.”

Mrs. Cutler held the cut material against Penny’s waist, visually measuring the length. “And besides, the pants will be loose, not tight fitting.”

Penny felt and looked doubtful. “I’m not sure. I mean, I don’t see any other women wearing pants.”

“Well of course not. We only wear them at home when we need to. Last year Steven hurt his arm and it was in a sling for several weeks. We had a terrible wind storm followed by rain storms.” She stopped pinning the material together and looked directly at Penny. “And who do you think climbed this house and fixed the roof?”

Penny’s eyes widened. “*You* did?”

“I sure did. And let me tell you, climbing a ladder and hammering on the roof while wearing a dress would be very impractical.”

Penny thought on it. “I guess it would be difficult!”

“I’m not saying to wear these pants when you go to town, but every now and then, you’ll find they come in handy. Now, let’s see how they fit before we sew it together.”

Penny helped with the sewing the best she could, but Mrs. Cutler did most of the work. When they were done, Penny tried them on and let Mrs. Cutler check the seams.

“It feels funny not feeling my skirt brush against my legs,” she admitted as she walked around the kitchen area.

“You’ll feel better if you get a pair of boots instead of these shoes.”

“Michael already bought me a pair.”

Mrs. Cutler looked up and smiled. “Smart man.”

“Yea. It was his idea to ask you for help in making the pants. I’m sure he had an ulterior motive.”

The day after she brought her new pair of pants home, Michael surprised her with a saddle.

“You need to know your land,” he admitted. “And the best way is to ride over it.”

“Why can’t I just ride over it in my buggy?” she asked.

“Because there are ditches and ravines and rocks that make using the buggy difficult, if not impossible.”

“But, why do I need to ride over it? You ride over it all the time?”

Michael stopped saddling Sadie and looked at his wife. “Do you remember the first day we met? How we asked about your land, your boundaries, your herd? And how clueless you were?”

Penny looked sheepishly to the ground as she nodded her head. “I remember.”

“You should never be in that position again.”

Penny looked up. “Does your sister wear pants and ride the range?”

“She sure does, right alongside Conrad.”

Penny looked surprised. “She does?”

“Probably not so much right now in her condition. But she enjoys riding by herself, with Ty, and with Conrad.”

Penny took a deep breath. “Well, then I guess I can learn too,” she admitted.

Michael finished saddling Sadie. “I’ll teach you how to saddle her another time. But right now, I just want you feel comfortable on Sadie, instead of behind her.”

Penny followed Michael’s instructions on how to mount Sadie. She had to admit, it was more comfortable without the skirt bunching all around her. She looked down at her legs and noticed no skin was showing. She waited as Michael adjusted the stirrups for her.

Soon, they were both riding, slowly at first, but picking up speed as she felt more comfortable.

“Where are we going?” she asked after they rode several miles.

Michael turned and smiled at her. “You’ll see.”

It was almost an hour later when they finally came to the southern pasture.

Penny looked and saw their herd of cattle enjoying the lush green grass, the large pond, and the two rivers flowing from it.

Penny just stared at the sight for a moment. “Is this what Baxter wanted?” she asked in awe.

“I think so. This pond is fed from a natural spring.”

“So this area is always green.”

“Most of the year. Jason bought a good piece of land.”

Penny looked over the herd and smiled. “Maggie!”

Michael located the older mare. “The boys have been watching over her.”

“She looks . . . content,” she finally said.

“Come along,” Michael said as he led her to a clearing under an oak tree. Michael dismounted, then helped Penny dismount.

Penny could not help but rub her backside. Michael noticed the move.

“It’ll get easier as you ride more.”

Penny looked skeptical. “If you say so.”

“I have a surprise.”

Penny watched as he opened his saddlebags. Michael had a small blanket, some biscuits and chicken, johnny cakes with a jar of molasses, and two cups.

“I thought we could have a picnic here.”

Penny had to smile. “A picnic?”

“In celebration of your first official ride across your land.”

Penny looked around at the blanket spread out, then watched as Michael walked to the stream and fill each cup with water.

They sat down and began eating. She was surprised when she realized she was sitting crossed legged, the same as Michael.

Maybe there was something to wearing pants.

They went to town several days later. Michael wanted to check on the lumber he had ordered, and Penny needed to buy more supplies.

He parked the buggy in front of the mercantile, then helped her out.

“I’ll be back after I check on the lumber.”

Penny quickly made her purchases, adding a few pieces of material. Her sewing was getting better, and Mrs. Cutler promised to help her make a new skirt.

When she was finished, she stood outside, wondering where to go next when she heard her name called.

“Penny!”

Penny turned to see Margaret coming from across the street.

“Margaret,” she called out, smiling as they hugged each other. “You look good. And happy.”

Margaret smiled back. “I am, very much so. And you? You look about as happy as I feel.”

Penny smiled again. “I am.”

“You are so different from when you married Jason. Don’t get me wrong, I thought Jason was a kind man. But Michael brings out the best in you.”

“I’ve learned so much, not only from Michael, but from others here in town. I’ll never be able to say thank you enough for all that everyone has done.”

Margaret squeezed her hands. “How about a cup of tea?”

“That sounds fine. But just a minute.”

Penny stepped back into the mercantile.

“Mrs. Chase?”

Mrs. Chase looked up from her ledger. “Yes dear?”

“When my husband comes by, will you tell him I’m at the hotel restaurant?”

Mrs. Chase smiled. “Of course.” She looked from Penny to Margaret. “You both have a nice visit.”

They headed to the hotel restaurant and both ordered a cup of hot tea.

“I get so tired of coffee,” Margaret confessed. “I love tea.”

"I remember that. Your parents always served tea when I visited."

"They're from the east. They think it's 'proper'."

"They chatted about their new lives."

"I didn't realize I needed so much when I got married," Margaret confessed. "For some reason, I thought Don's new house would be the same as my parents. Just walk from one home to the other. But I had to buy all the basic staples in the kitchen." Margaret laughed. "It was rather fun buying everything. And one of the wedding gifts was money 'for the basics' it said. At the time, I didn't know what that meant. But the next day I realized the meaning. But at least the house is finished. I'm so glad all the building is done."

"Ours is just starting," Penny said.

"Starting?"

"Michael wants to make the barn bigger, especially since we have the extra horses."

Margaret nodded her head. "That makes sense."

"And since the three workers I have hired on are carpenters, I'm hoping the work goes smoothly and quickly."

Margaret's expression turned serious. "You know, when Jason died, Don and I had just started courting."

Penny frowned. "I didn't know."

"I know. When I saw you at the funeral, I didn't know what to say."

Penny remembered.

I'm so glad Jason brought you to Clearwater. You made him so happy.

"I was so miserable for several weeks," Margaret continued. "I felt guilty for feeling so happy when you had lost so much. Don will tell you, I stopped the courting for a time."

Penny was shocked. "You did?"

Margaret nodded her head. "You don't know how much I enjoyed our visits when you came to town. I felt I could be myself."

Penny smiled. "And I enjoyed them every bit as much too."

"It was a whole month before I allowed Don to court me again. By then, I realized how much I really loved him. I never

saw you in town anymore, and I missed our visits. But Don was so encouraging. He kept telling me I had to have faith, and that it would all work out.”

Margaret smiled as she squeezed Penny’s hand. “And then Michael Bradley came. I started to see you more in town, and you were more, alive, than I’d ever seen you. I think somehow Michael filled a need in you.”

“I think you’re right.” Penny agreed.

“And,” Margaret continued, “I think you filled a need in him as well.”

Chapter 39

“I gather you had a nice visit with Margaret?” Michael observed as they sat side by side in the buggy heading home.

Penny smiled. “Yes I did.”

“Good.”

“I forgot how much I missed her visits before.”

“Too bad she no longer lives in town. It’ll make it more difficult to meet up with her.”

Penny turned toward him. “I was thinking, maybe we could plan our monthly visits to town for supplies on the same day each month. Then maybe Margaret and Don can do the same thing.”

Michael nodded his head. “That could work. What did Margaret say?”

“I didn’t ask her yet. I wanted to see what you thought of the idea first.”

Michael inwardly smiled. “I think it’s a great idea. The lumber should be delivered next week. We can drive over to their place, talk to them, and maybe set up a schedule.”

Penny leaned over and kissed Michael on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“For what? Agreeing with a good plan?”

“No. For agreeing with a good plan and helping me to execute it.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek again.

Michael turned to Penny, his eyes full of mischief. “Mrs. Bradley, if you keep that up, we are not going to make it to the ranch house any time soon.”

Penny giggled as she scooted closer and grabbed his arm. “I don’t think life can get any better.”

While Penny was preparing dinner, Michael checked over his plans for the barn addition. He found something that needed to be changed and patted his shirt looking for a pencil. He felt a lump instead.

“I forgot, I passed the Post Office and they told me you had a letter,” he said as he pulled the letters out. “Actually, you have two.”

“I have a letter?”

“Two,” he corrected.

Penny wiped the flour from her hands and reached for the letters. The top one made her smile.

“It’s from Rose!” she anxiously cried out.

She tore the letter open and looked at the young handwriting. “Shall I read it to you?” she asked as she sat at the table.

“There might be something private in her letter,” he joked.

Penny smiled. “Then I’ll stop reading out loud.”

Michael got up, poured them each a cup of coffee, sat back down and folded his arms in front of his chest. “I’m ready.”

Penny began to read:

Dear Mrs. Banks:

Papa said I could write to you. I am home now and going back to school. Joel walks me to school every day. Then he walks me home. Thank you for the picture. Mama put it on my bedroom wall. I have been practicing with my rope.

“The word ‘practicing’ has been written out, like she wrote it as someone spelled it to her,” Penny noted.

I even caught Joel when he ran around the barn. I miss you. Please write back.

Rose

“That was sweet,” Michael said as Penny turned to the next page.

“There’s more.” She looked at the note. “The handwriting’s different. It’s not from Rose.” She looked to the last page. “It’s from Mr. Tanker.

“Dear Mrs. Banks,

I cannot tell you how grateful we are for what you did for Rose. I know when we last saw you, I still harbored the thought that you were somehow involved with Rose’s abduction. Rose still refuses to talk about when she was taken or what it was like with those people. But she talks about you and Mr. Bradley constantly. I know now in my heart that you were in no way responsible for her being taken. But that instead, you were responsible for getting her away from them.

I have heard that the couple responsible for taking Rose have finally been caught. I can only be thankful that they will never be able to cause pain to any other family like they did to mine.

I know we refused to let you say good-bye to Rose the next morning, and for that I am now greatly ashamed. My wife is still coming to terms with things, and I am sure in time, she will agree with me as to both your innocence and your intervening.

Please accept my apology and sincere thanks for what you have done.

You gave us our daughter back.

Edward Tanker

Michael rose and went to hug his wife, who was silently crying. “I told you they would come around.”

“I’m so glad he let Rose write to me.”

She read the letter from Rose again, smiling the whole time. Then she lifted the other letter. “It’s from Anna!”

“I thought so. I’ll go milk the cow while you read this one.”

She turned to her husband, glad that he was considerate. “Thank you.”

When he left, she tore the letter open. There were several pages.

Anna wrote about receiving a small inheritance from her parents, now that she had been found. She was planning on traveling some, to see what was out there. To see her future.

She was also thinking of the idea of owning a boarding house. The one she was staying at was run by an elderly couple who were thinking of selling. They have no children, only a sister who was not interested in the establishment. She was having a lawyer look into it. Hopefully, when she returned from either the east or the west coast, she would have a better idea if she would be interested.

The last two pages were of a different tone.

I have heard of the arrest of Ben, Clara and Jake. I cannot say I am sorry one bit, they caused so much suffering. I am hoping when they go to trial to be there myself, to add my voice to the crimes against them.

I think I mentioned before that I had hired a private investigator to locate my relatives, which they admirably did. Since then, I have had them look into other areas. I have had my suspicions about Ben and Clara adopting the three of us. So I had the matter investigated. They could find no records anywhere of the three of us being legally adopted anywhere. I had already learned that my parents indeed did die, but they died several years after I was taken.

Needless to say, it took me several days to come to terms with what Ben and Clara actually did to me. I then had the investigator begin looking into your background.

Dearest Penny, I believe I have found your parents. I have met them and am positive you are their daughter. I have told them only a little about you, but that I did know you. As you can

imagine, they want to meet you. I would not promise them anything, as I am not sure about your feelings on this matter. I have agreed to setting up a meeting in Marmet, which is a few towns away from you. They understand that you may chose not to appear, that your life is different now. But they are willing to take that chance. If you chose to look for them, they will be at the Marmet hotel lobby at noon the last Friday of the month.

I hope I did right. They are anxious to see you, and as I said, I am sure they are your parents. If you meet them, you will understand why I feel it is so.

I hope to hear from you soon, little sister, either way. Know that I love you, and wish you all the happiness you deserve.

Take care,

Your sister, Anna

Penny sat and stared at the letter, her coffee forgotten before her.

Her parents were still alive!

She was never adopted!

Ben and Clara stole her, the same as they stole the other girls. All those years of being unloved and ordered about. How could they have done that!

Michael returned with a cold jar of milk from the creek. When he opened the door, he saw Penny staring at the pages before her. He stopped when he realized how pale she had become.

“Penny,” he asked as he placed the jar on the table. “Penny, what’s wrong? Did something happen to Anna?”

Penny just sat there, her eyes glued to the pages in her hands.

Michael reached out and touched her arm. “Penny, honey.”

Penny slowly turned troubled eyes to him. “Michael,” she said.

Her hands were so cold, he began to rub them in his hands. He saw her cup of untouched coffee and poured it out, then filled it with hot coffee.

“Here, drink this.”

Penny held the cup, hugging her fingers around the warm cup.

“Penny, drink some,” he softly ordered.

Penny lifted the cup and took several sips.

“Now, what’s wrong?” he asked as she placed the cup back on the table. Penny handed the last two pages of Anna’s letter to him. He quickly read it.

“How could they do that?” she asked when he finished the letter.

Michael shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“They never adopted us! They stole us, just like the other girls.”

Michael rubbed her arm. “Didn’t you ever suspect, especially after knowing what they were doing?”

Penny took another sip. “I guess I began to suspect when Marshal Browning asked me. I realized then that he even suspected it.”

Michael looked at the letter. “What do you want to do?”

Penny looked at Michael. “I don’t know,” she honestly answered. “I really don’t know.”

Chapter 40

“Michael, I’m not sure about this!”

Penny grabbed the side of the buggy as it came to a halt. Her eyes automatically went to the hotel on her right.

He could almost hear her unspoken questions:

Were they there?

What was she doing here?

They probably forgot all about her by now!

They probably are not even inside!

What would they expect?

Why did they let her go?

“Do you need a few minutes?” Michael’s soft and assured voice broke through her racing mind.

“I need more than a few minutes. I need a few days, or even months!” Penny blinked, trying to calm her mind. “What if they don’t want me?”

Michael had to strain to hear the question. His heart went out for this young woman sitting beside him. His wife. As much as he wanted to protect her, he knew what she needed most right now were answers.

And they were waiting inside.

He jumped down, then reached his arms to help her. He saw her eyes glued to the hotel behind him. He noticed her hands

were shaking.

“Penny?”

When she did not respond, he gently touched her face, turning it toward him.

“Take a deep breath. That’s right. Now another.”

He breathed with her and was pleased when color returned to her face. There were many people walking up and down the boardwalk, and in and out of the hotel. So Michael led Penny to stand beside the open doorway. With her back to the doorway, Michael could see several of the tables inside. He briefly noticed one couple staring at them.

“Feel better?” he asked as his gaze returned to Penny.

“I’m scared,” she confessed as she watched several people pass by them.

“I know.” From the corner of his eye, Michael could see the woman seated inside stand up. She made to walk toward them, but the man with her pulled her back. The woman looked like she was going to cry, and the man pulled her into his arms.

“I remember when Anna . . . and Alley left,” Penny whispered, her gaze looking into the past, “and I was alone with Clara and Ben. I remember how scared I was, how alone I felt. Then, when I was sent off here, I felt the same.”

Michael resisted the urge to hug Penny. Instead, he quietly listened.

“Now, I feel like nothing has changed.” She shook her head. “It’s like I’m still that little girl, afraid and alone.”

Michael shook his head. “No. This time, something has changed.” His rough hands gently cupped her face as he brought his face closer, their lips almost touching. “This time, you’re not alone! You have me!”

He sealed his declaration with the softest of kisses.

He noticed the man and woman inside were again seated. The woman was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief. The man was looking directly at him.

It was time!

“Are you ready?” he asked, a smile on his face. “No matter what happens, I’ll be right here beside you.”

He was rewarded with a smile from Penny.

“Thanks.”

He gathered her in his arms and gave her the hug he wanted to give her a moment ago.

Penny looked around, unsure. “I’m not even sure if they came. We may have made this trip for nothing.”

Michael again gazed at the couple sitting in the hotel restaurant, intently watching them.

“They came.”

Penny saw Michael’s gaze and turned in his embrace to see who he was looking at.

Michael did not need any proof that these were indeed Penny’s parents. Penny looked just like the woman, same eyes, nose, hair, same face. There was no denying these two were mother and daughter.

When Penny saw the couple watching them, she slowly took a step forward, out of Michael’s embrace. Knowing that Michael was behind her, she took another step, then another.

The woman did not wait. She rose and closed the gap between them.

“Ginny?” the woman softly called out.

Ginny?

Penny’s face showed surprise. “Ginny?” she asked the woman.

Penny’s mother was smiling as she looked her daughter over from head to toe. She reached out to touch her daughter, afraid after all these years that she would somehow disappear again. But when Penny felt the gentle stroke on her cheek, the woman suddenly hugged her.

“Ginny, you’re alive,” the woman said incredulously. “And you’re so beautiful.”

Both women were crying as they held each other.

“I think we had better sit down,” Michael suggested.

The two men had to guide the women back to the table. When everyone was seated, Michael looked at the man, Penny’s father. “I’m Michael Bradley.”

“Lee Jenson. And this is my wife, Beatrice.”

Still holding Penny, Beatrice looked up to Michael, a warm smile on her face. “Hello.”

Michael took off his hat, then nodded his head. “Ma’am.”

Beatrice looked back at Penny. “I can’t believe it’s you. We’ve looked for you everywhere.” Her hands were constantly stroking Penny’s cheek, hair and arm. “Where have you been?”

“Well, for awhile, I lived in Middleton, Texas,” Penny offered as way of an explanation. She turned to Michael. “This is my husband Michael.”

Beatrice gave a soft gasp as she quickly gazed from Michael to Penny. “You’re married?”

Lee Jenson looked from his little girl to the man sitting beside her. He noticed how Michael’s arm rested on the back of his daughter’s chair.

“You’ve been gone so long,” Beatrice spoke again. “Oh Ginny, we never gave up hope you were somewhere with a good family.”

Penny made a decision. These people did not need to know everything right away. “Is my name Ginny?” she asked.

Beatrice looked confused. “We call you Ginny, but your real name is Virginia. That was your grandmother’s name.”

Penny remembered what Anna said about her real name being Hannah. Hanna/Anna, Ginny/Penny. Clara and Ben had obviously changed their names to sound like their real names. “Virginia,” she said to herself. A small memory surfaced of a woman tickling her. “*I’ve got you now, Virginia.*”

Penny smiled at the memory.

“I’ve been going by Penny,” she finally said as she tucked her new memory away for safekeeping.

Beatrice looked sad for a moment. “Well, Penny is a fine name too.”

Penny smiled.

Beatrice tried to control herself as she sat up straight. “I know you must have many questions for us.”

Penny saw the uncertainty in her mother’s eyes. “I do.” She looked to Michael for reassurance. At his nod, she turned back to her parents. “How old was I when I was taken?”

“You were four. I had taken you, your brother and sister to a park to play with the neighboring children. We had been there several times, and you knew almost all the children there. You had been chasing a ball . . .”

Beatrice’s voice cracked with emotion at the memory.

“One minute you were there, then the next, you were gone. We searched for you for hours. All the neighbors helped, but you were nowhere to be found. For weeks, we went out in the neighborhood looking. We even hired a private detective. He suspected you were taken by another family.”

“I was. They had taken two other girls, so I always had someone to play with.”

Beatrice was holding back her tears. “Did they love you?”

Penny hesitated but for the briefest moments. “They loved me the best they could,” she answered truthfully. “I have a brother and sister?” Penny asked, not wanting to dwell on the family that took her.

Beatrice smiled as she placed her hand on her husband’s. “Shawn and Emily.”

“Shawn and Emily,” Penny whispered to herself. She could faintly hear her mother’s voice, *Shawn, watch out for your sister! Emily, stop chewing on Ginny’s hair!* “Are they older?”

“Yes. Shawn is 3 years older and Emily is 2 years older.”

Lee asked a question. “How long have you been married?”

Penny smiled. These were happier memories. “Two months.”

Beatrice gave a soft sigh as she looked between Michael and Penny. “You’re newlyweds.” Then her face sobered. “I’m sorry we missed the wedding.”

Penny looked at her father, and noticed the kindness in his eyes. She remembered those eyes, laughing.

Penny noticed the tattered blanket in Beatrice’s lap. Beatrice followed her gaze, then tenderly brought the blanket to the table.

“Do you remember this?” Beatrice asked.

Penny touched the soft blanket. “It’s blue!”

Beatrice smiled. “Blue was your favorite color.”

Penny smiled. “It still is.”

Beatrice looked at the blanket in her hands. “I know you are

no longer a baby, but it was the last thing I had that was yours before you disappeared.”

“I remember a soft blanket. . .and the smell of honeysuckle.”

Beatrice smiled again. “There was a honeysuckle vine growing along the side the house. Your bedroom window opened to the vines.”

Vague memories were just on the boundaries of Penny’s mind. She looked at her father. “You drew a picture on my wall.”

Lee smiled as he finally sat back in his chair. “You remember.”

“It was a tree. . .and a bird?”

Lee nodded his head. “You wanted a tree in your room, so I drew one.”

Beatrice and Lee looked at Michael as he chuckled. “I see where she gets her talent from.”

Beatrice and Lee looked from Michael to Penny. “Talent?” they both said at the same time.

Ignoring the stern look Penny was sending his way, Michael looked back to Lee. “Your daughter draws. And very well.”

Lee looked from Michael to his daughter, then to his wife, a smile of fatherly pride on his face.

“Your father is an artist,” Beatrice pointed out. “He has several exhibits every year.”

Penny looked with pride at her father. “Really?”

Lee nodded his head. “It’s something I enjoy doing.”

Penny smiled. “I enjoy my drawing.”

Lee reached over and covered her hand. “Maybe one day you can show us some of them,” he suggested.

Michael cleared his throat. “Actually, I brought a few of her sketchbooks with us.”

Penny looked at Michael, surprised. “You did?”

“Sure. You’re very good, and I’m proud of you.”

Penny turned from Michael to her father, unsure if her drawings were good enough for an artist. “I don’t think he wants—”

“But of course we do,” Beatrice jumped in.

Michael squeezed her shoulder as he rose and left the table. For a moment, Penny was alone with her real family.

Beatrice leaned forward. "Are you happy?" she asked in a whisper.

Penny smiled. "Yes," she confidently said. "Very happy."

Michael returned with two sketchbooks, the first one with her pictures mostly of Anna and Alley.

"These are my sisters," Penny paused. "Well, we called each other sisters."

"They are lovely," Beatrice said as she turned from one page to another. "And you all looked so different."

"I know. But we each wanted something from the other. I wanted Anna's darker skin, Anna wanted Alley's hair, and Alley wanted my freckles."

Beatrice looked up and stroked Penny's cheek, her finger brushing across her nose. "Shawn and Emily have freckles too."

Lee was turning the pages, then suddenly stopped. Both Beatrice and Lee stared at the picture.

Penny looked over the table to see which picture captured their attention.

"Oh, that picture is one I never could finish. I never could remember the details."

Never taking his eyes off the drawing, Lee reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a wallet. Inside was a small photo, a photo of him standing behind Beatrice who was sitting in the parlor chair.

Penny looked at the picture and realized it was the same.

"I had the photo taken," Lee said, "then I painted it on canvass and gave it to Beatrice."

"I have the picture hanging in the parlor, above the fireplace," Beatrice said.

Penny looked again from the picture to her vague sketch. "I must have remembered it, just barely. Not enough to remember any details, but just vaguely."

Beatrice let a tear slip down her cheek. "I would like to think that you kept a small part of us with you, even if you didn't remember it."

Penny thought that was a nice idea.

They looked through the remainder of the book and saw the pictures of Jason.

“Who’s this,” Beatrice asked.

Penny had hoped not to discuss Jason, or Ben, or Clara with them.

“This was Jason.”

Lee looked up. “Was?”

“Jason died almost a year ago. He was a good friend.”

Michael now knew what bothered him the first time he looked through these books. He realized there were no pictures of her so-called parents, of Ben or Clara. Even then, Penny must have had suspicions.

That night, Penny lay in the arms of her husband. They had decided to stay the night in town, giving them time to visit the next day before Lee and Beatrice had to leave at noon.

He had not been surprised when they retired to their room that Penny took her sketchbook and began filling in the details of her parent’s picture. He laid his head against the headboard and watched as his wife quickly filled in the detail work. It amazed him how quickly she remembered details. Her strokes were quick and precise. When she was satisfied with her work, she went to a blank page and began sketching Beatrice and Lee sitting in the hotel restaurant. He closed his eyes, waiting for her to finish.

He opened his eyes when he no longer heard the pencil sliding against the pages. Penny gave a satisfied sigh as she closed her book, a smile on her face.

“Finished?” he asked as he sat up.

“I think so. At least for today.”

He watched as she lovingly patted her book, then placed it on the dresser. He scooted over when she came to bed and nestled her head on his chest.

“I like your parents,” he whispered into her hair.

He felt her smile. “I do too. They’re so different from what I was expecting.”

Michael remembered when Beatrice asked if the couple who took her, loved her. He heard Penny's quick hesitation before answering *they loved me the best they could*. He remembered looking at Beatrice and noticed how she accepted the answer. But when he glanced at Lee, he saw that her father had noticed the hesitation, and probably understood exactly what Penny did not say.

But Lee had kept silent.

Michael hugged his wife. He let his hands wrap around her stomach and wondered if she had any idea yet. He was pretty sure she was pregnant, but Penny gave no indication that she knew.

He was thinking he needed to send her to Mrs. Cutler. Mrs. Cutler has a way of suspecting the truth. All she would have to do would be to ask a few innocent questions.

How have you been feeling?

How's your appetite? You barely ate anything.

You should be thinking of having your own family instead of visiting with us all the time.

When was your last monthly?

Penny was smart. She would catch on fairly quickly. He was eager to see her flushed face from excitement when she finally would tell him.

He gave her another squeeze

Yep, as soon as they returned home, he planned to make a visit to the Cutler ranch.

He felt her fidget.

"Having trouble sleeping," Michael asked as he tightened his hold.

"Some. I just can't believe how this day has turned out. I was afraid . . ."

"I know," he whispered. "I know."

Penny thought for a moment. "Was I bad to not explain about Jason?"

"No. You didn't want to tarnish this day with sad memories."

"I feel that I betrayed Jason somehow."

"Jason would understand. Another time, another visit, and you can explain about your first husband. Now is a time for

healing.”

Penny agreed.

“Is Pat going to stay on, or head back to your sister’s ranch?” she asked as she snuggled deeper into Michael’s embrace.

She felt him shrug his shoulders. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I hope he stays. I enjoy his company.”

“Yea. Pat’s a good fellow.”

“Maybe he needs to find wife!”

Michael laughed out loud.

“What’s so funny about Pat finding a wife?”

Michael was still laughing. “I’m not sure there’s a woman out there who could handle Pat. He likes to be free.”

Penny gently slapped his chest. “If he met the right woman, he would change his mind.”

Michael was shaking his head. “I’m not sure.”

Penny lifted herself up and rested her weight on her elbows. “Don’t you want your friend to be happy?”

“Of course I do.”

“And don’t you think that if he found the right girl he would be happy?”

Michael took a moment to consider it. “I guess so.”

Satisfied, Penny laid her head back on Michael’s chest. “If Pat did find a girl and got married, do you think he would stay with us?”

She felt Michael take a deep breath. “I’m not sure. His family is back in Round Rock. I never thought where Pat would live if he got married.”

Penny let her fingers trace figures on Michael’s chest. “Well, I hope he stays. I know how much you like his company.”

“Yea, I do. He’s a good friend.”

“I agree.”

As she lay in the comfort and security of her husband’s arms, Penny smiled. Her life felt complete. She had all she needed.

Especially with the man laying next to her.

She snuggled closer. “Thank you,” she whispered as she kissed his cheek.

He leaned over and kissed her back. “For what?”

For showing me how to accept help from the community.

For showing me how to trust that the truth would come out with Rose.

For showing me, by you own family, how a family could be close.

For showing me how my own true family never gave up on me.

She remembered when he almost walked away, how she finally gained the courage to say what was in her heart, that all she really needed was him!

“For not leaving me!”

Author's Note:

Thank you for downloading this copy of "[All I need is You](#)." After I finished "[A Knight in Cowboy Boots](#)", the character of Michael stuck in my mind. I decided he needed to have his personal story.

I would love to hear about your favorite character or your favorite scene. Contact me any time via the obooko feedback link on my obooko download page, or email me directly at charmainscallaway@yahoo.com.

Again, thank you,

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