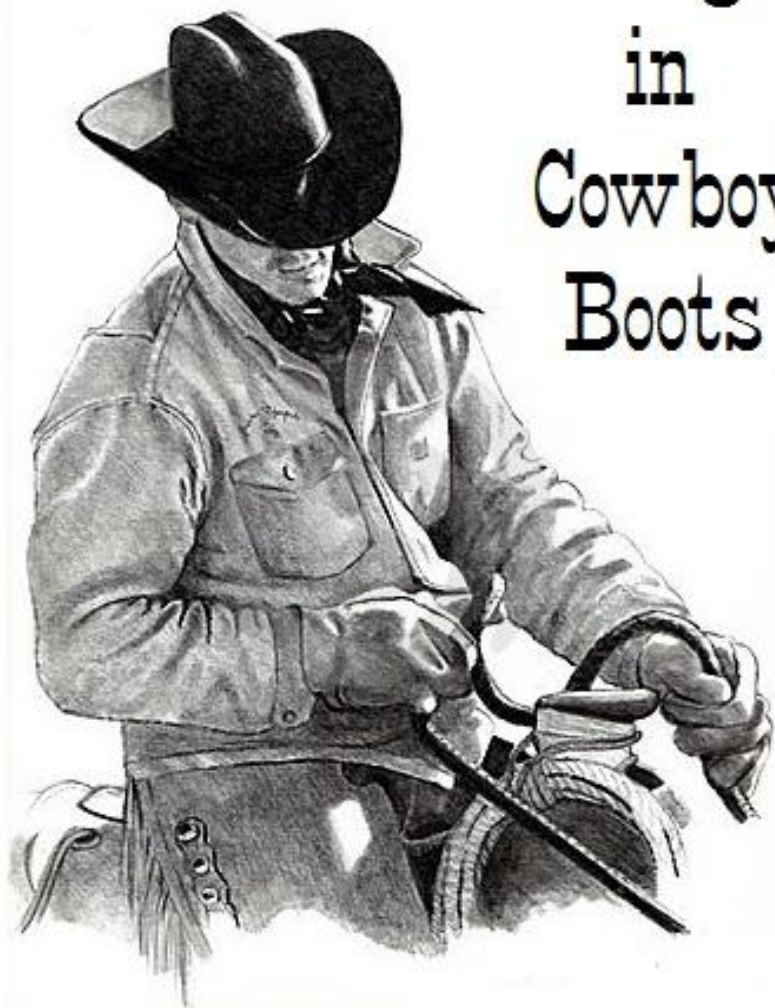


A Knight
in
Cowboy
Boots



Charmain Callaway

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

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Prologue

West Texas, 1860

The first shot knocked the look-out guard off the top of the wagon. The second shot winged the man riding shotgun, followed quickly by a third shot which caused the man to fall forward. The fourth shot hit the driver in the heart, causing him to fall over his partner. The fifth shot hit the guard inside the wagon.

The five riders quickly rode alongside the wagon, a rider on each side as they grabbed the lead horses and brought the wagon to a halt.

“Make sure they’re dead,” the leader commanded.

The bearded man automatically turned to check on the first guard lying on the road. The thin man climbed inside the wagon, checking the last man shot while the taller man jumped on the wagon and checked on the two lying over the driver’s seat.

“That was pretty good shooting,” the younger one proudly claimed.

The leader turned toward the young man. “Then why did you only wing the shotgun-rider?”

“But, I got ‘em the second time.”

“You shouldn’t have needed the second time.”

The younger man lowered his head. He knew this man was volatile, knew what he was capable of. “It won’t happen again,” he promised, his voice subdued.

“Make sure it doesn’t. I don’t tolerate sloppiness . . . nor give many second chances.”

“They’re dead,” the tall man on top of the wagon announced as he lightly jumped down. A shot from behind them said the first man was dead—now.

The leader turned cold eyes to the thin man, who wisely did not try to justify why he missed his mark also.

This seemed to appease the leader.

By the time the bearded man returned, the young man and the tall man were dragging three boxes from the wagon. Three more shots, and each of the locks became useless. Four men huddled around, waiting for the leader to open the boxes.

Using the toe of his boot, the leader lifted the lid of the first box, then the other two.

“Silver?” the younger man questioned. “I thought we was after gold.”

Cold eyes turned back to the younger man. “Gotta problem with that?”

“Uh . . . , no.” The younger man stepped back out of the leader’s line of vision.

“You boys know what to do,” the leader’s voice was stern as he glared back at the other three. “You each have two saddlebags. Once you have the silver packed, you’ll head to Round Rock. You know who to meet there in town.”

“I thought we were sending the silver to Ohio like usual,” the bearded man spoke.

“Marshal Robertson and his deputies are crawling all over the state. Our new operation is in Round Rock, Texas. Get a message to your contacts and we’ll meet at a predetermined place. Any questions?”

The four men looked at each other. “No,” they all finally said.

“You each know your different route?”

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Each nodded their head.

“Good. It’s not wise to all show up at the same time. I’ve already established myself in the town, so remember, if you see me, we don’t know each other!”

He took a moment to slowly scan each of the four faces. “I hope I don’t have to remind anyone of what happened to the last man who thought he could cheat me.”

Four heads shook as they each remembered. Two had known the boy before he became greedy. But stealing money does a person no good when you are six feet under.

Chapter 1

Round Rock, Texas 1861

The earth was trembling.

That was the first thing Toni thought of when she fell on her hands and knees in the sweltering heat. She lifted her head to look around the seemingly endless desert floor. Seeing nothing, she slowly rose on unsteady legs, as if her five foot five inch height would help as she scanned the horizon.

With her hands linked together and held above her brows to cut down on the glare, it was on her second pass around when she noticed a faint dark line on the horizon, the extreme heat causing the line to dance in the sunlight. Squinting under the brim of her hat, she stared at the spot, then knelt down again, bracing her palm on the hot ground.

Yes, the earth was definitely trembling.

Was it her imagination, or was the trembling stronger? She slowly rose again, focusing hard on the dark line. She could just see a faint dust cloud above the line, almost as if it was . . .

Her eyes widened as her mouth fell open.

“Oh no!” she whispered into the silence. Toni twisted

around, looking frantically.

Nothing!

Absolutely nothing!

When she turned again to the rapidly growing dark horizon and dust cloud, she noticed a tree standing alone in the midst of the desert. Gone was the fatigue in her limbs and the thirst in her throat. She ran with all she had, her hat pulling at her neck by the small delicate green ribbon that matched her shirt. She kept her eyes focused on the tree. Toni ran toward the tree, the only thing between her and the fast approaching stampede.

With his three men flanking on each side, Conrad was racing alongside the herd. Fifteen minutes ago, five thousand head of cattle was happily grazing in contented peace in the small valley he usually used to do the yearly branding.

Lefty and Juan had been dismounted, one working with the branding iron, the other taking a needed break while he and Trent were on horseback, cutting out the unbranded ones. The men preferred to stay in the saddle and work all day, so the men took turns working on foot.

He was just cutting out the next young bull, his lariat swinging in the air, when he heard the screaming cry of a wild cat echo in the small valley. Unfortunately, the herd also heard the cry and immediately headed as one in the opposite direction. His men reacted immediately, those dismounted were quickly mounted, all of them headed for the herd.

Trent and Juan were directly behind him while Lefty was on the other side. They were slowly gaining on the herd when he looked up into the distance. Sure he was mistaken, he quickly blinked again.

Someone was directly in line with the stampeding herd, running toward them!

What was somebody doing way out here?

He checked where he was again and knew there was no way he could make it to the lone person. He would never be able to cut across through the herd in time.

He urged his horse faster, starting to turn the herd inside. He knew it would make no difference, but he had to try. Trent

and Juan also started leaning into the herd, forcing them to turn to the left, causing the whole herd to slowly shift.

Toni was not sure if she was going to make it. The herd was gaining faster than she had hoped. But the tree was closer.

If she could just make the last few feet.

She was able to see the faces of the cattle, their nostrils blowing from their frantic run, their eyes glazed from their fright. She knew they did not see her. She was only an obstacle in their way, one that would very easily be knocked down and run over, effectively put out of the way.

When she was only seven, she had seen the body of a ranch hand who had been trampled by some runaway horses at her father's ranch. She had innocently run to the wagon to see what everyone else was looking at. No one noticed her until they heard her startled gasp. But before her father could send her away, she had seen the deep cuts all over the ranch hand's body, his clothing in shreds from the hooves, revealing deeper cuts. What was left of his face was unrecognizable. For a month, she had nightmares.

With that thought in her mind, Toni concentrated on the tree directly in front of her, forcing her legs to move faster.

She noticed the limb hanging above the ground, a few feet higher than herself.

It was going to be close. She silently counted the feet remaining, ten . . . seven . . . five . . . three . . . two . . . jump! It was less than a minute later when she felt the wind rush below her from the herd as she swung her leg over the limb to hook over her other leg. The tree shuddered from the herd bumping into and brushing by the small tree that was her lifeline. Hugging the limb, she silently gave a prayer of thanks for giving her the needed strength.

Conrad watched in amazement as the person raced toward the tree that was between him and the herd. He watched as he leaped through the air, catching the limb above him, and deftly swung his body out of the way, locking his hands and feet around the limb.

Conrad pulled away from the herd, signaling his men to

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continue. He then spent the next few minutes walking his horse, Dancer, allowing him time to cool down while the herd passed by. With the dust still clinging to the air, he approached the hanging figure.

Toni realized the herd had finally passed when the tree quit shaking. She had kept her eyes closed the whole time, afraid she would somehow let go. With her ears still ringing from the thundering hooves, she did not hear the approach of the lone horseman, nor did she see the astonishment on his face as he rode closer.

It was a girl!

There was a girl hanging on the limb of the tree! What in blazes was a girl doing in the middle of his range in the first place? He rode toward her in silence, setting his stern face back in place.

When he was almost directly underneath her, he noticed her hair was loose from her run. It was almost pure black with waves and curls. Her hat was dangling from her neck by a thin green ribbon. Most of her hair was cupped in the hat, a few strands escaping on the slight breeze that stirred the air. She was wearing a split skirt, her knees appearing above her worn boots where the skirt had rode up.

He knew he should not stare, especially when she was at a disadvantage, but his curiosity got the better of him. He wondered what she was doing here. Where was her horse, or buggy? He looked around, fully expecting to see one or the other, somewhere.

Nope, nothing at all but empty space.

He leaned forward on his horse and waited for her to notice him. He figured he would have to say something to let her know she was no longer alone when she suddenly started talking to herself.

“So help me, when I get hold of him, I’ll kill him! The idiot! Stupid, stupid idiot!! Whatever possessed me to listen to that man in the first place?”

Conrad's right eyebrow rose at her incensed statement. He felt sorry for whoever she was so upset at. She really did sound

capable of murder right then. With only a moment's pause, she continued on.

"Getting me lost in the middle of nowhere. So help me, he will rue the day he talked me into this. *'You'll have no problem at all. It'll be so simple.'* Hah!!"

Conrad smiled when her voice rose in pitch when mimicking what someone had spoken to her. He knew it was rude to listen and that it would be the proper thing to let her know he was there. But she barely finished one sentence when she launched out with another string of threats for the poor man.

"Incompetent fool! You would think I would learn by now." She paused again, but only long enough to catch her breath. "I swear, a porcupine has more brains and sense than that man does."

She seemed to possess a temper, and Conrad could just imagine the fire in her eyes.

Toni was livid. Here she was, somewhere, probably lost, hanging from a tree, with no idea what to do next. She was ready to launch another verbal attack on her brother when she heard a horse underneath her. She turned her head quickly to see a beautiful Appaloosa with stripes on his hooves and the traditionally dotted patch of white over his rump and loins. But as beautiful as the horse was, what caught and held her attention was the man calmly seated on his back.

He was leaning on one arm, which was resting on his thigh. His worn and battered hat was pushed back to reveal a tanned face with a square jaw. Light brown hair was plastered to his face, emphasizing a hatband mark across his forehead. On his face he wore a darker mustache along with a few days growth of a beard. Dark brown chaps with water and dirt stains were well worn over long legs. A faded blue shirt opened at his collar showing his chest to be as tanned as his face. A tattered red bandana was loosely tied around his neck. The knot was behind his neck, indicating he had used the bandana as a mask to keep from breathing the dust. Hazel eyes were silently searching her face, laughter lurking in their depths.

"Who are you?" she snapped.

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Toni knew she was being rude. The poor man had done nothing but approach her on his horse. He was not responsible for her being where she was, up in a tree. She was embarrassed that she was caught in such a precarious position. She knew her skirt was showing more of her legs than was proper, but hanging in a tree limited one in putting her clothes in their proper place.

Conrad watched the woman with the flashing gray eyes as she surveyed him. He knew he should offer her a hand down, but he was enjoying himself so much just watching and listening to this strange woman.

She reminded him of a badger he had found with its paw caught in an iron trap. The skin around his paw became raw where he had tried to pull it free.

The badger snapped at him the whole time he was trying to help. He eventually ended up covering the animal with a blanket, then bundling him up while he worked on the steel jaws holding the small paw. The badger kept up a steady stream of snapping and hissing sounds, plainly letting him know that he felt Conrad was somehow responsible for his predicament. Even calmly talking to the animal while he worked failed to quiet the animal.

Yep, she was just like the badger, snapping and hissing.

That made his smile move from his eyes to his mouth.

“What are you laughing at?”

Conrad was sure the lady would be insulted at being compared to a badger. “I was just thinking about something. Nothing important.”

Conrad watched the sparks in her eyes. “Would you like a hand down, miss?”

“Who are you?” she asked again, skeptically this time.

Conrad rose his right eyebrow again. “I am the person trying to help you down from that most uncomfortable tree.” When the woman did not move, he added, “I also am the one who owns the land this tree is on, which makes it my tree that you are precariously hanging from.”

As if on cue, the limb she was hanging from gave a loud ‘*crack*’.

Conrad urged his horse closer and easily caught the woman

as she came crashing down, limb and all. The limb she was holding on to made a valiant effort to remove his hat as it swung in midair before it fell to the ground.

Dancer did not appreciate the additional weight as it was literally dropped on him, but he felt the pressure from Conrad's knees, which told him to hold still.

Toni was out of breath. She was not sure if the cause was from the run, the fright from the stampede, the fall from the tree, or all three. Sitting on the man's lap as she was, she quickly tried to rearrange her skirt to cover her legs and knees.

"Thank you for your help, mister?" She waited for him to identify himself. Hazel eyes showed a sparkle of mischief behind long lashes. *Why do men always seem to have longer lashes than women*, she wondered to herself.

Conrad tipped his hat. "You're right welcome, ma'am."

For some reason, she was sure he was still laughing at her. Nothing, so far today, was funny in the least bit. She was here on an errand, and the sooner she took care of business, the sooner she could return home.

Period!

"I appreciate your help," she spoke as she gave her skirt and shirt one last look over.

"My pleasure."

"The wheel on my buggy came off a few miles back."

He lowered his hat, the brim effectively shielding his eyes from the harsh sun. "What about your horse?"

She knew her face was already red from the run, not to mention from the sun. Even though she wore a hat, the reflection from the ground had still brought color to her face. But when he asked the question, which she knew he was going to ask, the color deepened.

"Yes, well, the hitch came loose and, uhm, he took off."

She did not have to look at the man to know his right brow rose, again. Not wanting him to question her any further, she continued.

"By any chance, do you know where the Morgan ranch is?"

She looked up to see his face. He had turned his horse so

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that his hat blocked the sun from her face. His tan looked darker, his eyes more intense.

“Sure do.”

“Do you know Mr. Morgan?”

“Most folks around here know Mr. Morgan,” he answered in a soft drawl.

Toni took a deep breath. “Is his ranch far from here?”

Conrad turned his head and looked to the east. “About five miles that away.”

Toni was not sure about what to do next. She was stranded without any means to travel except her legs. But she knew that in this heat, it was not safe to walk the distance.

“Would it be much of an inconvenience to take me there?”

Conrad turned his head back and gave a long look at the woman. “Is he expecting you?”

“Not that it’s any business of yours, sir, but yes he is.”

Conrad had to smile. Her temper seemed to have an extremely short fuse to it. “Sounds fair.”

Toni was wondering what he meant by that when they started heading south.

“I thought you said the ranch was east?”

“I have to let the men know that I’m leaving for awhile. If that’s alright with you?”

Toni looked up, intending to give him one of her scalding looks when she saw the laughter in his eyes.

Conrad saw her shoulders relax, then heard the soft chuckle and felt the slight shake of her shoulders while she laughed.

“I’m really sorry. But this day has been one disaster after another. I usually don’t snap at people like that for no reason.”

“I think everyone has the right to snap every now and then.” He looked down into her gray eyes, noticing the fatigue from a day gone wrong.

“Thank you, very much. My name is Toni, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Toni.”

She liked the way he said her name. Lord, the heat was really getting to her. How many times did Wayne call her name like that?

Wayne.

So much for another week going by without her thinking of him. In a way, she was grateful that her rescuer interrupted her thoughts.

“Name's Conrad.”

She nodded her head once for emphasis. “Conrad.”

The lone man at the make-shift camp did not even try to hide his surprise when Conrad rode up with a woman on his lap.

“Frenchy, tell the men I'll be awhile.”

Frenchy stared for a moment while Conrad explained about delivering Toni to her destination, then looked up. “Sure Boss. But if you want, I'll deliver the young lady?”

Toni saw the hope in his face fall when Conrad declined the offer.

“Thanks, but I can take care of it.”

On the way to the ranch, Toni asked about the stampede.

“What spooked the herd?”

“We seem to have a rogue cat around these parts.”

“A rogue cat?”

“Yep.”

Toni not only felt the sudden tension in Conrad's body, but she could also hear it in his voice. “Is this the first time he caused your herd to stampede?”

Conrad was quiet for a moment before answering. “You hear him every now and then. We would find a few of our herd laying dead from the kill. But last month, we finally had the herd together. Most of my men were taking a break and eating when the cat sent the herd running. They went right over the chuck wagon. Killed eight of my men, wounded five.”

“Why don't you track him down?”

“We've tried a few times, but he always seems to elude us.”

Toni looked ahead. *Not only a rogue cat, but a smart one at that.*

Conrad shook his head, clearing away the memories. “Are you sure Mr. Morgan is expecting you?”

Toni turned around in the saddle the best she could so she could look the man in the eyes. She saw confusion behind his

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eyes, for some reason.

“Yes, I’m sure.” She paused a few moments, then turned back around. “Why do you ask?”

She felt the large shoulders behind her slightly shrug. “Most folks around here know everything that goes on. Don’t rightly recall hearing mention about a young lady coming for a visit?”

Toni smiled. Well, at least *everyone* did not know *everything*.

Chapter 2

Virginia, 1861

The town was quiet as Wade tied his horse to the post, his eyes scanning the streets: McGraw Stables, McGraw General Store, and McGraw Saloon. It was not difficult to know who was a major landowner here. He rubbed his chin, feeling several days growth of beard as he walked past the barber shop. He had hoped to arrive earlier so he could have a proper bath, shave, and then change clothes. A quick look at his pocket watch told him those luxuries would have to wait.

His hat made a quick slap across his legs, the loose dust making a small cloud as his eyes continued to scan the streets and boardwalks for anything unusual, any person out of place. Satisfied, he pushed open the swinging doors of the saloon, the smell of sour liquor, dust and sweat filling the room.

It was just past noon and already there were several men inside. He mentally counted three ranch hands leaning against the bar while four of the seven tables were occupied, one with two ranch hands, one with two men he was sure were foremen, and one with four men playing cards. Judging by the satchels

next to two of the players, Wade figured these two were waiting for the three o'clock stage while the other two looked to be local townsmen. In the far corner, the last table was occupied by a lone man, his back to the wall, a shot-glass and a half-filled bottle of whiskey on the table. Their eyes locked as the man sitting gave a barely noticeable nod. Returning the gesture, he made his way to the corner.

"Stevens?" Wade confirmed as he approached the table. Stevens nodded his head as he held out his hand.

"Wade," Stevens acknowledged, a slight tilt to his head. "Was expecting you yesterday," the man greeted as Wade sat in the chair against the adjoining wall.

"Would have been here earlier, but there was a mine cave-in in the last town I passed. Decided to help the townfolk."

Stevens nodded his head as he gave the barkeep a signal. "How many trapped?"

"Three. Took all night, but we got all of 'em out. One had a busted leg, but otherwise, they were fine."

"Good."

Both men paused as the barkeep placed a clean shot-glass before Wade, then returned to his place behind the bar.

"Thanks," Wade offered as his companion poured a shot from his bottle.

Stevens waited till Wade finished his first drink, then refilled his glass as he brought up the reason for the meeting.

"As you know, the counterfeiterers are getting bolder back east. With the Civil War running its course, President Lincoln is concerned with freeing the slaves, but he's more concerned with uniting the Nation. Right now, every bank in every town prints their own banknotes. The government estimates that there are several thousand varieties of genuine currency flooding the nation. With all the assorted notes in circulation, shopkeepers are having a difficult time determining the difference between a genuine banknote and a bogus bill."

"I heard rumors that the government is planning to make one note to be recognized throughout the country."

"President Lincoln is highly considering it."

Wade took another drink. “Has the government considered how the counterfeiters are going to react? They are very adaptable.”

“To be honest, I don’t think they’ve thought that far. Several of us have been chewing on the problem. If this new Legal Tender Act goes through, we think it’ll make it easier for the counterfeiters.”

“How do you figure?”

“Right now, a small storeowner will study a large banknote from a distant town or state, wondering if it’s real or fake. But the same storeowner would most likely accept a large U.S. Note without a second thought. Did you know, the government believes about half the paper currency in circulation is counterfeit?”

Wade gave a soft whistle.

“Some of the bills we’ve recovered looked good,” Stevens continued, “but it was easy to see where they misspelled words. Too many people never noticed.”

“A lot of people never finished school.”

“True. One of the best counterfeit engravers was finally caught. His five-dollar bill was so accurate, it even fooled experts.”

“That good?”

“Yeah. As you know, most of the counterfeiting rings are located in major cities where there’s a substantial printing industry and a major transportation hub to make it easy to distribute the counterfeit bills or coins. In the past three or four years, though, many of these organizations are heading west where there’s less law enforcement to hinder their work.”

“We’ve been noticing a rise in counterfeit coins even out here. With the absence of effective law enforcement, seems counterfeiters are hoping to enjoy a very long and lucrative career.”

“Unfortunately, you’re right. And these counterfeiters blend in well with their surroundings. They can be anyone from a seamstress buying food, to a gambler paying off a winner, or a shopkeeper making change.”

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“Wherever these thieves hope to do their business, I assume it’s important they not be strangers.”

Stevens finished his drink, then poured himself another. “In order to use the public spaces and meeting places, they need to establish themselves as regulars with some pretense of legitimate employment.”

“Well, to qualify as a regular, they would have to live in the vicinity, same as their honest neighbors.”

“Like I said, they blend right in.”

Wade took another drink. He had a feeling he knew where this meeting was heading. “Notice a central area?”

“Somewhat. There’s a particular area in Texas, but where we’re noticing the coins are a far piece away from each other. Somehow, they’re either shipping or transporting them.”

“Any idea how they’re transporting the coins?”

“We’re not sure yet. But somehow the coins are being shipped from one place to another without anyone noticing.”

“Many businesses use a shipping company today. Finding one particular one may be difficult to locate.”

“People are losing confidence in the paper currency, so they’re starting to use more coins. The government is having a hard time keeping up with them. They’ve started to print fraction bills, but the people are still wanting to use coins. Several months ago, a stage was held up and a large shipment of silver was stolen. Three of the men on the stage were found dead, but one was barely alive.”

“Did he mention who was responsible?”

“No, but he kept repeating two words over and over until he died. We want you to go and investigate. We’re not sure if they’ve established an organization there, or if it’s just a lone man operation. Either way, we need to find that shipment of silver, hopefully before it becomes counterfeit coins.”

Wade nodded his head. “Where am I going?”

“Round Rock, Texas.”

Chapter 3

Round Rock, Texas 1861

“What do you mean, you’re Mr. Morgan?”

Conrad slightly leaned back in the large chair behind his desk as he watched the young lady before him. He decided he liked the way her raven black hair framed her face.

“Now, what can I do for you?”

“Why didn’t you tell me who you were before?” she challenged.

“What difference would it have made? I still needed to deliver you here, if anything to get you out of the sun.”

“It doesn't take that long to identify yourself.”

“I did.”

Toni bristled. “You know what I mean. You knew I was on my way to see you.”

Conrad looked through several piles of papers before finding the letter he was looking for. “The only person I’m expecting is a Mr. Logan. So, unless you are he...” he left the sentence to drift off as he laid the letter back down.

Toni’s clenched jaw relaxed. With exaggerated slowness, she

rose from the chair and approached the massive desk. Leaning over, she offered her right hand.

“The name is *Anthonia* Logan, Mrs. *Anthonia* Logan.”

Toni watched Conrad’s face as he scanned the letter she had written two weeks ago. He finally laid the paper down again on his desk, rising to shake the offered hand.

“My pardon, Mrs. Logan.”

Toni gave a slight smile. “Most people make the same mistake.”

Conrad stood until Toni reclaimed her seat, then sat back down himself. “Now that that little mystery is solved, what can I do for you?”

“I’m here on behalf of my brother.”

“Brother?”

“Michael Bradley.”

Conrad’s eyes rose a fraction at the name. “Your brother,” he softly spoke as he leaned back in his chair. “And how is Michael recovering?”

“Quite well, thank you, although he’s still limping around. The doctor says he should be good as new in three or four months.”

“Tell him I’m glad he’s mending.”

Toni eyed Conrad with a hint of suspicion. “I will.”

Conrad nodded his head.

“As I said before, I’m here in behalf of Michael. He informed me of the small accident that occurred last month.”

“*Small* accident?” Conrad asked as he watched her open her purse and withdraw a folded bank check.

“If you would be kind enough to inform me of the damage Michael caused, I’ll write you this check, then I can be on my way back home.”

Conrad examined the woman sitting before him. If he looked real close, he could see the resemblance between brother and sister, same eyes, same nose, same cheeks. He wondered just how much Michael had told his sister about what happened.

“I told Michael not to worry about it.”

“Yes, he told me.”

Conrad watched as she flattened the check on the desk, clearly intending to write on it. "All right." *Let's just see how much Michael told her.*

Conrad opened a large drawer at the bottom of his desk and pulled out an overstuffed file. In less than a minute, he located the paper he was looking for. Conrad took a quick look at her face before he rattled off the amount.

Toni began writing, "Eight hun . . ."

Conrad heard the pause and looked back up.

"I beg your pardon, how much did you say?"

He repeated the amount.

Toni just sat there for a moment and blinked. She had to have heard wrong. She had to. "*Eight hundred?*"

Obviously, Michael did not tell her everything. "Twenty five dollars and fifty cents," he added.

Conrad watched eyes change from confidence to stunned disbelief to confusion to outrage, all in less than one minute.

"I really don't think this is funny, Mr. Morgan."

Conrad looked at the file again. "Believe me, this is anything but funny."

"Just exactly what did Michael damage?"

Conrad laid the papers back in the folder, then closed the folder shut. "The bunkhouse burnt down, injuring several men."

"How did the fire start?"

"The day before, the men had been in town spending their pay. When they returned, obviously several of them were liquored up. Michael was tired, and he remembered leaving the kerosene lamp on the table when he fell asleep."

"So, he knocked over the lamp?"

"It appears so. But, like I said, I told Michael to not worry about it. It was an accident."

"Not worry about it? No wonder he asked me to come out here and settle it up with you. He's been laying at home worrying over this debt that he created, obviously a very large one. No wonder he's as upset as he is."

"Look, Mrs. Bradley,"

"Logan," she corrected.

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Conrad looked up. “Mrs. Logan,” he corrected. “As much as it cost me when Michael had his accident, replacing the money value is not that important right now.” He rose and walked around the desk, leaning his hip on the edge while facing her.

“Then what is important right now?”

Conrad watched his boot swing in the air. “As I mentioned before, I lost several men when the herd stampeded last month. Michael’s accident took out another three of my men, men I am still trying to replace.”

Toni knitted her brows together. “Then why not just hire extra men?”

“Easier said than done.”

“I don't understand.”

“This is the busiest season of the year. We have the yearly round up, branding, castrating, not to mention delivering over three thousand head to various army posts. Then I also have the horses to round up and break for the army, which I am already behind on as well. If I don't deliver the promised cattle and horses to the army on time, I will lose the contract, a contract that will ensure a profit for the next five years. My problem is that I am not the only ranch around here. Many of the young men are off fighting the war in the south. Others are in California or Utah panning for either gold or silver. The men who are available have already hired on to other ranches. There are far too few men left to choose from to hire.”

“Oh, I see.” And she did. One year, her father did not have enough men to work, and he ended up losing a lot of money. While other ranches were shipping their cattle or herding them on cattle drives, her father was still working on rounding them up. By the time he was ready, the buyers had already bought what they needed, so her father only received a fraction of the worth of the herd.

And Conrad was in the same situation. Obviously money was not as important as manpower was right now.

The study door opened and a middle aged man came through with coffee and biscuits.

“Thanks, Sam.”

Sam nodded his head to Conrad. "Miss," he tipped his head as he walked out, shutting the door behind him.

"Why isn't he out on the range?"

"Most of these men drift from town to town, year after year. They don't know about loyalty to a ranch, only what they get in return for their work. And there are only two things a good hand works for, his pay and his food."

Toni turned back to the closed door. "And Sam cooks?"

"He's the best I have right now."

Toni turned back around. "Why not hire a woman in town?"

"Believe me, I've searched all over."

Toni looked again at the closed door, a plan forming.

"But if you found someone, then Sam could return to his work?"

"If I hinted that I found someone, he would be back in the saddle in a heartbeat."

"Well then, maybe there is some way I can repay our debt."

Conrad looked at Toni, a frown crossing his face. "No."

"No? You haven't even heard my idea yet."

"I already know what it is, and the answer is still NO."

"And why not?"

"Because, I don't need someone like you around here."

Toni stood up, her hands on her hips. "What do you mean, *someone like me?*"

Conrad took a moment to let his eyes travel up and down her figure, taking the time to appreciate the womanly curves she possessed in all the right places. "My men don't need any distractions right now. We have enough work without losing time to hold your hand."

Toni kept herself from bristling. "I don't need anyone to hold my hand, as you so politely put it, Mr. Morgan. I can do a job that you need done, freeing one of your men to do another job that you need done. You win both ways."

Conrad narrowed his eyes. "What does your husband think of you traveling all alone out here?"

"My husband is no concern of yours."

"I beg to differ. I don't want some irate, jealous husband

causing more problems I don't need to deal with.”

Toni gave a heavy sigh. “I am a widow. You have nothing to worry in that regard.”

She noticed Conrad's eyes softened. “I'm sorry.”

“Thank you, but it's been several years, and I'm used to taking care of myself.”

“I can believe that. Still, the answer is no.”

Toni took her time as she slowly placed the check back into her small purse. “Mr. Morgan, my grandfather instilled into his family that no matter what, the family supported each other, stood together, fought together. Many generations before him lived by that creed. If one of us owes you, you may as well accept that one of us will pay it.”

Conrad shook his head. “The answer is still no.”

Toni crossed her arms across her chest. “You obviously don't know the Bradley family very well, Mr. Morgan.”

Cold gray eyes clashed with steel hazel blue eyes. “Obviously not!”

Chapter 4

When Toni drove the wagon into town for supplies, she headed first to the livery stable. Louis Satchel, who rented the horse and buggy to her, was in the corral, grooming the stock.

“Mrs. Logan,” he excitedly called out as she anchored the reins around the brake lever. Putting down the brush, he came around to her side, offering a hand for her to dismount.

“Mr. Satchel,” she acknowledged in return.

He saw her looking over the horses. “Ginger came home the other night.”

Toni gave a sigh of relief. “I was worried about her loose, after the wagon wheel broke.”

“I am sorry about that. I sent my son, Shaun, out to fix it.”

“I’m sure he’ll find several parts of the tack scattered between here and there. I tried to unhitch her and ride her, but she got spooked by some noise and bolted.”

Louis looked alarmed. “You didn’t *walk* to Mr. Morgan’s ranch?”

“No, no. Right after it happened, Mr. Morgan found me and took me to his ranch.”

“Oh,” Louis said with relief as he looked around. “Is Mr. Morgan with you?”

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

“No. He left early yesterday, heading to the neighboring towns looking for extra men to hire.”

“Ah. Hope he finds some. Tell him I’m ready for those new horses whenever he is.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“How’s Star?”

“She’s doing fine. I think she should foal in a few weeks.”

“Dana will be pleased.”

“Dana?”

“Mr. Morgan’s daughter. She’s away at school right now. Star is Dana’s horse.”

“Ahh! Well, while Mr. Morgan is away, I’ve been making sure she’s comfortable.”

“That’s good. I remember when she was born, Mr. Morgan promised her to Dana.” Louis chuckled. “That young girl stayed many nights in the barn, making sure the young foal was safe and taken care of. I hope she returns home before she foals.”

With a promise that Ginger was indeed fine, Toni drove the wagon to the Hotel. Every time she rode into a different town, it amazed her how they all looked alike. There may be fewer or more saloons, an extra mercantile store, and different homes scattered along the streets, but everything else was the same. And Round Rock was no different.

Every town west of the Mississippi knew the railroad was eventually coming, and every town was built, hoping theirs was in line with the proposed track. Every town knew the railroad could breathe life into it, or be the last nail in its coffin. Hoping for the former, towns were quick to attract as much attention as possible.

Men from nearby ranches were always eager to spend their hard-earned dollar as soon as it touched their palms. Saloons were a popular place, which was why towns usually had several to choose from.

And as the town grew and families moved in or nearby, the need for other businesses increased. Churches became a permanent fixture, with services held every week instead of twice a year. Many schools would share the church building until the

town grew enough to build a permanent schoolhouse.

As the people came, so would the hotels and restaurants. Stores would become more specialized, selling only a specific type of product in more varieties. It would become more like the cities she had seen back east; a store for dresses, for hats, or for boots and shoes.

This town, so far, had one general store, two saloons, a lawyer's office, a shoe repair shop, the Assayers office, a hotel, a livery stable with a corral behind it, a Doctor's office which also serviced as his home, a blacksmith, an Undertaker's office, and a restaurant with vacant rooms behind for the weary traveler. Many homes were situated between the various shops.

Stopping at the Hotel, Toni quickly went to her room to pack her few belongings. She had planned for a short visit. Now it appeared she was going to need more clothes and personal items.

Taking a few moments, she wrote a letter to her family.

Toni headed to the General Mercantile store where she met Mrs. Greene, the proprietor's wife.

"How long before this letter will go out?" Toni asked.

Mrs. Greene took the letter, studying the address, then turned to check the stage schedule tacked to the wall behind her. "I can have it in the mail pouch leaving on the twelve o'clock stage tomorrow. It goes directly to the town, so it should get there in three or four days."

Toni nodded her head as she paid the postage. "I have two orders. First, I need some yarn."

"Yarn? We have a few balls over by the material. If you want something different, I can show you the catalog and you can order some."

"I'll check the barrel. I also need to purchase some supplies."

Mrs. Greene took the list Toni handed to her. "Will this be cash or credit?"

"Does Mr. Morgan have an account?"

"Yes."

"Charge it to Mr. Morgan's account."

"It'll take a few minutes."

"I'll take a look at the yarn you have."

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

“Fine.” Mrs. Greene turned to locate the first item on the list. “You’re new in town. I saw you get off the stage a few days ago.”

“Yes.” Toni noticed an older woman standing in front of the store window, staring inside. “I’m working for Mr. Morgan.”

“It’s always a pleasure to see new faces. I’m not sure if you know it yet, but Preacher Adams will be visiting in two weeks. He only comes by every two or three months, so we’re excited. In fact, I think Mr. Curry is scheduled to house him that week.”

Mrs. Greene turned to check a schedule tacked to the wall behind her.

“Yes, he is. He’s to have dinner with us on Tuesday. Everybody takes turns feeding him while he’s here, so as to not be a burden to any one family. He’s so busy when he’s here, visiting all the families and encouraging them. Three months ago, he stayed with us. We’re hoping to soon build a proper church.”

While Mrs. Greene was boxing the supplies on Toni’s list, the elderly woman entered the store.

“Mrs. Greene,” the woman hesitated while clutching her small purse, her eyes quickly scanning the store. “I need some flour and sugar. Not much, just enough for a few days.”

Mrs. Greene looked flushed as she carefully looked around. Lowering her voice, she whispered, “I can let you have—”

“Mrs. Baines,” Mr. Greene interrupted as he bolted through the back door, his eyes snapping at his wife. “I’m glad you came by today. Are you here to make a payment?”

Mrs. Baines looked flustered as she glanced around the store. “Well, no, I haven’t—”

Mr. Greene gave an exaggerated sigh. “Mrs. Baines, we can’t keep giving you items and crediting your account when you refuse to make any payments. Surely you can see that’s no way to run a business.”

Mrs. Baines expression fell. “Yes, I know. But work has been slow.”

“Well, that may be. But you really can’t expect my business to suffer just because yours is practically non-existent.”

Toni watched as Mr. Greene, a tall man with balding hair,

craftily led Mrs. Baines by the arm and escorted her to the door.

“Well, yes. I guess so.”

“Good. Now when you have a payment, by all means come back and see me.”

“But—”

“I’m glad we understand each other. Have a nice day.”

Mr. Greene turned and closed the store door. Toni could see Mrs. Baines through the glass as she stood on the boardwalk, a dazed look on her face before turning and slowly heading across the street.

“Poor Mrs. Baines.”

With several balls of yarn in her hand, Toni turned to Mr. Greene. “Oh?”

Mr. Greene established himself behind the counter as he casually went through the receipts for the day. “Her husband passed away last year and left her in quite a fix, owing almost everyone in town.” Mr. Greene shook his head as he opened the ledger. “Didn’t know how to budget money. Spent far too much on things that were not important.”

Toni thought she heard a sound from Mrs. Greene as she walked by.

“Maybe if she had learned how to run the hotel instead of staying in the kitchen all day, she would still have it. I make sure Mrs. Greene knows how to account for every cent.”

Mr. Greene looked at his wife as she put several more items from the list into a basket.

“Had to sell the hotel to Jeffery Selton,” he continued, “but she still owes us more than she’ll ever be able to pay. I let her get things she needs, out of the goodness of my heart.”

I’ll bet, Toni thought to herself.

Toni turned to see Mrs. Baines walk out of sight. “What does she do now?”

“Oh, she helps Millie with her sewing, but she’s not very good.”

Toni felt her temper rise. “I don’t know. Anyone who can sew two straight stitches together is better than me. Doesn’t she have family that could help?”

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

Mr. Greene began tallying the order. “Has two sons, but they live back east.”

Toni had an idea. “You said that Mrs. Baines stayed in the kitchen. Did she cook the meals at the hotel?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, she prepared all the meals for the guests.”

“That must have been difficult, especially if the hotel was full.”

“Never heard a complaint about her cooking. But her sewing!”

“Really?” Toni was not really listening as she looked out the store window in the direction Mrs. Baines had gone. “Really?” she repeated, more to herself.

“Is anything wrong?” Mrs. Greene asked.

If Michael had been around, he would have noticed the look in his sister’s eyes, one he had seen more times than he cared to remember. A look that usually led to some obscure or strange idea she had formulated in her head.

A look that usually preceded the words he dreaded to hear most: “I have a plan.”

Chapter 5

Conrad rode into the town, his eyes scanning the area, noticing where everyone was. With a heavy sigh, he dismounted and entered the local saloon. Another scan.

A few men were sitting at a nearby table, drinking from the same bottle. At another table, a lone man was playing a game of solitaire.

“What can I getcha?” the barkeep asked.

As he laid his coin on the bar, Conrad ordered a beer. “I’m looking for men to hire.”

Conrad knew if any one person knew what was going on in town, it would be the local barkeep. Men living in town, riding through, or working on nearby ranches, all seemed to end up in the saloon. Men spoke freely in a saloon, and a good barkeep remembered what he heard.

The barkeep shook his head as he set the beer on the counter, then pushed it forward. “Most men already hired on for the season. A few men here and there left, but none I would hire,” he nodded first to the two men sitting at the table, then at the man sitting alone, “if you get my drift.”

Conrad glanced at the men again. “Yea, I do.” Some men could not stay at any one place, either they caused trouble with

the other hands, or they were lazy, or worse, they rustled cattle for themselves or someone else. These men were not worth any pay.

“I’m heading north. Heard of any men looking to hire on?” Conrad asked.

“Carter Ranch up north was looking for men. Probably hired whoever was around.”

Conrad finished his beer, then placed another coin on the bar. “For the information.”

“Thanks.”

Back outside, he remounted, then turned west instead of north. He had already been gone three days, and had yet to hire one hand. Of course, Sam was now back working with the men. He still was not sure how he let Mrs. Logan talk him into letting her stay on as a cook. He meant what he said about not needing any distractions. What he did not mention was that he was speaking about himself.

Diane had been gone several years now. There were a few women in town he saw, but none regular. It would not take the men in town long before they knew of Mrs. Logan.

They may already know. He would not be surprised if the men were already lined up, knocking on his door.

Mrs. Logan was a right pretty woman. He briefly wondered how she managed to still be single. She mentioned she was a widow for several years. How many was that? How long had she been married? Children? She must have married very young, like he and Diane did.

Her family had deep roots in the land. He could appreciate her feelings about family. He felt the same way. She seemed like the kind of person who would work alongside her man, someone who understood the land and wanted to make a difference. Someone who wanted to make their own mark in life.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. Yep, this was a distraction he did not need at this time.

He needed to get back and help his men. He would spend the night at the next town, then tomorrow, extra hands or not, he was heading home.

Charmain Callaway

He needed to keep focused.
Somehow, he had to get that contract filled.

Chapter 6

Toni was helping Mrs. Baines fix lunch for the men. After talking with her the other day, she knew the older woman would do nicely.

In fact, Toni had stopped by the General Store and adjusted her order, adding several items suggested by Mrs. Baines.

Mrs. Baines was a flurry of activity in the kitchen. With the beans and ham simmering in the dutch-oven, she was already spreading the dough and cutting out biscuits. The aroma of apple and cinnamon hung heavy in the air, the three freshly baked pies cooling on the spare kitchen table.

Mrs. Baines also liked to talk while she worked. It appeared she had a wealth of information about the people in Round Rock.

“Mrs. Greene mentioned you were a widow,” she added.

Toni’s eyes narrowed for a moment. “Small town gossip seems to thrive in every town, no matter the size or location.”

Mrs. Baines looked alarmed. “I meant no disrespect.”

Toni shook her head as she waved her hand in the air. “It’s not your fault. I was just surprised how fast news traveled about me.”

“Most folks roundabout know about everyone else. And they take note of anything different. Especially when a new woman

comes to town. The further west you go, the fewer women are available.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“Women are so scarce, several of the men have sent for mail-ordered-brides. That’s how Mr. Greene found his wife.”

Toni’s brows went up. “Mrs. Greene was a mail-ordered-bride?”

“All the way from New York.”

“New York? She doesn’t sound like she’s from New York.”

“I heard her family moved there from the south. Her family was large, and it was difficult for her pa to take care of everyone, so she decided to leave. She answered the ad Mr. Greene placed in the newspaper.”

“I’ve heard that women were answering such ads.”

Mrs. Baines grinned. “Mr. Culver, who owns the range south of here, also sent for a bride. She arrived, took one look at him, then bought a ticket back home.”

Toni had to smile. “Well, it would make sense that not all matches would be good.”

“He had three small boys to raise. He finally hitched with a woman from the north.”

Toni watched as Mrs. Baines put the biscuits in the oven.

“Mr. Cole owns the spread south of here. His spread is the largest in the area. He mostly hires anyone who comes through looking for work, which is why other ranchers are having a difficult time hiring help. Word is he wants to get the contracts from the army if Mr. Morgan doesn’t.”

“Well, Mr. Morgan is looking now for additional men. I’m sure some will come along.”

Mrs. Baines moved in the kitchen like she had been cooking there for years. Toni felt like she was in the way. Tomorrow she was going to help the men with the branding. But today, she wanted to make sure Mrs. Baines would be fine on her own.

Helping to dry the dishes, Toni heard the hoof-beats of a horse in the front yard. Looking out the kitchen window, she saw a young man ride up to the front porch, then hesitate before finally dismounting.

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

“I guess he doesn’t know Mr. Morgan is away.” Wiping her hands, Toni went to greet the newcomer.

“Hello,” she greeted as she walked through the doorway. “I’m sorry, but Mr. Morgan...is....”

Toni halted when she saw the handful of flowers, not sure what to say.

“Mrs. Logan?” he asked shyly.

“Yes.”

“My name is Rick.” He quickly removed his hat. “Rick Curry.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Curry.”

Rick stood for a moment, not sure what to do next. Toni felt sorry for the young man. With his hat in one hand and the flowers in his other, he looked about as out of place as a man could be.

“I saw you in town the other day,” he finally volunteered.

“Oh!”

“You went to the General Store. After you left, I asked Mr. Greene, and he told me you were working for Mr. Morgan.” Rick looked around, an obvious sense of relief that all the hands were out on the range.

“If you came to see Mr. Morgan, I’m afraid he’s away at the moment.” Looking at the flowers again, Toni already knew he was not here to see Conrad.

“Actually, I came to see you.”

“Me?” Toni hoped Rick did not hear the squeak in her voice.

“Like I said, my brothers and I saw you in town. I knew they were thinking of coming for a visit, so I decided to get here first.”

“Yes, well you are the first one to stop by.” Toni watched the smile play across his face at that news. “Would you like to sit on the porch, Mr. Curry?”

“Uh, yeah. Fine. And you can call me Rick. When you call me ‘Mr. Curry’, I want to turn around and see if my pa’s standing behind me.” With his hat in one hand and the flowers still in his other, Rick sat down, then quickly stood back up when he realized Toni was still standing. “Sorry,” he whispered as he watched Toni sit down. He again glanced at the yard, reaffirming

that all the hands were gone.

Toni noticed his grip was so tight on the flowers, they were being strangled.

Toni decided to change the subject.

“Back home, I have a young neighbor named Ricky. I’m sure when he gets older, folks will call him Rick, like you.”

“Folks hereabouts never called me Ricky. I was named after my pa.” He looked down, noticing the flowers still in his hand. “These are for you.”

Toni momentarily leaned back as the offered flowers were suddenly thrust before her face. He was so nervous, she was sure if he did not hand them over, he would lose his nerve completely. She took the practically wilting flowers from his deadly grip. “Thank you.”

“They were fine when I picked them,” he confessed. “Guess I crushed them.”

“They’ll be fine when I trim the stems,” she assured him as she laid the flowers on her lap. “So, Rick, where are you from?”

“My family has a ranch next to Mr. Morgan on the west side.”

“And how many brothers do you have?”

“Two. I’m the youngest.”

“Any sisters?”

Rick shook his head.

Toni looked at the young man before her, wondering what to say next. “Are you in the cattle business also?”

“We have a large herd we’re getting ready to drive north.”

Toni smiled. He seemed more relaxed talking about his work. “It appears that everyone is getting ready to move their stock.”

Rick nodded his head in agreement. “We got about fifteen hundred head of cattle. We’ll drive about seven hundred up north.” He stood up as Mrs. Baines came out on the porch, two glasses of lemonade on a tray.

“Thought you might be thirsty,” she said as both Toni and Rick took the glasses. Toni hid a smile as Rick drank the lemonade in one toss. He looked at the empty glass, surprised he

gulped it down so fast.

"I'll just take that back inside," Mrs. Baines offered as he handed the glass back to her. She gave a friendly "You're welcome" to his shy "Thank you."

Toni took another sip as Rick's eyes looked around, obviously looking for something else to say. "I'm a hard worker," he finally offered.

"My father has a ranch in the Kansas territory. About now, he's getting ready to drive his cattle to the railroad yard to ship them back east. Ranch life is hard work. I know!"

Rick gave a puzzled expression. "Your pa don't let you work with the cattle, does he?" he asked in astonishment.

Toni nodded her head. "I work right alongside the men when I can."

Rick shook his head as he glanced around the yard. "If I had a sister, I know my ma would never allow her to work like that."

Toni tried to hide her grin. "If my mother had her way, I would never be working with the stock either."

Rick turned his gaze back to her. "Then why do you do it?"

"At first because I was raised with two brothers and my father. My mother tried to teach me all the proper things a girl should know, but I wasn't interested. Then I figured out how to get my mother to let me work outside."

"What did you do?"

"Every time I cooked, I made sure I burnt the meal so much, it was beyond being saved. Then when I did the laundry, I always managed to drop most of it in the dirt. And every Tuesday was ironing day. I can't tell you how many of my father's shirts I burnt with the iron. Then my brothers would become furious when my sewing would come apart, usually when they were doing strenuous labor." Toni smiled at a memory. "The other men would laugh at them when they came home, their shirts barely hanging on their shoulders. Finally, my mother gave up and let me work with my brothers. Said it made less work for her."

"You mean you never learned to do that stuff?"

Toni laughed. "I think my mother knew I could already do

those things, and that I was just trying to get out of it. That's why she let me go."

Rick shook his head. "I thought all women wanted a home to take care of."

"We do. But sometimes, a woman wants to work alongside her husband. It takes a strong man to let her."

Rick's expression was precious. He obviously did not agree with that thinking. Stay home, cook, clean, have children and raise them. That was the law of many of man.

It was not her law. And Wayne had agreed with her, let her be a part of their everyday life. After they had married, she had worked beside him as he built a home for them.

If need be, she would watch her son grow up without a husband. She was never alone. She had her father, her brothers, and her son.

She would never settle for anything less.

Chapter 7

The next day, Toni had planned to work with the men, but she got a late start. As a result, she was at the homestead when the next eligible suitor arrived.

“It’s a good thing there are several lemon trees planted in the back,” Mrs. Baines chuckled.

Toni was trying to hold on to her patience as Mr. Cassidy finally left. The town undertaker, he had listed his many clientele, in detail. He had lived in New York before venturing west. Crime was more common there, and he had been called upon numerous times to take care of the latest bank robber or murderer or the like. He was obviously proud of his work, proud of the many newspaper pictures that had been taken of him standing beside the coffin with the deceased.

When Mr. Cassidy finally left, it took Toni awhile to collect herself together. She should have left as soon as he did, because within half an hour, another suitor arrived.

For the next few days, several eligible suitors arrived, many with flowers, others with their manly qualities memorized. Normally, Toni had no problem socializing with other people, but this was not socializing. Men were parading before her, each extolling their finer points, their goals.

When Mr. Howard came by, she had politely listened. He had asked a few questions, but when he learned she had a small son, his demeanor changed. He quickly finished the drink Mrs. Baines had brought him, then politely excused himself.

For the first time in two days, Toni smiled. Certain she now knew how to get rid of future suitors, she made it a point to quickly mention her son Tyler to Mr. Jason, the next visitor.

Unfortunately, Mr. Jason was not put off by her having a son.

“I was blessed with three daughters before my wife passed away,” he confessed. “I wanted a son, but she died giving birth to Elise, my youngest daughter.”

“How old are they?”

“The oldest is five, the youngest just turned one.”

Toni truly felt sympathy for the man. “It’s difficult raising children by yourself.”

“Yes, it is. That’s why I need a wife. To help around the house and take care of the girls.”

Toni had let him talk about his ranch as he described the land, his stock, and how he intended to improve the stock within the next few years.

Later, she had been surprised at first to see Rick return. But as he dismounted, she noticed something was different. It was in his eyes, and in the way he carried himself. Rick had been nervous, hesitant. In his eyes, she saw his shyness. This man, even though he looked like Rick, was different.

Twins!

This man walked and carried himself like he knew what he wanted and where he was going. His eyes were sharp, scanning the area before settling on her.

“At first, I thought you were Rick,” she acknowledged. “But I’d say you’re not!”

A slow smile formed on his tanned face as he tipped his hat to her. “My name’s Kirk. Rick’s my younger brother.”

“He mentioned he was the youngest. Of course, I thought he meant younger in years, not in minutes.”

Kirk’s smile was genuine as he leaned against the front

porch. Their conversation was easy as they talked. For some reason, she was pleased he was not put off by the mention of her son.

“What’s his name?”

“Tyler. He was named after his grandfather.”

Kirk nodded his head in understanding. “I was named after my pa.”

Kirk was looking down, so he did not see Toni’s confusion. “Your pa? But...I thought...”

She was sure Rick had said *he* was named after his pa. She must have misunderstood. The poor man was so nervous that day, he must have mixed up his words.

“Thought, what?” Kirk asked, his eyes looking intently at her.

“Nothing. I misheard something. That’s all.”

Kirk nodded his head, then sat in the seat across from her on the porch. “I’m working with my pa to expand the ‘TA’ ranch.”

“TA?”

“Thomas and Anna, my parents.”

“Ah.” Toni wanted to ask how his name *Kirk* was from Thomas, but Kirk continued with his explanation of his family plans.

“I’ve been doing some reading about how to improve the cattle. We went to east Texas last year and met a man with some prize bulls. We’re saving up for one of the stock. Figured crossing it with the longhorn, we should get more meat on the hoof.”

“That sounds ambitious.”

“Yeah. It’ll take time, but soon the land will be worth more than ever. Soon, all the gold out west will pan out. When the railroad comes, the distance between New York and California will close up. And when the war in the south ends, people will naturally move on. Soon, this land is going to grow in leaps and bounds. And I aim to be firmly planted when that happens.”

“You sound like my father. When he learns of something better, my mother knows not to stand in his way.”

Finally, Kirk took a deep breath, then rose, his hat dangling from his fingers at his side.

“I appreciate your time. I know you have work to do, same as me.”

Toni also rose and followed Kirk down the steps toward his horse. “I truly enjoyed the visit.”

Kirk turned and saw the truthfulness in her eyes. “It’s been several years since I called on a woman. Is there anyone calling on you, regularly?”

Toni smiled as she looked at the ground, embarrassed the conversation turned back to this topic. “Several men have stopped by, but they are so far only checking out the new prospect in town.”

Kirk looked out across the land. The sun had risen several degrees. *Had he been here over an hour?* “I can see how awkward this can be for any female. Suddenly you have men coming from all directions.” Grabbing the reins, he easily lifted himself into the saddle. “I expect more men will stop by. Guess we all want the same thing. Question is, is that what you want too?”

Toni looked up at the deep brown eyes shielded from the sun by the brim of his hat. “I assume if the right man came along,” she honestly admitted for the first time.

“And what would he be like?”

“I’ve been married before. And I have a son. He would have to accept Ty.”

Kirk nodded his head in understanding as she continued.

“Wayne has been gone for several years now. I guess I’ve thought of myself as in mourning, still.”

Kirk was silent for a moment. “And are you?” he softly asked?

Toni looked up again, saw the genuine concern in his eyes. “Honestly, I never really thought about it. I’ve been so busy raising Ty and helping my father. The men about never bothered me, and my father never pushed.”

“Sounds like him and your brothers were making sure you had plenty of time to grieve in your own way.”

Toni was surprised she had never thought of that herself. Now that she looked back, none of the available men from the

area had come calling. Her father and brothers must have made sure she was allowed to mourn the loss of Wayne in peace. She smiled at the new thought.

“I guess you’re right,” she agreed.

“If you’re not objecting, I’d like to come by again.” He smiled at her response. “You have a nice smile. My pa always said ‘a woman content in life should have a smile on her face.’”

“I think I would like your pa. He sounds like mine.”

Kirk tipped his hat. “Mrs. Logan, it was a pleasure meeting you.”

“And you too, Mr. Curry.”

Toni watched the man ride away, then went back inside. Mrs. Baines was busy with the lunch meal, but she stopped when Toni walked in.

“Mr. Curry leave?”

“Just.”

“Looks like you were in the sun a bit too long.”

Toni’s hands cupped her face. She knew Mrs. Baines was saying something different. “I guess I was. What can I help you with?”

“Nothing. Almost got the meal ready. The boys should be here in a few minutes.”

“Then I had better get changed. I told Sam I was going to help today.” As she ran upstairs, she heard Mrs. Baines behind her, teasing.

“You’d better hurry, before the next rider comes a-calling.”

Chapter 8

Toni wiped the sweat from her eyes as Sam dragged another heifer toward her. Lefty pulled the animal down, quickly tied three of the four legs together, then removed Sam's rope from its neck. Toni was ready as she quickly clipped a notch in the ear, then grabbed the branding iron and held it against the animal's rump. She ignored the loud bellow from the heifer as the smell of burnt hair and flesh assaulted her nose again.

When she was done, Lefty untied the heifer, who bellowed the whole way back to the herd. As the one was leaving, Sam was dragging another one to take its place.

Looking to her right, she could see Trent, his lariat flying in the air as it landed over the head of a young bull. Frenchy was ready with the clips as Juan released the bull Frenchy just branded. It always amazed her how fast men could cut, tie, clip, castrate and brand. It took Frenchy, Trent and Juan less than half a minute. She was taking more time.

"Ya doin' well," Frenchy hollered as he also took a moment to stretch.

"Not as fast as you."

Frenchy spat on the ground. "Ahh, ya comin' along. At least yur not givin' away any more of the Boss's cattle."

Toni gave a playful scold. "It was only two."

Each rancher in the surrounding area had a designated area of the ear to clip or notch. When the cattle were herded closely together in a pen, it was easier for a rancher to identify his cattle by the notch in the ear than the brand on the hip.

Toni had accidentally notched the ear like she had done for her father's ranch, which was the opposite ear for Conrad's ranch.

Frenchy noticed the mistake early on.

"Besides," she continued. "You promised you wouldn't tell."

Frenchy raised his right hand, as if he was being sworn to testify. "My promise is my promise."

Toni could not help but smile as she placed the iron back in the fire at the same time she was reaching for the clips in her back pocket. Lefty had the next one ready. "Thanks."

Frenchy had another three steers done by the time she had done two. She wanted to think that Frenchy was faster than Lefty at tying the animal down, but she knew better. Still, she was impressed with the men working for Conrad.

Sam she had met the first day when he served her something to drink. He was a crusty old goat, but a fair man. He was also the oldest. Toni figured he was about thirty-five. Most ranches hired men anywhere from teenage to the mid twenties. Ranch work was hard and demanding, a job more suited for the young and strong.

Sam seemed to be the exception. He talked almost non-stop about anything that came into his mind. Some of his ramblings made no sense, but most of the time, he spouted words of wisdom from his life. He had been a fur trapper, a gold prospector, and a scout for the army. What he wanted now was to settle into life. Maybe find a good woman and stake a claim of his own.

When she first told him she was planning on working alongside the men, he shook his head.

"Ain't no woman goin' to wear pants and work!" he argued.

"And how could I help with the branding in a dress?" she countered.

“Ain’t natural,” he quipped back.

“Sam,” she pleaded, “I’ve worked with my brothers and father. Believe me, I can handle myself.”

“But, the other men...” Sam turned toward the bunkhouse, then back at her.

“The men will be so busy, they’ll forget I’m even there.”

Sam scratched his head. “I’m not sure...”

“Sam, you are the foreman. The men will follow your lead. And you know you need help. I’ve worked with my father and his men since I was a child. I know how to brand, clip and castrate. I’ve done it for many years.”

Sam almost choked when she mentioned castrating. “You...know...how to...to...” he stuttered while his hands performed the job in the air.

“Yes I do. I may not be as fast as you, but I can help.”

Sam was shaking his head again. “Ain’t natural, a woman doing that.”

Toni placed her hands on her hips, her stance stubborn. “I hate to say this Sam, but you owe me.”

Sam looked up. “Huh?”

“You owe me. When I hired on as a housekeeper, you were able to return to work with your men. Right?”

Sam took a deep breath as he looked at the ground. “I guess so,” he mumbled.

“You know Mr. Morgan needs all the help he can get. Even if it is a woman. I’m even willing to work on the ground and let one of the men ride.”

Once Sam had finally agreed, he then had to convince the others that she would do. She had expected to argue her case more, but she had been right. As the foreman, once Sam made the decision, the others followed his orders.

He had promised to keep an eye on her.

“Wouldn’t want the boss-man upset at you gettin’ yurself hurt!” he claimed as he gave her a wink.

Lefty was assigned to work on the ground with her. As his nickname implied, he was left-handed, and fast with a rope. She had learned he was originally from back east. On his way to seek

his fortune in California gold, he had stopped at various ranches, working weeks at a time to pay his way. A year ago, he found he loved the life on the range, loved being alone with the vast land, enjoyed watching the sun rise and set every day. He hired on with Conrad as a permanent hand.

Frenchy was a character. From Europe, he was the optimistic person in the bunch. At nineteen, he had drifted from ranch to ranch, slowly making his way to Oregon where his sister and brother lived and owned a shipping business. He wanted to see the land before he reached there.

Trent was a mixture of Spanish and Negro. With his dark skin and dark eyes, he had a sinister look to him. As Frenchy was the optimist, Trent was the pessimist. Some said he was running from the law, that he killed a man back east. Trent never talked about it, but Toni suspected there was some truth to the story. Many men had a past, some violent, some troubled. Changing your name and moving west was a way to start over, to lay to rest the past. Many lawmen were forgiving when they met someone whose past was tarnished, so long as their ways were now law-abiding. Only a few crimes would not be overlooked, stealing from the government, and outright murder.

There was a cautious side to Trent. He never said much, but when he spoke, he usually had something important to say.

Juan was mostly Mexican, with dark skin and eyes. He spoke English well, but whenever he got excited, he naturally resorted to his native language. He was also the youngest. She guessed his age at about seventeen. No one knew where he was from, he kept his life personal and to himself. But he knew his horses. In the evenings, she would listen as he softly spoke to each of the horses as he helped Sam to check their hooves for rocks, then brushed them down.

With these men surrounding her, Toni felt oddly at ease. Sam, it appeared, was the peacemaker of the bunch. He seemed to make a point to include everyone in whatever the men were doing.

“Ya gonna dream, or slap that iron on this here hide?”

Toni turned to Lefty, who already had the next calf tied and

waiting.

“Sorry. I was wool-gathering.”

Lefty gave her a grin as she clipped the ear, then reached for the iron. “Been caught doin’ the same thing every now and then.”

Sliding into the routine of the past two days, Toni again raised her hat and wiped the sweat from her brow. Hopefully, her father had already received her letter and sent the men she asked for. It would be just a few more days.

Chapter 9

Conrad saw his men working as he rode over the hill. He knew they would be branding on this section of his land. The smell of burnt flesh filled his lungs as he rode closer. He could tell who his men were by their movements. Lefty and Sam were riding and roping. Frenchy was tying and holding while Juan was branding and clipping. He noticed the new man working with Trent. Sam must have hired someone while he was gone.

Well, he did better than me, he thought. He had been gone almost six days and hired no one.

Found no one.

Seemed all the young men were heading to California, looking to make their fortune.

Well, he wished them luck. He knew only a few would really strike it rich. Most mines were claimed by companies now, companies that had the manpower to dig deep. The men would get paid only a small amount in cash, the rest in script which would only be redeemable at the local store. What the men did not know was that the store would raise the prices for items paid in script because the value of the script was less than cash.

The company was the only one making it rich.

Others learned that mining was not as profitable as

supplying the tools, food and animals needed. Men were willing to part with their long-saved money for a chance to find the mother-lode, the one vein that would make them rich. All they needed was the proper tools.

Men would keep coming, keep trying, and keep paying for it along the way. In the past thirteen years, he had seen more than his share of Boom towns, towns that saw their population explode from a few hundred to several thousand in less than a week. The cry of gold or silver traveled faster than any Pony Express rider.

Make-shift stores, saloons and hotels were set up anywhere they could. Most would last as long as the gold or silver continued to pan out. Once the ore was gone, the town shriveled up as quickly as it had grown.

It was an unusual sight to see.

Right now, Conrad knew a man could make a stake in life at ranching. The Railroad was quickly coming west, and the people back east wanted beef on their tables. Also, as more families came west, more army forts were established to help protect the families from the Indians, and keep a reasonable sense of law in the land.

Most ranches drove their cattle to the nearest Railroad station to ship their beef back east. But Conrad knew the forts needed not only beef, but horses as well. He would get paid less, but would not need as large of a herd nor have to drive the herd as far.

Supplying the forts around here would be enough for him.

“Hey boss!”

Conrad saw Sam riding towards him. “How's it coming?”

“Comin' along. Got most of the west valley done. Find any help?”

Conrad shook his head. “None I would want to hire.” He saw again the new hand. “Seems you found someone.”

Sam turned around, his eyes squinting as he also looked. “Yea, sort of.”

Conrad's eyes narrowed as he looked from Sam to the new man. “What do you mean, sort of.”

Chapter 10

“She’s doin’ good work,” Sam spoke out loud as Conrad sat next to him a week later. “Boys give her no problems.”

“They had better not.”

Sam heard the tone in Conrad’s voice. Maybe his boss was not aware of it yet, but Sam knew he was getting sweet on Mrs. Toni. Like she had said, once Sam had accepted her, the other men followed too.

Oh, there were the occasional stares when they first worked alongside her. After all, she was wearing mens pants, and that was a sight a man did not see very often, if ever. But she ignored the men. In fact, she worked so hard, the men had to work extra just to keep ahead of her. Within a few days, they were treating her like one of the boys.

Of course, Sam made sure they kept their language tuned down. She may work with the boys, but she was still a lady.

“You can tell she work with the cattle before,” Sam added.

“I noticed,” Conrad reluctantly agreed. He was having a more difficult time than the other men. They may have accepted her working alongside them, but he was constantly reminded she was not a man each time he looked her way. No man filled out his jeans or shirt the way she did.

At first, he had distanced himself from her, working as far away as possible. But when he heard the men talking with her, or her laughing at something someone said, a part of him bristled.

For his own piece of mind, he started working alongside her. He told himself it was to make sure the men did not bother her. But he knew better.

He had to admit, she did know how to handle the branding, clipping and castrating. It was obvious she had worked alongside her brothers and father.

Listening to the night sounds, Sam heard Star in her stall as she whinnied in response to another horse. "Don't think she'll be much longer."

Conrad turned toward the barn. "I know."

"Dana will be disappointed if she misses it." Sam looked to the west, knowing of the work still needing to be done. "Think we'll get that contract filled?"

Conrad took a drink from his coffee cup. "I sure hope so. We still have much to do."

"Yea. Guess we're behind on the horses."

"We are."

"When is the deadline?"

"We need to have them delivered within three months. Otherwise, someone else has the option on it."

Sam whistled. "Three months! What will ya do if'n you don't have the full number done?"

"Then I guess we'll take what we have and hope for the best."

"Hmm," Sam whispered into the night air.

"How's Mrs. Baines doing?"

Conrad felt rather than saw Sam straighten up. "Doin' fine."

Conrad smiled. "I notice she saves the biggest and best pieces for you."

Sam chuckled at that. "I guess she does."

"She's a good cook."

Sam was quiet.

"And a fine woman," Conrad added. "Sure will hate it when she leaves."

Sam's head snapped around. "She leavin'?"

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Conrad turned to face his foreman. “Well, any fine woman that can cook, well... surely some single man will catch her eye. She’d want to live with him, not stay here and feed a bunch of ranch hands.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed as he started listing the single men in his mind.

The list was long.

Conrad tried to keep a straight face as he heard Sam grunting next to him.

“I’d say, once the men round about hear what a fine cook she is, there will be suitors calling on her in a steady stream.”

Sam was thoughtful for a moment, then turned to his boss.

“Sort of like... them fella’s...calling on Mrs. Toni now?”

Sam was pleased at the expression on Conrad’s face.

“Each evenin’, Mrs. Baines tells her who came a-callin’ while she was workin’,” he continued. “Hear tell there’s at least three a day come by.”

Now Sam was pleased with the silence from the man next to him.

“Maybe it’s good she works with us,” he added, “and not at the house entertainin’ the young men.”

The two men eyed each other, then smiled.

Conrad drank the last of his coffee, then rose. “Seems we each have our own problems.”

Both men turned to see the silhouettes of the women on the windows.

Two women working and helping each other, teasing and laughing together.

Both men were thinking the same thing:

Was there a better sound in the world than that?

Chapter 11

Six men rode into town, dusty and tired. Nate, the unspoken leader, headed toward the first saloon they saw, the other five following behind.

“Looks like a nice town,” Tommy observed as he tipped his hat to a passing lady. “Nice town indeed.”

“Think we have far to go?” Red asked as they all dismounted, tying their horses to the rail.

Nate slapped his hat across his thighs. “We’ll see.”

Roberts, the barkeep, was polishing the glasses, getting ready for the late afternoon/evening business. Even though it was still early in the day, there were already a few patrons sitting at different tables. Mr. Alex Cole was talking with his foreman, while two other gentlemen were sharing both a bottle of whiskey and a game of poker. He had been keeping an eye on the game, making sure there were no signs of cheating. He did not cotton to fights in his saloon. Tables and chairs he could have fixed or replaced quickly, but it cost money and time to replace mirrors and glass. These two, he observed, were playing more to kill time than to make money. Another gent was off to himself, drinking slowly, waiting for someone.

He looked up as six men walked through the swinging doors.

With a practiced eye, he noticed several things at once: they were quiet, their eye contact was direct, and more importantly, their hands were not hovering around their guns. Roberts had made a living accurately reading the measure of a man when he walked through his doors. His business depended on knowing whether or not the man was trouble, wanting information, or just wanting the services offered by his establishment.

These men were going to fall into the last two categories. He noticed Mr. Alex also noticed the men, watched them as they approached the bar.

“What can I get you gents?” he asked as he wiped the counter in front of the newcomers.

“Beer,” one man spoke as he placed several coins on the counter. “This one's on me.”

The other five men smiled their approval. “Thanks, Nate,” they returned. After they each took a long drink, JT, the youngest one looked at the barkeep.

“Is there a decent place to eat around here?”

Clark laughed. “Yea, I'm gettin' tired of eating Red's beans n' bacon.”

“Didn't hear you complain last night,” Red defended.

“Yea, well, I agree with Clark,” Daniel added. “A thick steak sounds great after the last few days.”

“The best place to eat is at the restaurant in the hotel,” Roberts informed them.

“Thanks.”

“You boys riding through, or looking for work?”

All six men turned at the older man standing behind them. Nate recognized him as the man sitting with another man.

“Name's Alex Cole. I own the largest spread in these here parts.” He took another moment to check each of the men, and deciding he liked what he saw. “I'm always looking to hire on good men, if you're looking for a job. I pay top dollar for experienced men.”

Nate noticed the other man with him respectfully stood behind Mr. Cole as he spoke. Nate tipped his hat. “Thanks for the offer, Mr. Cole, but we already have a job.”

Alex's brows drew together. "Don't recall seeing you boys before. Which ranch are you from?"

"We work for Mr. Bradley," Tommy answered. "His ranch is northeast of here."

"Fellas are far from home."

"We're doing a job for Mr. Bradley," Nate clarified as he took a drink, then sat his glass down.

"Loyal to your boss. I appreciate that. Still, if for any reason you decide differently, the offer still stands. My ranch is east of town. Ask anyone."

Nate watched as the older man tipped his hat, then walked outside.

"Seemed like a nice fella," Tommy observed. He turned to the bartender. "What can you tell us about him?"

"Mr. Cole?" Roberts placed the glass he had finished polishing on the ledge behind the bar, then picked up another one. "He owns the land east of town. The largest spread for miles around. His men come in regularly. Good men. And he pays well."

"Can you tell us where the Morgan ranch is?"

Roberts set the glass he had been polishing down as he turned to the one called Nate.

"Conrad Morgan?"

"Yea."

"Take the road north about five miles. When the road splits, take the east trail. About fifteen miles, you'll see a large creek. Follow it north about five more miles. Can't miss it."

Nate placed another coin on the table.

"Thanks." The other men followed as they left the saloon.

"It'll be late by the time we get there." Clark observed as he looked up. Nate also looked at the sky, noting the position of the sun. "Morning will be soon enough. Let's have a decent dinner."

"A thick, juicy steak sounds great."

Daniel laughed. "JT, you're always hungry."

Tommy slapped JT on the back. "He's still a growing boy."

"Confess! You're tired of Red's beans 'n bacon too!"

Chapter 12

Toni was sitting down as Mrs. Baines placed a pan of fresh biscuits on the table. The aroma of fried ham mingling with fresh brewed coffee made her mouth water.

“Mrs. Baines, breakfast smells wonderful.”

Conrad entered and sat down.

Sam poked his head through the door. “Boss, riders comin'.”

Conrad placed his napkin down and headed toward the porch. With Sam on one side and Toni on the other, he waited as six men rode through the still dark yard, stopping in front of the house. He noticed the quick look toward Toni from all of the men as they tipped their hats in her direction.

“Mrs. Logan,” they greeted.

“Hi Nate, boys.”

“You know them?” Conrad asked.

“Known most of them for years. Fine men.”

Conrad narrowed his eyes as he looked from Toni to the men still sitting on their horses. He noticed the men were not surprised that Toni was wearing pants. “What can I do you for?”

Nate, the obvious leader, dismounted, a silent signal to the others to do the same. “Name’s Nate. This here’s Red, Daniel, Clark, JT, and Tommy.”

Nate offered his hand, liking the firm handshake of the man before him. He had worked both for and with lazy men before. But the past several years working on the Bradley ranch, he had enjoyed being around men who worked hard for their pay. He enjoyed working on a ranch where the men respected the owner. Mr. Bradley worked just as hard as his men did, and he paid them top wage for the work they did.

“We’re from the Bradley ranch. Heard tell you might be needing some help. I have a letter for you.”

Conrad accepted the letter and read the short note from Mr. Bradley.

While he waited for Conrad, Nate turned to Toni. “Your mother sent a package for you, too.”

Toni’s eyes widened. “Me?”

Nate opened the saddle bag on his horse and removed a long and thin package. “She made me promise I would not pack anything with it, in case it got broke.”

Toni took the package, already guessing what was inside. “Thank you, Nate.” As much as she wanted to tear it open, she waited to make sure Conrad hired her father’s men.

Conrad refolded the letter, glancing again at the six men before him. He wondered if Toni had somehow sent for the men. But he was not in a position to argue. The men before him looked like seasoned ranch hands. With this crew, he just might get the contract filled in time.

“I pay thirty-five dollars a month. And I have three simple rules: no drinking, no gunning, and no fighting on the job. If you have a problem with the rules, you can water your horse, have a bite to eat, then head back out.” Conrad watched the expression of each man at the news.

“Sounds fair to us,” Nate agreed for the group.

This time Conrad offered his hand out. “You men eat yet?”

“We had a bite at the restaurant before we headed out.”

Conrad nodded to the building next to the bunkhouse. “The other men are already eating. Mrs. Baines made plenty if you men want to join the other men before we ride out. Drop your gear in the bunk house. Sam, introduce them to the other men.

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When you're done eating, take them to the north range with the other men. See if you can finish that section of cattle branding. Lefty, Juan and I will stay and work on breaking the horses."

"Sure, boss."

Nate paused before following Sam. "If you need help, Red here is good at breaking horses."

Conrad turned toward Red. "After you eat, I could use the help."

Red nodded his head. "I'll see what you got."

"Much obliged." Nate tipped his hat again to Toni, then followed Sam to the bunk house, the other five men following behind.

Conrad turned to Toni. "Did you know your father sent them?"

Toni shrugged her shoulders. "I might have mentioned it to my father when I wrote. But like I said, they're good men."

Chapter 13

With his right foot resting on the bottom rail, Conrad watched Juan hold the mare steady as Lefty quickly raised himself into the saddle. Almost immediately, the mare's hind quarters left the ground as her back end fishtailed in the air. Lefty leaned back as the front legs hit the ground, jarring Lefty forward. The mare changed tactics by bucking straight up in the air. Lefty kept his balance as the mare jumped to the right, but lost his seat when she unexpectedly pitched forward.

Juan and Red, sitting on the top rail of the corral, were cheering Lefty on, even when he landed in the dirt.

Spitting the dirt out of his mouth, Lefty grabbed his hat, slapping it against his leg as he put it back on his head. "She sure has a wicked kick."

"You can do better than that," Juan argued.

Red gave a chuckle. "You had her fine till she suddenly twisted in midair."

Lefty stared at the mare. "Yeah. Well, she sure knows how to change her mind."

"Just like a woman!" Juan laughed.

Lefty was about to answer when he turned his head slightly, listening.

Juan chuckled as he noticed the serene stare of his friend. “I think she addled your brains with that last buck,” he joked to Red.

Lefty put his finger to Juan’s lips when Juan was about to say more. Juan also lifted his face, turning toward the sound.

Conrad grabbed the mare as she ran around the coral. “You boys suffering from sun stroke?”

When neither man answered, Conrad walked around to stand directly in front of them. He watched as first one, then the other, stared off into the sky, a tranquil look on their faces.

“What’s the matter with you two?”

“Don’t you hear it?” Juan whispered, a puzzled look on his face.

“Hear what?”

“Listen,” Lefty said as he stood next to Juan. Red also turned his head, listening.

Conrad shook his head. “I think you boys have already been in the sun too long.”

“It’s pretty,” Lefty whispered.

Juan had a smile on his face. “Yeah. It is.”

Without meaning to, Conrad turned his head in the same direction. After a moment, he also faintly heard it. He lifted his face toward the sky to listen better, just as his men had.

Red recognized the sound. “That’s Ms. Toni.”

Toni was more than pleased with what her mother had sent.

Sitting back on her heels, her hands clutched tightly to her chest as she looked at the one item that meant more to her than all the wagons of items put together, her flute. Her mother had not forgotten.

She gently held the instrument that her father had brought back from France so many years ago.

Her brother Mike had laughed at her initial attempts to play. She had spent many hours playing by the pond, in her room, and beside her mother while she had been sewing. While Mike worked on his saddle and tack in the barn, she would sit in a spare stall across from him and make up tunes. It had taken over a year, but she had learned to play songs she knew from church

and tunes she heard from the saloons when visiting town.

Her mother greatly preferred the former.

“Church songs are more inspirational,” her mother would say.

“But the songs and tunes from town are more fun,” she had objected. “And they’re easier to play.”

“But they’re from the saloons!”

“Now, Carolyn,” her father would interrupt. “Let her enjoy her music.”

“But—”

“Let her enjoy her music,” he repeated in a firmer tone. Her mother had finally given in.

Over the years, she had learned to play very well. Even Mike had admitted that.

Suddenly, memories crowded in on her. She missed Mike. And Tyler. She lovingly ran her fingers across the delicate piece of wood, carefully examining it for cracks.

Without thought, she went directly to her room and bolted the door behind her. She did not want to be disturbed right now.

She was remembering the tunes she loved to play, the tunes she hummed while working in her garden. With almost trembling hands, she raised the instrument to her lips, closed her eyes and let the music flow from her.

Conrad listened to the music. The melody was simple and pure, the notes clear and strong. There was a certain quality about the music that made one stop whatever they were doing and listen.

He looked around the corral and the courtyard. The noise from the stable, the bunkhouse and the corral, it all came to a halt. There was total silence around, except for the melody being carried on the wind. Even the mare standing next to him seemed calmer.

He decided she must be in her room.

The music flowed effortlessly on the wind. It was graceful, he thought. It was beautiful.

Just like Toni.

Toni let the music flow from her, her mood reflected in the

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notes she played. The tunes were peaceful, calming to her soul and spirit.

The notes echoed off the walls, reaching back toward her, caressing her and soothing her. Her notes blended together so well, you did not know where each began or ended.

Her fingers flew over the long staff with each breath she took. She needed this time to herself.

Her music was private, personal.

Chapter 14

“Small copper tubing, magnifying glasses, piano wires? Whatever are you doing now, Mr. Peters?”

“Uh, just some projects.”

“Well, it will be about two to three weeks for these items. We don’t carry these, so we’ll have to order them.”

“That’s fine, Mrs. Greene.” He waited patiently as she wrote down each item on the order log, then tallied the price.

“You’ll need to pay in advance.”

“Oh, that’s not a problem. I have the money right here.”

As he dug in his pocket for the money, Mrs. Greene looked up to see who else was in the store.

“Mrs. Logan. I’ll be right with you.”

“I’m in no hurry,” Toni replied.

Since the men from her father’s ranch arrived, they needed more supplies. With Mrs. Baines busy cooking, she had volunteered to come to town.

“Mrs. Logan, have you met Mr. Peters?”

Toni turned to the man. “No, I haven’t.”

“Ryan Peters is our local inventor.”

Toni was truly impressed. “Really?”

Ryan Peters was literally shrinking, he was so shy.

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“Yes. He’s always ordering the strangest items,” Mrs. Greene continued, oblivious to Mr. Peters discomfort.

“Well, I dabble here and there,” he almost stuttered.

“Don’t be modest,” Mrs. Greene gently chastised. “He’s been working hard lately. He only comes out to eat and order new supplies.”

“Well, I... I do have to go.” He nervously tipped his hat to the two women, then quickly left the store.

“Don’t be offended, Mrs. Logan. He doesn’t talk to many people.”

“That’s alright. I understand.”

“He goes out of town every month or so for a few days. I keep hoping he’ll meet some nice young girl. But he’s a loner. Likes to keep to himself, working on his inventions.”

“It’s good to have a hobby that you like.”

“Which reminds me, that yarn you ordered came in two days ago.”

“Oh, that’s great. I also have a list from Mrs. Baines.”

Mrs. Greene leaned against the counter, her face showing genuine concern. “How is she doing?”

“She’s been such a help. I’m so glad she came in that day.”

“I’m glad she’s with you. I wanted to help her more, but...”

“I understand. Any mail?”

“I do have several letters for Mr. Morgan. Would you want to take them back with you?”

“Sure.”

Toni collected the letters, then placed them inside the box of groceries.

“Thank you,” she called over her shoulder as she headed out the door. Shifting the box from one hand to the other, Toni walked out the door, and collided with a solid body.

The box fell from her grasp as she felt her feet lose their footing. Strong arms grabbed her waist as her own hands clutched the upper arms of her rescuer.

For a moment, she felt disoriented. Then the strong arms lifted her upright as her feet found the ground beneath her. Embarrassed, Toni quickly adjusted her lopsided hat.

“I’m so sorry,” she began as she looked at her rescuer.

The man stepped back as he tipped his hat.

“You alright, ma’am?”

“Yes. Thank you for your help...” Toni’s eyes narrowed as she studied the familiar face before her.

“My ma always said it was impolite to stare,” he finally said, his smile showing even white teeth.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized again. “I know, but...”

The eyes were smiling, like the man enjoyed life to the full. She got the impression that life was a game for him, and he intended to enjoy it, no matter what. Gone was the shyness, gone was the control and determination. This man was a lady’s man.

And he knew it!

“Mr. Curry?” she finally spoke.

“At your service,” he quipped as he removed his hat and bowed at the waist, his arm with his hat extended behind him.

Toni could not help herself. She laughed at the comical sight.

“I thought Rick and Kirk were twins, but I’m guessing it’s now triplets. Should I consider you quadruplets?”

“Naw. It’s just the three of us. But I’m impressed. Most folks take a long time to get us straight. Kirk said you knew he wasn’t Rick right away. I thought he was funning me. But now I know better. My name is Pat.”

“Pat. It’s nice to meet you. I have friends back east who are twins. You learn early to see the differences in people.”

“And what differences do you see in us?”

“Well, Rick is shy. He keeps his eyes lowered like he’s trying to figure out what to do next. Kirk is quiet, but more mature, more confident. His presence is felt by his silence. And you. At a glance, I see merriment in your eyes. You enjoy life. And you appear to be confident around women.” Toni paused as she intently looked at the man before her again. “And I would say you have a mischievous side to you.”

Toni was pleased when Pat’s brows rose. “I’m impressed, again.”

Toni tried to hide a smile as she knelt down to gather the

items around her feet.

“Let me help you,” Pat offered as he gathered the items further along the boardwalk.

“Thank you, Mr. Curry.”

“Pat,” he corrected.

“Pat. Are you named after your father?” she jokingly asked.

“Sure am.”

Toni looked up in surprise. “You’re kidding?”

“No.”

“Your father, Mr. Curry’s name is Tom, right?”

“Yeah. Thomas Curry.”

“Then, how can... I mean... Rick, Kirk, Pat.” Toni paused. *Rick, Kirk, Pat.* “Rick is the youngest, right?”

“And Kirk is the oldest.”

“Kirk, Pat, Rick. Kirkpatrick!”

“That’s pa’s middle name. Thomas Kirkpatrick Curry. I thought everyone knew that.”

“Well, everyone refers to him as Mr. Curry. And you have to remember, I am new here. You each said you were named after your father, and I was trying to figure out how it was possible. I thought my hearing was bad.”

“They didn’t know there were three of us. Ma promised pa if it was a son, he would be named after him. Kirk was gonna be named Tom, but then I came. Then Rick.” Pat put his fingers in his back pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. “Ma came up with the idea of naming us after his middle name.”

“That was rather clever of her.”

Pat put the box of groceries in the wagon for her. “Yeah. Pa thought so too.”

“Well, Mr. Curry. I mean, Pat, it was nice to meet you.”

She accepted his hand as he helped her onto the wagon. He then handed the reins to her.

“It was a pleasure, I assure you. Maybe we’ll meet again. I would love to meet your son.”

Toni realized Kirk must have told him about Tyler. “I’m sure he would enjoy the meeting as well. Good-day.”

Toni smiled as she drove off. She knew without looking that

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he was watching her drive off.
He was such a charmer.

Chapter 15

“Are you ready for the lye?”

Toni stirred the lard as it boiled. “I’m ready,” she answered Mrs. Baines.

Mrs. Baines collected the large bucket under the ash hopper Conrad had built yesterday for the women. Since her father’s men arrived, Conrad had refused her help with the men.

And her father thought *she* was stubborn!

The hopper was a wooden box, wider on top and narrowing to a “V” shape on the bottom. A little trough was nailed under it to drain the lye to a large wooden bucket on the ground.

After cleaning the fireplace last week, the women had discovered that Conrad had a pile of ashes in a barrel in the barn, and that he had saved the fat from previously slaughtered beef and pigs.

Both women knew what they were going to do today.

Early this morning, Toni had lined the hopper with straw to keep the ashes from flowing through. Then Mrs. Baines dumped the ashes from the fireplace inside. Pouring a gallon of water at a time on the ashes, the lye dripped into the bucket on the ground.

While the lye was dripping into the bucket, the women boiled several pounds of lard in a large wash-pot over a fire

outside. When the lard was boiling, they added the lye a little bit at a time, taking turns stirring as the mixture thicken to a syrup.

Several shallow crates were stacked nearby, each with wood-slat partitions so the soap could be poured, making several bars of soap when it hardened.

“I haven’t made this much in a long time,” Toni confessed.

“I know what you mean. But I’ll wager this won’t last as long as we think.”

“You’re probably right.”

Mrs. Baines looked up, her eyes squinting as she looked to the distance. “Looks like company is coming again.”

Toni looked up from stirring the pot. “Is Mr. Morgan expecting company?”

Mrs. Baines tried to hide her smile. “Most women would enjoy the attention you’ve been showed lately.”

Toni took a deep breath. “It has been flattering,” she reluctantly admitted.

Mrs. Baines smile widened as she glanced at the young woman standing beside her. She really liked this woman. Mrs. Logan did not quickly judge her, as many in town did, but treated her like a friend. She appreciated that Mrs. Logan did not offer charity, but instead offered her a job that she was qualified to handle. For that, she would be forever grateful. Working for Millie as a seamstress had been difficult. Even when she was younger, her sewing was not great. But now that she was older, it was difficult to even thread the small needle. She had worked in a kitchen most of her life.

Looking down the dusty road again, she noticed the buggy approaching. “Looks like Preacher Adams.”

“Preacher Adams?”

“He tries to visit every family each time he comes through town. I guess it’s been three months since his last visit.”

“The day is far along. Do we have enough to invite him for dinner?”

Toni tried to look surprised at the older woman's shocked expression.

“You know better than to ask.”

Toni chuckled. "I know. I just wanted to ask first."

"Well, that's mighty nice to think of me like that." She looked at the work they had done. "The fire has burnt down, and the soap won't be ready for another half hour."

Pulling off her apron, Toni headed for the house. "In that case, I think we have time to at least wash our faces, comb our hair and change our aprons."

Mrs. Baines grinned again as she followed the woman racing inside the house.

Toni waited until the Preacher stopped at the front of the house before she went outside.

"Good afternoon," she warmly greeted.

Adams did not try to hide his surprise when he looked up and saw the beautiful young woman standing before her.

"Good afternoon." He quickly looked around, making sure he was at the right ranch. "I usually meet Sam, but might I say it's a true pleasure to meet you."

Feeling the unexpected blush in her cheeks, Toni looked down at her hands at the compliment.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you." He quickly tied his horse and took a step forward. "I'm usually more tactful than that," he confessed.

"Would you like some lemonade? Mrs. Baines just made some."

"That would be fine." He took off his hat as she went back inside. Silently, he berated himself. He knew better than to embarrass someone like that. The towns-people expected a certain discipline from a man of God. People tended to forget that even men in his position appreciated the beauty God had created.

He had heard from several families about the new help at Morgan's ranch. He had heard whispers of her beauty, but seeing her just now, he knew why the male population in the area was talking.

Adams turned as the two women came outside.

"Mrs. Baines has some sugar cookies, if you would like some." Toni offered.

Mrs. Baines offered the plate to Adams. "They're only a few hours old. But if you wait too long, they'll all be gone."

"Then I had better take advantage of getting first pickin's."

Mrs. Baines sat the tray with cookies and three glasses of lemonade on the small porch table. When the two women sat down, he did the same.

"My name is Anthonia Logan. But my friends call me Toni."

"My name is Clint Adams. Friends call me Clint. I understand Mike Bradley is your brother."

Toni's eyes widened in surprise. "Yes."

"And how is he?"

"Still limping on his crutches. But it won't be too long before he's back in the saddle."

"That's good. No decent ranch man likes to be off his horse for too long. I understand you are a widow."

"My husband died four years past. I moved back with my father and my brother. My father is taking care of my land until a time when I can return."

"And I hear you have a son. How old is he, if I may ask?"

"He's only six. And his name is Tyler."

"It's hard for any parent to raise a child. I'm sure you've done a fine job raising him. And I'm sure you miss him."

Toni nodded her head. "Thank you. And yes, I do."

Adams turned Mrs. Baines. "And how have you been since my last visit?"

"It's been getting easier without Chad. I was working for Millie, but Mrs. Logan here hired me to cook for Mr. Morgan."

"It appears you're enjoying your new job."

"Oh, yes. It's good to be needed again. And the crew here seems to like my cooking."

Adams smiled. "Everyone wants their efforts to be recognized."

"So, which family are you staying with?" Mrs. Baines asked, changing the subject from her.

"The Curry family." He turned to Toni. "The boys told me they met you."

"Did they mention it was at different times? And that no one

told me they were triplets?”

Adams chuckled. “I see they are still pulling that trick. Maybe I’ll change this Sunday’s sermon to ‘The Dangers of Misleading People.’”

Toni smiled at the mental picture of the three men in question squirming in their seats. “Mr. Morgan will be back soon. I’m sure he would want you to join us for dinner.”

“Well then, I accept the warm offer.”

During supper, Conrad explained what had happened during the past few months.

“So many of the ranches I visited nearby are also in need of extra help,” Adams added. “Many of our young men are either heading south to support the fighting or heading west to seek their fortune in gold.”

“I visited several towns nearby looking for men to hire, but there seem to be fewer to choose from. Did you meet Dave Peterson on your last visit?”

“Yes. He bought the land west of his ranch.”

“Good. He was hoping to expand his cattle, so he needed the extra land.”

Toni listened as the two men exchanged messages from friends in neighboring towns and caught up with current news events.

“How many towns do you visit?” Toni asked later on.

“About fifteen. There are several communities that are not official towns yet, but I try to visit them as well.”

“No wonder it takes several months between your visits.”

“One has to go where the Good Lord sends him. And, I am very fortunate in that I meet a variety of people: farmers, ranchers, shop-owners, immigrants, hired help, traveling merchants. I get to meet them all.”

Mrs. Baines rose. “More coffee, anyone?”

Toni and Conrad shook their head while Adams placed his hand over his cup. “Thank you, but no, Mrs. Baines. And may I say that was a delicious dinner!”

Mrs. Baines blushed. “Thank you.”

Adams rose. “Conrad, I enjoyed the meal.” He turned to

Toni, tipping his head slightly. “And the company.”

Conrad and Adams shook hands. “You know you’re always welcome here.”

“Thanks for the invitation.” Adams looked from Conrad to Toni, his eyes taking a moment to study her facial features. She was indeed a beautiful woman. She was intelligent and funny. Family was obviously important to her. Also, she was a hard worker, not one of those who lounged around and expected others to wait on them hand and foot. He could understand why the men around were talking about her.

For a split second, a thought occurred to him. Married preachers were not uncommon. “I just might come back.”

Adams climbed into his buggy, then waved at Conrad and Toni standing on the front porch. He smiled as he turned his horse down the road.

Funny how, in all the time he had been traveling from one town to another, he never considered returning early. The people were accustomed to his visits every two or three months.

If he came back earlier, what would the townsfolk think?

Would they know? Or suspect?

His smile broadened as he slapped the reins on the rump of the horse. He adjusted himself as the horse obediently picked up the pace.

It was nice to have a reason to return to town so early.

Chapter 16

Wade walked into the saloon, parting the swinging doors with his large frame, his eyes quickly scanning the room, noticing where everyone was located. A sudden hush fell over the room as he walked to the bar.

He almost always had that effect on people.

Reaching into his vest pocket, he retrieved a coin and placed it on the bar. “Whisky.”

Roberts looked at the coin, then at the star hanging off his vest. It did not matter if anyone could read or not. Everyone knew what a U.S. Marshal’s badge looked like.

“Sure thing, Marshal.”

Wade took a moment to look around as the bartender poured his drink. Men of various ages and occupations sat in small groups, a few playing cards, talking with each other or with the paid girls. A few sat alone, savoring their drink and their own solitude.

He hoped that sitting around like this was not in his future. Life had to have more of a purpose.

Many of the men who worked beside him in the past were lying dead in the ground in various towns from California to New York. He knew exactly where most of them were laid to rest.

After all, he helped bury each one of them.

On the other hand, some decided to leave this work, find a good wife and settle down somewhere. He personally could not figure that one out, but to each his own.

Settling down was not for him.

Wade took a deep breath. *Settling down was not for him.*

Maybe he needed to rethink the idea. He was getting tired of talking to himself most of the time.

Wade's eyes shifted as the saloon doors swung open. A large man dressed in a clean city suit scanned the room, his eyes only pausing slightly on Wade's table before heading toward the bar.

"Beer," he said as he leaned against the bar. Taking his glass, he sat at a table with two other men playing cards.

Both men looked up as the man sat down.

"Mr. Hughes," the smaller one spoke. "Didn't know you were coming to town this soon?"

"I didn't figure on coming for another month, John, but I have business that needs my attention. When I'm finished, I have some personal business I need to see to."

"Plan on being in town long?"

"A week, maybe longer."

"Curt and I were just taking a break waiting for an order to come in."

"Is that the Ohio shipment?"

John laid a card on the table. "One," he told Curt. "Wagon's due in two hours, Mr. Hughes."

Hughes looked at John's hand, watched as he picked up the new card and placed it with his others. Curt took two cards, then each man made another bet. Laying the cards on the table, John groaned as three twos took his pair of aces.

"Curt, I do believe you won more than you lost yesterday."

Curt smiled as he raked the coins into his hat. "It's about time."

"How's the new guy working out?" Hughes asked as the men finished the game.

"Fred?" Curt answered. "He's doing fine. He's at the office right now."

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

“Good. Good.”

“We picked up another business,” John added.

Hughes brows rose. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Mrs. Cutter down the road ordered some special glass from Kentucky.”

“Glass?”

“Yep. Should be here by the end of the week.”

“Curt,” Hughes spoke up as he rose from the table. “I have a shipment I want you to take to Middleton.”

Curt pocketed the money as he replaced his hat. “I didn’t know we had a shipment to deliver.”

“It just came. I promised it would be delivered by tomorrow.”

“I can take it, if John can handle the one coming in.”

John walked behind the two men as they headed out the door. “I can take care of it.”

Their voices faded away as they turned left, heading to the freight office.

Neither of the three men noticed the Marshal quietly sitting against the wall, his eyes cast down, seeming to mind his own business. Neither noticed how his head slightly turned toward them at the mention of a sudden shipment to Middleton.

The Marshal’s head slowly rose as the men left the saloon. He signaled the barkeep for a refill.

“Who was that man?” he asked as they barkeep filled his glass.

“That’s Stewart Hughes. He runs the freight company. Has several offices all over the state.”

“Does he have one in Red Springs?”

Roberts looked up and scratched his head. “I think he does. Ships all sorts of stuff.”

“How long has he been shipping from this town?”

“Oh, about three years, I think.”

Wade looked again out the window, watching the three men enter a nearby building.

“Three years?”

“There-bouts.”

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Wade took a small notebook from his vest pocket and wrote this information down. "Thanks."

Chapter 17

“We got company coming.”

Toni paused in hanging the laundry as she looked down the road. Sure enough, she could see the dust cloud from a buggy or wagon. Hopefully it was not another possible suitor. She was beginning to feel like the only single female in all of Texas.

Mrs. Baines headed toward the porch. “They’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Toni quickly hung the last of the laundry. As she came to the front of the house, she saw Conrad coming out of the barn.

“Seems we have visitors again.”

Whoever it was, she needed to clean up first. In her room, she could hear the buggy as it came to a halt in front of the house. The fingers buttoning her blouse stopped as she listened to the voices.

It couldn't be.

Forgetting her hair, she ran down the stairs and through the door.

“Tyler!”

The six-year old dark haired boy turned when he heard his mother’s voice.

“Ma!”

Toni knelt down and hugged her son, her eyes catching sight of Michael, her brother, as he hobbled out of the buggy.

“Uncle Mike said we would surprise you. Were you surprised?”

Toni smiled as she ran her hands through her son’s hair. “I sure was.”

Conrad held out his hand, and Mike took it in a firm handshake. “Good to have you back.”

Mike looked at his leg, the crutches holding his large frame up. “Not sure what help I can be right now.”

Conrad shook his head. “Doesn’t matter.” He looked at Toni still checking out her son while she listened to his detailed account of their trip here.

“Where are your manners, young man,” she playfully scolded when he took a breath.

Tyler looked around, seemingly noticing Conrad for the first time. He walked up to Conrad and extended his small hand. “My name is Tyler. But ma calls me Ty.”

Conrad bent down and shook his hand. “Glad to meet you, Ty. I’m glad you brought Mike back.”

Tyler glanced at his uncle. “He missed ma too.”

Conrad smiled as he glanced at Mike. “Well, let’s get your bags inside where it’s a little cooler. I’m sure Mrs. Baines has some fresh baked cookies inside.”

Tyler’s eyes widened as he turned to face the door. “Sugar cookies?”

“Maybe. Want to help me get the bags?”

“I helped Uncle Mike carry them to the stage.”

Toni took the opportunity to hug her brother, then help him up the steps and inside.

“I gather the men already arrived?”

Toni nodded her head as they walked through the door. “They arrived last week.”

“I figured you would stay longer than you thought. And I knew you would be missing Ty.”

Toni gave her brother a fierce hug. “I cannot thank you enough for bringing him. I hope Mr. Morgan is ok with him here,

because I am not sending him back without me.”

“Ma packed you a trunk with your things. Can’t say I was surprised when we got your letter. Which reminds me, Stewart was there when your letter arrived.”

Toni gave a heavy sigh. “Surely he’ll not come!” At her brother’s grim look, Toni knew better. “He’s coming!” Toni rolled her eyes. “I mean, I know he has business here.”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he paid you a visit. In fact, he may already be in town.”

Toni watched as Conrad and Tyler entered the house, each carrying several bags. “I’ll deal with it when I have to.”

Tyler dropped his bags and ran to his mother. “You know what?”

“What?” Toni tried to hide the smile on her face.

“Mr. Carter sat on top of the stage with a shotgun. You know why?”

“No. Why?”

“He was looking out for Injuns and bandits.”

“Indians, not Injuns,” she corrected.

“Indians,” he repeated. “He said it was his job to protect the stage. He told another man there were bandits around, and they took some money from another stage.”

“Then it was a good thing he was there to protect you.”

“If bandits came, Uncle Mike would have helped, huh?” Tyler turned to face his Uncle, his adoration evident in his eyes.

“Sure thing,” Mike agreed as he set his crutches aside and fell into a chair.

Tyler turned back to his mother. “And you know what?”

“What?”

“Mr. Wilkenson sat across from us on the stage, and he showed us all kinds of tricks with cards. He even found a silver dollar in both my ears!”

Toni looked dutifully shocked. “A silver dollar?”

“Uh-huh,” his head nodded. “Uncle Mike is keeping them for me.”

Toni looked surprised. “You kept them?”

Her son’s head nodded again. “Uh-huh.”

Toni looked from her son to her brother. Mike simply shrugged his shoulders. "Ty insisted that since the dollars came from *his* ears, they were his by right. Mr. Wilkenson and I both agreed there was a certain logic to his reasoning."

"You know what?"

Toni was thinking how just last month, she was ready to pull her hair out if she heard that three-word phrase one more time. But now, the words softened the ache in her heart from missing him. "What?"

"I saw the Pony Express rider."

"You did!"

"And I waved to him, and he waved back."

Toni could not help but smile at the excitement evident in her young son's voice.

"And you know what?" he continued.

"What?"

"He rode real fast, faster than Uncle Mike."

Toni glanced at her brother, wondering how he was taking his hero status falling a few notches.

"Uncle Mike saw him first. He waved at the rider too!"

Toni's eyes danced with laughter. "He did?"

Tyler's head quickly bobbed up and down. "Uh-huh. I think he heard me when I called to him."

"I'm sure he did. And do you know what?"

"What?"

"I'm sure he really appreciated your waving at him."

Tyler's thin chest puffed out with pride. "Me too! Uncle Mike said you couldn't come home yet. Why not?"

"Because I need to work for Mr. Morgan."

Tyler looked from his mother to Conrad, his small inquisitive eyes trying to understand. "Why?"

"Because I have to pay off a debt."

Tyler turned his attention back to his mother, his face wrinkling. "What is a debt?"

"A debt is when you owe someone something, usually money." She ran her hands over his small shoulders, absently brushing the dust off his shirt. "You remember when Uncle Mike

promised to pay you a nickel if you did those extra chores around the house?”

Tyler nodded his head. “Uh-huh.”

“When you finished the work, Uncle Mike owed you money. It was a debt until he gave you your money.”

“Oh.” He turned his gaze back to Conrad. “You owe Mr. Morgan money?”

“Sort of. I’m working for him for awhile.”

“I can help you work!”

Toni wrapped her arms around her son and felt the familiar squeeze around her neck when his small arms did the same. “I would love for you to help,” she whispered into his soft hair.

Feeling her eyes filling with tears, Toni led her son toward the kitchen. “Let’s see what we can find to eat. Then we’ll unpack your bags.”

“Uncle Mike helped me pack my bags, but Grandma unpacked them and then packed them again.”

Toni stopped and looked down at her son. “She did?”

“Uh-huh. And you know what? Grandma said a bad word.”

Mike saw the unspoken question in his sister’s eyes as she looked up at him. “You know how she likes to take charge,” he offered.

“Ah!” Toni looked down again as Tyler tugged on her hand.

“You said poper ladies don’t say those words.”

Toni continued to the kitchen. “That’s *proper* ladies, and I’m sure Grandma didn’t mean it.”

“Uncle Mike says that word when he’s mad. I heard him.”

Toni glanced back with an accusing look to her brother. “Really?”

“Ma, what does that word mean”

Conrad watched as mother and son went into the kitchen, their voices fading away.

“I wonder when he takes time to breathe,” Mike absently commented. “He was quiet for a full fifteen minutes as he watched the Pony Express rider ride by. I had to check myself a few times from reaching over and pinching him to make sure he was still alive.”

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The silence almost sounded foreign after the brief few moments with Tyler.

“Maybe,” Conrad observed, “we could hire the Pony Express to ride by every day!”

Chapter 18

As Toni kissed her son goodnight, she noticed the slow movement under the bedcover.

“What’s that?”

Tyler looked at the covers as something definitely moved under them. “That’s Jake.”

Toni looked at her son. “Jake?”

Tyler nodded his head. “Uh-huh.”

Toni pulled the covers back, revealing a small black garden snake. Tyler grabbed it as it tried to hide further under the covers.

“What did I tell you about bringing animals in the house?”

Tyler held the snake close to his chest. “But Jake is my pet. I found him.”

“Jake needs to go back outside.”

“But he likes it here.”

“He’ll like it better outside.” Toni held out her hand and Tyler reluctantly put the wriggling snake in her hand. “No arguments, young man. You know the rules.”

From his office, Conrad looked up from his books as Toni walked by, a small snake held in her right hand.

He heard the front door open, then close. He watched as she

returned without the creature. Her footsteps told him she was heading back for her room, again.

Smiling, he shook his head as he finished adding the column of numbers, then closed the book.

Toni again kissed her son goodnight, then rose to leave.

“Ma, you didn’t tell me a story!”

“Sorry.” Toni sat on the edge of the bed. “What story do you want to hear?”

Tyler thought. “The Knight and the Dragon.”

Toni made a face. “Again? You know that story better than me.”

“Uh-uh,” Tyler shook his head.

“How about a different story?” Toni knew as she asked the question what the answer would be.

“The Knight and the Dragon,” he insisted.

“Ok.” Toni tucked the covers under the mattress as she began the familiar fairy tale. “Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful princess with long blonde hair, who lived in a very short tower—”

“A tall tower—” Tyler interrupted.

Toni looked surprised. “A tall tower,” she corrected as she began the familiar game of changing different details each time she told the story; a different color, shape or name, which Tyler was quick to correct. “She had been kidnapped by an evil Lord who wanted to marry her. But her heart belonged to a knight who—”

“—a handsome knight.”

“A handsome knight, who loved her just as much...”

Conrad walked up the stairs and paused just outside Tyler’s room as he heard Toni telling the story. Leaning his back against the wall, he listened.

“He rode to the tower on a strawberry gelding—”

“—a white stallion.”

Toni paused. “Are you sure?”

“Uh-huh. A white stallion.”

“Well, if you’re sure. The prince rode up on a white stallion whose eyes were crossed.”

Tyler giggled. “No they weren’t.”

“Oh, yes they were. I saw them, and they looked like this.”

Tyler burst into giggles again, and Conrad could just imagine Toni crossing her eyes, and Tyler’s delight at the scene.

“—and because his eyes were crossed, the poor horse couldn’t find his way to the tower. He went this way and that way—”

Tyler’s giggles increased as it became evident that Toni was tickling him.

“Ma—”

“—and he kept bumping into the trees.”

Tyler’s giggles took some time to calm down. “He didn’t have crossed eyes.”

“He didn’t?”

No sound, but Conrad could sense Tyler’s head shaking back and forth.

“Hmm. Maybe the cross-eyed horse came from another story.” Another pause. “Oh well, if you’re sure. Then the handsome knight went to the tower to rescue the fair princess. But when he got to the tower, guess what was guarding it?”

“A big dragon,” Tyler said with excitement.

Another pause. “How did you know?”

Tyler giggled again. “He was big with green scales and red eyes, and he breathed fire when he was mad.”

“You’re right!”

As tired as Conrad was, he stayed against the wall and listened as the brave knight eventually slew the fierce dragon, not with an arrow, but with a sword, and then finally rescued the princess not through the window, but by charging his noble steed right up the steps of the tower.

He heard the bed squeak as Toni rose.

“Maybe tomorrow night I’ll tell you the story of the cross-eyed horse.”

“Ok.” Tyler’s voice was sleepy.

“Goodnight,” Toni whispered again, then blew out the lamp.

He did not move as Toni closed the door halfway behind her. Toni was surprised to see Conrad leaning against the wall, a

slight smile on his face. He looked tired.

“I’d like to hear the story of the cross-eyed horse.”

“I’ll have to think of one.”

Conrad’s right brow rose. “What about tomorrow night?”

“Ty will want to hear the story of the Knight and the Dragon, again. It’s his favorite story.” She looked at the half closed door.

“Maybe I need him to tell me the story instead.”

“He probably could.”

Toni was tired, yet a part of her wanted to stay and talk. She enjoyed being with Conrad. She was not constantly on guard, like when she was with Stewart.

Conrad watched as she tried to cover a yawn. Pushing himself from the wall, he took a step away. “Night.”

“Goodnight.”

Chapter 19

Conrad saw the young bull sprint from the herd. Pointing his horse toward the runaway bovine, Dancer obediently took off, cutting off the bull and herding him back. Conrad barely had to think of what to do. Dancer was a good cutting horse.

Instead, he was thinking how his simple life he had worked so hard to acquire was suddenly full of chaos. Most of the men he had hoped he could rely on were either injured or dead. He suddenly had a family and a cook living in his house. And since one member of the family was single and beautiful, there had been a steady stream of men from town and surrounding ranches visiting. Add to that was the fact that Dana was due to arrive in a few weeks.

What was she going to say to all of this?

He had tried hard to give his daughter a stable life. He knew she hated going to the girl's school in Philadelphia. But he had made a promise. He felt it was the least he could do if it meant she could stay with him.

He wanted her to want to stay with him.

She had wanted to be home for the birth of her horse's foal. But Star's time was getting closer. He was not sure Dana was going to make it.

A different thought made Conrad frown.

When Dana learned about Toni, would she be jealous?

Toni was a fine lady. She had done far more than he expected, he admitted.

She seemed to enjoy 'crocheting' as she called it, sitting at night with a hooked needle and a ball of thread. She made it look effortless as she knotted and looped the one string into one amazing item after another. She had placed several of the lacy things around the house and in her room. He had to admit, it made the place feel more ... comfortable.

He had started to listen for her playing her flute. She usually played it when the men were all out on the range. But occasionally, he had come back and heard her playing from her room. Once, he heard her from the barn in the hay loft. Her tunes were various, from slow and solemn to quick and playful. He was sure if she knew he heard her, she would stop, so most of the time he would stop and just listen.

She was a very patient woman, especially with her son. Just last night, she had released a handful of crickets Tyler had captured and put in a small box. Three nights ago, she had released a lizard. She never raised her voice. It was as if she understood his desire for a pet.

And then she had hired Mrs. Baines behind his back. Mrs. Baines not only could cook for many people, but her cooking was great. He had not heard one complaint from any of the men. In fact, they always came back for seconds or thirds, if there was any left. Especially Sam. Sam seemed to be taken with Mrs. Baines. Any fool could see that. And it appeared the feeling was mutual. If those two kept it up, he would have to build a small house just down from the ranch.

Conrad smiled. Sam deserved a good woman.

Between Mrs. Baines and Toni, the house was running smoother than any homestead he knew. He had to admit, Toni had made a good decision.

And asking her father to send any extra men was a gift he was not going to refuse. They got along with his crew, and it got Toni back in the house. He was relieved she was no longer

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

working with the cattle. That she could handle herself, he had no doubt. She had kept up with the men in the branding. But branding was dangerous work. He had seen many men kicked or gouged when the animal broke free from the rope. While she had been working, he had constantly been worried about her. Now, she was on safe ground.

And she had been right, the men were good workers.

There was the typical joking around, the kind that usually happens when a new one hires on. But all the men seemed to be taking it in stride.

Red was as good as Nate said he was with the horses. He, Juan and Lefty were working hard breaking the remaining horses.

Even having Michael here was a relief. True, he was still on crutches, but with the women alone all day at the ranch, he felt better just having a man there.

The cattle were coming together. Soon, the branding and castrating would be finished. He already had another string of horses to take to town for Louis Satchel to shoe.

If things kept on as they were going, he would be able to head the herds north in about five weeks.

A part of him acknowledged that when he was done and the herd was delivered, there was no reason for Toni to stay.

She would have paid her brother's debt, and then probably head back home.

It would be just him and Dana.

For some reason, that thought brought an ache to his heart.

Chapter 20

Toni raised her face to the sun, allowing the warmth to envelope her. The mare she was riding was gentle, taking her time as she trotted along.

Looking next to her, Tyler was holding on as his own horse followed.

“How are you doing?” she asked.

“Mo-om!”

She turned her head as she smiled. He was becoming more independent each day. “Sorry,” she finally spoke.

She wanted to spend some time with her son. She had been so busy helping Conrad, then helping Mrs. Baines, she did not want to neglect Tyler. She knew he had found numerous things to do around the ranch. Being a young boy, he quickly spoke with anyone willing to listen. Her father’s men were accustomed to Tyler. Conrad’s men had been very patient with his constant chatter and questions.

Tyler was very observant. He noticed little things as he looked around. A few days ago, he wanted to know if snakes burped. Last week he wanted to know if crickets ever sleep on their sides or back, like we do. She remembered last year, when church was finished, he wanted to know if God had a beard, since

He was so old.

It seemed, once the questions started, they never stopped. Everything Tyler saw was a mystery waiting to be examined, then explained. As a parent, she sometimes felt helpless.

Or stupid!

Lately, the questions he asked were becoming harder and harder to answer. Just today they noticed a bunch of butterflies flitting around a bush. She had explained how they came from caterpillars. He was quiet for a moment, which she had learned was his little mind trying to figure something out. Which usually resulted in a question she was sure she could not answer.

“Does the butterfly remember when it was a caterpillar?”

She hated admitting she did not know the answer.

But she did cherish the time with her son.

“Let’s ride to the creek,” she suggested. For the next hour, mother and son spent a wonderful morning enjoying being together. Tyler played in the water. He was having so much fun, she stripped down to her petticoat, then joined him in splashing around.

They took turns splashing each other in the face as they moved about in the creek. Toni would duck down so only her face was above the water, then slowly move to her son.

Tyler gave a playful scream as he awkwardly moved around her, continuing to splash.

Toni made a growling noise as she soon caught her prey.

“I have you now,” she threatened as she pulled him to her, then stood up with him in her arms.

Tyler’s giggles made her smile. “How would you like to learn how to swim?”

Tyler’s eyes widened with excitement. “Yeah!” he almost screamed.

She showed him how to move his arms, then held his small body as he imitated her moves.

“Kick your legs!” she encouraged as water splashed in all directions.

When she felt his energy level drop, she stopped the lessons.

“Aw mom!” he wailed.

“We’ll continue another day,” she encouraged as she began to climb out of the water.

“Did Grandma teach you how to swim?” he asked.

“No. Your father taught me.”

“He did?”

Toni saw the curiosity in Tyler’s face. He always enjoyed hearing about his father, Wayne. “Yes, he did.”

Laying on their back, they both looked at the sky, the many clouds drifting by.

“I see a bird,” she said as she pointed to a particular cloud.

“I see a bear,” he replied.

Within minutes, the shapes changed. Among the images found were a horse, a turtle, a spider, a face and a saddle. Finally, Tyler was silent as he fell asleep.

Toni went to her horse and removed her flute from the saddlebag. She had begun bringing it with her wherever she went. Sitting next to her sleeping son, she began to softly play. Tyler turned to her in his sleep as she played on. She enjoyed these times.

After taking an hour nap on the soft grass, both got dressed and headed back to the ranch.

Both of them were hungry. Of course, Mrs. Baines had made oatmeal cookies.

“You’re spoiling him,” Toni jokingly chided her.

“He’s such a dear boy. Reminds me of my own children, when they were little. I enjoyed baking things for them too.”

“With the responsibility of cooking for the hotel, it’s a wonder you had time to bake special things for them.”

Mrs. Baines gave a sigh, as an obviously pleasant memory replayed itself in her mind. “When they’re your own, you make time,” she finally said.

Toni thought of the morning she had just spent with Tyler, then thought of the many chores she needed to do. She smiled. “Yeah, you do.”

Tyler came running into the kitchen.

“Mom, someone’s comin’.”

As both women looked out the kitchen window, Toni saw

Tyler grab another cookie.

“That’s the last one till supper, young man,” she warned.

“This one’s for Uncle Mike,” he yelled as he ran out of the house.

Through the window, she watched as he ran into the barn, where she knew Mike was working on the tack.

Mrs. Baines was chuckling. “Think Mike will get any of it?”

“Oh, he’ll get some. Tyler’s learning there is more than one way around the truth.”

“Oh?”

“Last week, I let him take some cookies to Mike. I caught him eating them while Mike was working on a bridle. When I asked what he was doing, he told me he was helping Mike share them.”

Mrs. Baines laughed. “That rascal.”

“Rascal he is.”

Toni turned her attention to the rider as he came across the courtyard. Mrs. Baines heard her groan.

“Is everything alright?”

Toni gave a heavy sigh. “Yes. I think I’m beginning to see why the men leave the ranch to work.”

Mrs. Baines watched as Toni took off her apron as she headed toward the front door. She looked again, finally recognizing their visitor.

“Guess I need to pour some lemonade,” she told herself.

Toni lifted her hand to shield her eyes as she watched Stewart dismount, then tie his bay to the hitching rail.

“Hello, Stewart.”

“Hello, Anthonia. You’re looking good.”

“Thank you.” Toni thought it comical that Stewart could be so formal, especially in such an untamed land.

Stewart climbed the few steps to the porch. She wondered what he was doing here, then remembered he had an office in town. She wanted to believe that he came here solely for business, but she was sure his main reason was different.

Her mother’s strict teaching of courtesy had her being polite instead of being direct and forward.

“Won’t you sit?” she invited.

Ever the gentleman, Stewart waited for her to sit, then took the seat next to her.

“I was hoping to be here sooner,” he commented, “but I had some business to take care of.”

“Here in Round Rock?”

“Yes. As you know, I have offices in several cities in several states.”

“Yes, I know.”

Stewart placed his hat on the table. “I was visiting your parents when they received your letter.”

“Mike told me you were there.”

Stewart smiled. “Then you must have been expecting me.”

“I guess I was.”

For some reason, Toni was glad of the interruption when Mrs. Baines came outside carrying two glasses of lemonade.

“Would you care for some cookies? I just baked some half an hour ago.”

“No, thank you.”

Mrs. Baines looked from one to the other, not missing the stiff posture of Toni. She wondered what was wrong.

“You’re Mrs. Baines, right?” he asked.

Mrs. Baines turned toward the man. “Yes. I used to work at the hotel with my husband when he was alive.”

“I thought I recognized you.”

“You’re Mr. Hughes. You own the freight office in town.”

Stewart simply nodded.

Mrs. Baines again looked from one to the other. It was apparent that Mrs. Toni was not happy with this visitor, but she did not know what she could do about it.

“Thank you for the lemonade,” Toni said as she took a drink. She was surprised when Mrs. Baines did not return to the house, but instead walked across the yard toward the barn.

“When did you arrive?” she asked him, the years of her Mother’s training in proper conversation coming to the fore.

“Came to town a few days ago.” He also took a drink. “I expected to find you at the hotel.”

“I was at the hotel for a few days.”

“But why are you here?”

She could hear the accusation in his tone. “Since I now work here, it was easier than traveling back and forth.” Toni took a deep breath, trying to compose herself. “So, how did you find me?” she asked in a calmer voice.

“Mrs. Greene told me.” Stewart set his glass down, his disapproval evident in the way he looked at her. “Really, Antonia. Working for Mr. Morgan!”

“This is not your concern.”

“Your brother admitted it was his fault.”

“Yes, and he’s on crutches for the next month or so.”

Stewart obviously did not hear the frustration in her voice. “Michael has to learn to be responsible for his own actions. If you keep helping him, he’ll never learn.”

“I think Michael is fully capable of being responsible for his actions. We are family—”

“And family help each other,” he concluded, his tone irate. “I’ve heard that speech many times from your father.”

Toni felt her temper rising. She was grateful when she saw Mike and Tyler coming from the barn, Mrs. Baines walking behind them.

“Hello Stew,” Mike shouted.

As angry as Toni had been, she had to hide a smile. Stewart hated that nickname. Now that she thought on it, Stewart hated any nickname. She watched as he straightened his back, a sure sign he was annoyed.

“Hello, Michael.”

Mike hobbled to the porch. “Mrs. Baines, could I have a glass of lemonade too, please?”

Mrs. Baines looked relieved to leave. “Of course.”

Tyler stood beside Mike, looking at Stewart. “What-cha doin’ here,” he asked. “You visiting mom, like us?”

“Tyler! Remember your manners.” Toni looked from Mike to Stewart, wondering what to say next.

Bless Mike as he brought the conversation back to work, primarily shipping.

“I heard you were opening another office in Chicago.”

Talking about his business was something Stewart loved to do.

“People are ordering more items from back east, items they cannot get at the local mercantile store.”

Mike nodded his head in agreement. “You’re shipping all over.”

Stewart leaned back, a satisfied smile on his face. “It’s important to be all over. You never know what people want to transport from one spot to another.”

Toni only partially listened as both men discussed the need for shipping, and how the future of the railroad was going to affect it.

Bored with the discussion, Tyler had already left and headed back to the barn. She envied him.

Toni was trying to find a way to dismiss herself when Mrs. Baines came to her rescue.

“Mrs. Logan, Could you help me inside?”

Bless her, she thought as she excused herself. She was sure she saw Mike give her a wink as she passed them.

“I thought you might need an excuse to come inside,” Mrs. Baines had whispered to her.

“I did,” she had confessed. She was surprised at how often she felt tired after being around Stewart. For some reason she seemed to always be on her guard.

To Toni’s dismay, Stewart stayed for dinner. Conrad joined the conversation, discussing the need for shipping supplies from one town to another.

“Once the railroad branches out, it’ll make it easier for people to travel, let alone move stuff,” Conrad said out loud.

“And ranchers won’t have to drive the herds so far,” Mike added.

Stewart nodded. “The railroad will be a big advantage, not only to ordinary people, but also to businesses. But, not every town will have a railroad going through it.”

“Hence the need for wagons to continue to ship from town to town,” Michael added.

“Right,” Stewart agreed.

“Mom,” Tyler spoke up. “Can we ride on the train?”

“One day, I’m sure we will,” Toni predicted with a smile.

Tyler turned back to his plate. “If I owned the train, I’d let everyone ride for free.”

The four adults laughed.

“You can’t make much money that way,” Stewart warned as he accepted another cup of coffee from Mrs. Baines.

“I don’t care,” Tyler said. “I think everyone should ride the train, at least once.”

Toni rose from the table, her look directed at her son. “I think it’s time for bed, young man.”

Tyler looked up, surprised. “Aw, mom.”

“Say your goodnights.”

Tyler reluctantly rose, then went to give his uncle Mike a hug.

“Good-night,” he called to the other men.

“Good-night, Ty,” Conrad said, playfully ruffling the boy’s hair as he walked around the table.

Three men watched as Toni led her son up the stairs, then out of sight.

Toni was grateful for the opportunity to leave the men downstairs. She intended to stay upstairs for the rest of the evening. She did not want to face Stewart right now.

After telling another story of the Knight and the Dragon, Toni went to her room. Half an hour later, she heard Stewart leave.

She knew she should have said good-night. After all, he had traveled all the way out here to see her. But right now, she did not want to see him.

Right now, her mind and heart were wildly spinning around. She knew she did not want to marry Stewart, even though he had been such a help since Wayne’s death.

Even though she had repeatedly declined his proposals over the past several years, for some reason he continued to believe that there was a chance.

Since she had arrived here, several of the town-folks and

ranch-hands had visited. She knew they also hoped for marriage, the same as Stewart. But in her heart, she was not sure.

Kirk had planted a thought that had grown over the days. Maybe her time of mourning for Wayne was over. Maybe it was time to open her heart to someone else.

Wayne would have wanted that. He would have wanted someone to help her raise Tyler.

But for some reason, she could not see Stewart in that role.

Chapter 21

Toni watched as each man checked their rifle.

Those who did not own one stood next to the rifle case as Conrad handed one to each of the men, along with a small box of bullets.

“I don’t need to tell you men how dangerous this cat is. He’s already killed stock on four ranches. And this week, he killed Jeff Hankins.”

The men’s faces were somber. A few were shaking their heads at the lost life of a dear friend.

“I will assign a few men to the herds, the rest will split up and help with the tracking. Shank says they found tracks about fifteen miles east of here. We’ll head out that way and meet the other ranch hands. Any questions?”

Toni waited, watching the serious expressions from the men.

“Ok, then let’s head out. You each know where you should be. Lefty, you and Toni take the herd.”

Toni watched Lefty’s face fall when he heard he was to stay behind with the herd. She knew all the men wanted to be in the hunt, Lefty included.

Toni stopped Conrad as the men started out the door.

“May I speak with you for a moment?”

“Sure.” Conrad watched the last of his men leave the house, then turned and went back inside his office. Placing his rifle on the desk, he turned and leaned against his desk, giving Toni his full attention. Which was difficult since she was once again wearing pants for the day.

“I want a rifle too.”

That snapped his attention from her attire. “What?”

Toni took a deep breath while she placed her hands on her hips. She saw the disbelief in Conrad’s eyes at her request.

“Look, I know you have a lot on your mind, but we’ll be out in the open. I fail to see how giving me a rifle would cause any problems.”

“Unless you shoot one of my men.”

Toni’s eyes narrowed. “I think I can tell the difference between a cat and one of your men.”

“Can you hit anything?”

Toni heard the slightly sarcastic tone. She was tempted to tell him that she was a better marksman than her brother.

“I do believe I could hit some part of a mountain, if I aimed real hard.”

Conrad smiled. Knowing Toni as he did, he was sure she was competent enough, or else she would not have asked.

“Fair enough.” He took out one of the last five rifles in the cabinet. Opening one of the drawers, he took out five bullets, quickly inserting them into the side chamber of the rifle for her. Giving it a final check, he handed the rifle to Toni with a smile. “But make sure you return with all ten of your toes.”

He started walking out of the office before Toni could thank him.

“Where you going, ma?”

Toni turned to her son standing at the doorway.

“I’m going to help Lefty with the cattle while the men go after the cat.”

“Did the cat kill another steer?”

Toni shook her head. “No, he killed one of Mr. Curry’s ranch hands.”

“Is Uncle Mike going too?”

“No. He’s going to stay here with you until I get back.”

“Can I come?”

Toni knelt down at eye level with her son. “I think it’s too dangerous for you today. I would be worried about you and not be able to do my job.” From the corner of her eye, she saw Mrs. Baines standing in the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on a towel. “But I bet Mrs. Baines would love to let you help her make a batch of cookies.”

Tyler’s eyes widened. “She would?”

“Sure. And then we can eat them together on the porch when I get back.”

“Even before supper?”

“Even before supper.”

“Oh boy!”

Mrs. Baines nodded to her as Tyler headed to the kitchen. Mike stood watching from his bedroom doorway.

“I’ll make sure he’s busy for the next several hours.”

Toni hugged her brother. “Thanks. And try not to eat all the cookies before we get back.”

An hour later, standing on the mesa plateau, Lefty was watching the scene below. He saw the men as they headed toward the edge of the dense vegetation. Earlier on, one of the men had found some tracks, and he could hear the excitement as they headed forward.

Lefty wanted to be down there. But his job was watching the herd, or watching the lady. He was not sure which one he was really there for.

Another shout came from below. They were closing in. He strained his eyes as he searched the area below, silently watching.

He heard Toni’s horse as she rode up beside him.

Toni knew where Lefty wanted to be, and sitting up on this hill with her and gathering strays back to the herd was not it. She watched as the men were forming a wide circle around a group of bushes.

“I really don’t think you have to stay up here, Lefty. I know you would rather be down below.”

She heard his heavy sigh as he silently agreed.

“Why don’t you go down and join them. I’ll be just fine with the herd.”

Lefty turned his head toward her. “I would if I could, but the boss told me to stay up here.”

Toni listened to the resignation in his voice. Nodding her head, she turned her horse and headed back to the herd. She heard the rifle shot and turned to see Lefty standing in his stirrups, looking down.

“I think they got ‘em.”

Toni rode back beside him and looked down too. The activity below was chaotic. Men, the size of ants, were circling around a large clump of trees and bushes.

With another heavy sigh, Lefty turned his horse north. “There’s a trail a few miles up where cattle like to graze. I’ll head over and drive any I find back.”

“Then I’ll stay to the south.”

For a few moments longer, she watched the scene below. The sound of the cattle behind her reminded her of her job up here.

Dancer, the horse she was riding today, was quick and alert. When she spotted a stray cow, Dancer immediately began to cut him around, encouraging him to head back in the direction of the herd. It felt good to be out in the open again.

She headed toward the south side of the valley, enjoying the view that nature had to offer. She had traveled some, but in all her journeys, there was no place like Texas. The flat lands and mountains were special. Watching the sun rise, then set, one observed a display of colors she had never seen anywhere else. This land was beautiful. How someone could not find happiness and contentment out here, she could not imagine.

A noise to her left caused Toni to halt. Looking in the bush, she could just see a patch of brown as it jerked back and forth a few times. As she dismounted, she heard the weak cry of a calf.

Pulling her leather gloves back on, she approached the baby calf who apparently had somehow gotten stuck in the bush. Pulling the bush aside and breaking the branches away, she

finally saw the young animal.

“You poor thing. Where did your mother go?” Toni raised herself erect and looked around the mesa. No mother in sight. “Well, I’m here now. All we have to do is get you out.”

That was easier said than done. Toni laid her rifle down beside the bush, then bent to the task at hand. The calf was frightened and trying to get away from her. It took her nearly twenty minutes to free him. Afterward, he was so exhausted and weak, he allowed her to pick him up. A few pitiful bellows were the only objections he seemed to be able to afford, right now.

With a mighty hoist, she maneuvered the calf across Dancer’s back, hanging his legs on either side of the mount. With her sitting behind him, she would be able to hold him steady.

The rapid fire of the rifles below startled her for a moment. Conrad’s men must have finally found the elusive cat. In a way, she was grateful. She knew of the danger the cat posed and of the loss of life it had caused. Still, she felt sad that any animal met his end this way.

Chapter 22

Conrad and his men were closing in. The tracks led them to this small valley. Men on all sides stood with their rifles ready, waiting. They heard the noise inside the dense vegetation, the rustling of the animal as it moved forward.

Conrad did not need to warn his men about a cornered animal. Their plan was to flush him out to the south side. The men to the north would make enough noise to cause the cat to migrate this way. Once out in the open, Sam and Nate were waiting.

They waited. They could hear the animal in the bush, rustling the vegetation as it moved. Looking around, he saw his men, could see their excitement. This cat had been a problem for longer than anyone wanted to remember. He was about to be a problem no longer.

Conrad turned at the sudden movement to the right. He heard the sound as every rifle was raised and cocked. The momentary silence told him the men were aiming.

The animal came charging out of the brush in a blur, a brown streak as it raced across the field. The men's shouts did not detract it from its course, which was freedom. It gave an eerie howl as it made a leap over a large boulder, bullets bouncing in

the ground all around him.

Conrad heard the single shot that finally brought the animal to a deadly halt. All the men slowly gathered around to view the animal. But Conrad was not among them. He was still gazing along the horizon, looking.

“Where’s the cat?” Frenchy asked?

“The thing moved so fast, I didn’t know what it was until it was too late,” JT replied.

Daniel looked at the dead Coyote, then looked around with the other men. “Where did the cat go?”

Conrad was already asking himself that same question.

Where was the cat?

The tracks around belonged to the cat, he was sure of that. Then where was the cat? He circled the area when he finally saw a faint print in the sand. It was only one print, but it explained where the cat went. It was headed west. Conrad raised his head to view the area toward the west, and looked up toward the mesa.

Could the cat be up there?

Chapter 23

Toni had finally gotten the calf in the position she wanted. The poor thing was so tired and exhausted, he would probably stay on without any help from her. She petted his head, talking in a gentle voice to reassure him.

Toni was about to lift herself onto the saddle when she remembered her rifle laying near the bush.

“I’ll be right back, young fella,” she whispered as she gave another gentle pat to the calf’s rump.

As she returned to the bush, she failed to see Dancer’s ears pick up, his eyes alert. When she bent down to reach for the rifle, she heard Dancer snort, then give a whinny. Toni turned in time to see the horse sidestepping away from her.

“Whoa there, Dancer. What’s the matter?” Toni tried to talk to the horse as she walked forward, all the time he was stepping sideways, away from her. Dancer suddenly threw his head up and shook it, the reins flapping in the air alongside his long neck.

Toni started to reach out to grab hold of the reins when she heard the unmistakable shrill of the cat’s cry. She stopped where she was for only a moment, but it was enough for Dancer to rear up, dropping the calf to the ground, then turn and run toward home.

“NO,” Toni shouted as she ran a few feet, but realized she would never catch Dancer. As the horse left a trail of dust in his wake, she heard the cat cry again.

Despite the midday heat, Toni suddenly felt a sudden chill encompass her. She turned around and looked, but saw nothing, nothing except the calf now lying on the ground in front of her. Toni looked around again. The cry was closer this time, just ahead of her somewhere. The brush ahead was thick and the cat could be in any number of bushes.

I thought Conrad and his men had it cornered.

The shots she heard before were almost a sure indication they had killed it. But, then why was it here? How did it get here?

Toni walked slowly ahead to gain possession of the rifle she had dropped. With the rifle in her hands, she felt a measure of courage, even if it was a very small measure. She was debating whether or not to try to carry the calf when she saw the large cat come out of the bushes about fifty yards ahead of her.

He was stalking them, staying low to the ground as he slowly approached. Toni felt the slight breeze from behind her and realized she was upwind from the cat. Forgetting about the calf, she started to walk backwards, away from the calf but kept her eyes trained on the deadly animal ahead.

With her mouth suddenly dry, she tightened her grip on the rifle. She was hoping the cat would be satisfied with the free meal she was leaving behind. She quickened her pace when she saw the edge of the mesa just a short distance from her. If she could get to the edge, she could maybe slide down.

As she walked, she kept watching the cat as he got closer to the calf. The calf did not move. She wondered if he had died from the fall from Dancer’s back. The cat gave another cry as he neared the spot where the calf laid. Toni raised the rifle, cocking the chamber, just in case.

Toni knew what true fear was when the cat merely sniffed at the calf, then turned his attention back to her, assuming the pace he set before.

Dear Lord, he was after her, she thought.

The edge of the mesa was behind her, but she was not sure if

she was going to make it. Knowing her only choice was to shoot the cat herself, she raised the rifle.

Settling the butt of the rifle in her shoulder to minimize the impact when she fired, she closed her left eye, lining the sight at the end of the barrel between her and the cat. She aimed for the head, right between the eyes. If she only wounded it, he would be more deadly than he was now. Holding the cat in her sights, she watched as he kept stealthily approaching. She had to wipe her forehead on her sleeve when a trickle of sweat threatened to run into her right eye.

She swallowed hard as the cat was again within her sights, then slowly pulled the trigger.

The cat paused when the bullet hit the dirt a few yards to his left. Giving a jerk of his head to make sure no threat was there, the cat then continued forward. Toni, though, was dumb-struck. She had the cat lined up in her sights. She should have hit him, dead on.

With a most unladylike oath, she recocked the rifle, then aimed again, trying to adjust for the obviously bent sight on the end of her rifle.

Again, she missed. She was so surprised, that for a moment she forgot the peril she was in as she stared stupidly at the end of the rifle. Lifting her eyes, she watched as the cat picked up speed toward her. Turning to run, she headed straight for the edge of the mesa. If anything, she could roll down faster than she could run.

Toni ventured one last look behind her when the edge was within a few feet. The sight she saw caused her to turn around to face the animal. She cocked the rifle again, never taking her gaze from the fast approaching animal.

As she raised the rifle to fire again, the cat leaped into the air with its powerful hind legs, gracefully flying through the space between them. Toni kept her rifle up, following the movement of the cat. At point blank range, she could hardly miss. She saw the long fangs as another cry breathed across the wind, saw his extended claws as they reached out, ready to clasp and hold.

The end of the rifle exploded in sound as she fired her final

shot. The animal made no sound as it continued its midair flight toward her. Toni stepped back again, trying to get away from the large cat as he fell to the earth.

Conrad watched in utter horror as Toni raised her rifle and fired at the cat after he leaped into the air. He could not tell if she hit it or not. His cry to her was choked out when she raised the rifle almost like a barrier just above her head. The cat's weight and momentum pushed Toni backwards off the edge of the mesa. Toni and the cat, tangled together as one, fell down the hillside of the mesa, rolling over rocks and bushes, until they stopped at the bottom.

Conrad did not see the stunned look on his men's faces as they also watched the fall. All the men were silent as Toni and the cat fell to the bottom. The motionless bodies tangled together caused each man to hold the breath they were already holding.

When Toni stopped rolling, Conrad came to his senses and moved forward. At first he was hesitant, still stunned at the scene. When he realized that the cat was laying on top of Toni, he quickened his pace, his rifle raised, ready. He knew how quickly the cat's claws could slice through skin and muscle.

Toni's head was spinning. For a moment, she was unsure where she was. Something heavy was on top of her, heavy and furry. When she opened her eyes, they widened in shock and alarm as two tawny eyes stared into hers. Panic enveloped her as she suddenly regained her strength, trying to dislodge the cat from her.

The cat was heavy, but Toni possessed the strength of an extremely frightened woman, which enabled her to effectively move the large feline and stand up on two wobbly legs. She heard men's voices behind her, but her shocked mind could not discern who or how many. When two hands firmly grasped her arms, she let out a scream as she suddenly started to struggle. The memory of the cat flying through the air, trying to get to her was still fresh in her mind.

"Toni, Toni, calm down," Conrad shouted above her scream. Lord, but she had a powerful set of lungs.

Toni turned around in Conrad's embrace. Conrad was

looking her over from head to boot. Her face was pale from the shock she just had, and there was blood all over her shirt. He glanced over at the cat laying a few feet away and saw where the bullet went through its body. There was blood still flowing from the wound, pooling in the sand underneath the cat.

Conrad quickly ran his hands around her waist and her back, checking for any claw marks on her shirt or on her skin.

“Will you stop that?” Toni shouted at him as she slapped his hands away. Embarrassed to the roots of her now tangled hair, she tried to step back, away from Conrad and the men standing around. When her boot met resistance, she turned to see what was behind her. Seeing the dead cat, she immediately backed up into Conrad’s arms.

Conrad grabbed Toni again, trying to pull her away from the scene. His breathing was still uneven from the grip of fear that had grabbed his heart. Right now, getting Toni away was his main concern.

Toni noticed Conrad kept his body between her and the dead cat, either on purpose or not, she was not sure. As she was being led away, she failed to see the look of respect and approval on most of the men’s faces as they looked between her and the dead cat.

A woman had killed the cat.

A woman on their ranch had killed the cat.

The boss man’s woman had killed the cat. Not many men could say that!

All at once, everyone found their voice at the same time. The men wanted to know exactly what happened. Conrad simply wanted to know if Toni was all right.

“Are you trying to get me killed?” she yelled.

All the men around suddenly became silent.

“What?” Conrad asked, surprised by the sudden anger in her voice and in her eyes.

“Are you trying to get me killed?” she repeated, her voice rising in anger.

Conrad saw her standing before him, her fists planted on the curve of her hips. Her legs were braced apart and she was leaning

slightly forward. That she was angry, Conrad had no doubt.

Conrad blinked a few times, making sure he heard her properly. Before he could answer her, she took her right closed fist and swung it at him with all her might. Conrad's head snapped back with the impact.

"If you really don't want me here, just say so. I can take a hint," she continued, her voice still shouting.

Conrad noticed her eyes were stormy as he rubbed his jaw. For a fragile looking woman, she sure could deliver a solid punch! She was madder than a hornet's nest disturbed. He knew she was still shaken from her ordeal. Lord, he would be too if he had been face to face with that cat.

"I can think of much nicer ways to eliminate a person than feeding them to a man-eating cat."

That caught Conrad's attention.

"What are you talking about?" Conrad had to raise his own voice to be heard.

"You trying to get me killed."

Conrad shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

She picked up the rifle that had landed a few feet from where she stood. Standing before Conrad again, she shoved the rifle against his chest as he reached out to grab it. "Shoot something. Anything."

Conrad looked at her angry face, then looked down at the rifle. He knew something was wrong. As he lifted the rifle, he could tell without even firing that the sight was bent to the right, which would affect the accuracy of the shot.

"Do you know how surprised I was when I fired and *missed? Twice?*" Her voice rose with the last two words.

"Toni, I know you're upset right now—"

"UPSET?" she yelled. Conrad was wondering if she was ever going to stop yelling.

"Yes, upset." He grabbed her shoulders after he handed the rifle to another hand.

She raised her arms to break his hold, but Conrad would not let go. He felt her feeble struggle to free herself, but would not lessen his hold.

Toni was so angry, she was unable to think straight. “He stalked me,” she yelled. “He was going for my throat. He was trying to kill me.”

Conrad kept his hold on her arms as she kept repeating, “*he was trying to kill me.*”

He silently signaled to his men to disperse, letting Toni get rid of her anger without an audience. Knowing women, she would probably break down in tears after the terror and fright left her.

Toni did not see the men leave. In reality, she was not even aware that they were there in the first place. Conrad was the only person she saw, the only person she could blame for her near fatal experience.

She kicked out at him, calling him names that called into question his parentage. Conrad had to hide a smile at the selection of words she chose, knowing she was going to be downright embarrassed when she eventually cooled off. He knew that if he cracked a smile, she would be more furious, so he kept his face sober.

Toni was exhausted when she was finished. Her heart had finally decided to slow down its beat enough so that she could no longer hear or feel the rhythm in her head.

Thinking of how close she had come to death, she began to shiver. She knew it was not really Conrad’s fault, even if he should check his rifles from time to time. But the look on the face of that cat would stay with her for a very long time.

As she pressed her cheek into his chest, she noticed his shirt was wet. Blinking, she realized she was crying.

Well, that did it! Now he would think her a typical crying woman, crying at the least little thing.

But her tears, once started, would not stop. She tried to pull away to cry in peace, but Conrad’s arms would not let her go. She felt his big hands as they softly caressed her head, stroking her matted hair. She heard his voice, soft and gentle as he led her away from the cat.

Conrad gently held Toni in his arms. He remembered when he was breaking Dancer, how he softly talked with the horse,

gently stroking his neck as he slowly introduced the blanket, then the saddle to his back. With the same tone, he talked to Toni.

But Dancer never made him feel like this. Toni fit just right in his arms. After they had walked a small distance, he sat them on the ground beside a sagebrush bush, which offered some shade from the beating sun. As he held her close, her body jerked as she cried. His heart went out to her when he heard her gasp for breath between sobs.

Toni finally became aware that she was being held by Conrad. His shirt was soaking wet from her hysterical cry just now, his arms were warm as they held her firmly in place. She had not lost her composure since Wayne's death years ago, and here she was acting like a blathering idiot.

Taking a deep breath, she raised her head, trying to dislocate herself from Conrad. Conrad let her go only a few inches. When she could move no more, she was forced to look up.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

Toni gave a weak smile. "I think so."

"Glad to hear it."

Toni was so embarrassed. She remembered what she had called Conrad before. *Where had those words come from?* She must have heard Michael using them. No proper lady ever used that kind of language. Yet she had, and most vocally.

She struggled to sit up, her head still lowered. She noticed Conrad's right arm was still draped around her shoulder. He was probably afraid she would attack him again.

"I'm really sorry about what I said to you," she started. "I don't know what—"

"Shh," Conrad whispered back, interrupting her. "There's no need to apologize." Even though her face was already red from her cry, he noticed her face becoming redder from her embarrassment.

"But I called you some pretty, uhm, ugly names."

"That you did!"

Toni looked up to see his smile, and hesitantly smiled back. "Thanks."

Conrad brushed her hair from her face. "You're welcome."

Even with her face red from her crying and embarrassment, she was still a fine looking woman. He knew she was exhausted, but could not help himself as he lowered his lips to hers. He saw the surprise in her eyes as his lips hovered for a moment, giving her time to back away if she wanted to.

Toni knew that the decision of the kiss would be up to her. With only a heartbeat, she closed the gap between them, letting her lips meet his.

Conrad felt the softness of her lips. He was not sure how long he sat there, his lips just touching hers, not forcing anything more. He felt her slight tremble beneath his touch, felt her soft breath as she opened her mouth just a fraction. But it was enough that Conrad felt it.

“BOSS? HEY BOSS?”

Toni heard the low growl from Conrad when Sam came riding up, shouting even as his horse came to a stop. Toni looked into Conrad’s eyes to see disappointment at the interruption.

“We *will* continue this another time,” he softly spoke. “I promise.”

Sitting on his horse, Sam watched the boss as he rose from the ground behind a bush, helping Miss Toni up afterward. Miss Toni’s face looked mighty red. Her hair was even messed up.

Sam had worked for many different bosses over the years, but this one was different. There was a certain mystery about him, a part of his past he refused to talk about or share.

Still, Mr. Morgan deserved a decent woman to share his life. And Mrs. Logan was about as decent a woman as you could find. He wondered how long it would take for these two to figure it out.

“Hey boss. Sorry to interrupt but, on our way back, we seen a buggy heading to the ranch.”

Conrad looked up to see Sam leaning across his saddle, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. “A buggy?”

“Yep. Seems you got company comin’.”

“Did you notice who it was?”

“Preacher Adams.”

“Adams? I thought he left a few weeks ago?”

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

Sam looked from Conrad to Toni. “Guess he came back for a reason.”

Chapter 24

“Hi!”

Adams turned at the small voice behind him. “Hello.”

“My name’s Tyler. Ma calls me Ty, except when she’s mad. Then she calls me *Tyler Wayne Bradley*. What’s your name?”

“Clint Adams.” He held out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Ty.”

Tyler looked the man over, then shook the offered hand. “You know my ma?”

“I just met her when I visited a few weeks ago.”

“Ma is teaching me how to swim.”

Adams looked surprised. “She is?”

“Uh-huh,” he nodded his head.

“It’s good to know how to swim,” Adams agreed.

“What do you do?”

“I’m the local preacher.”

“Oh. There’s not a church in this town. Back home, we have a church. Preacher Randall talks all the time. Sometimes Mr. Waller falls asleep, but when he snores too loud, someone wakes him up.”

Adams tried to keep himself from smiling. “That’s nice they try to help him.”

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

“Mr. Rivers don’t come to church. He says God can hear him just fine from his porch.”

“Well, God can hear anyone from anyplace.”

“Then why do we need to go to church?”

Adams paused as he tilted his head. “Do you like to play?”

Tyler nodded his head. “Uh-huh.”

“Would you rather play alone, or with some friends?”

Tyler thought for a moment. “I guess it’s better to play with friends, as long as they like to play the same games you like.”

“It’s the same with church. It’s more fun when you have your friends around you.”

Tyler looked skeptical. “Oh. Do you like peppermint sticks?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Me too. Ma lets me get one when we go to town, but I have to wait till after supper to eat it.”

Adams smiled at the almost gloomy face. “My ma did the same thing.”

Tyler looked up, his eyes wide at the thought that this adult also had to wait for his treat. “She did?”

“Yep. But when she wasn’t looking, I’d sneak a lick.”

Tyler giggled. “I lick mine too. But ma gives me a funny look.”

“Ah yes. The Look! I remember it well.”

Bored with the subject, Tyler changed to another topic. “Do you carry a gun?”

Adams opened his jacket as he shook his head. “Nope.”

“Aren’t you afraid someone will rob you?”

“Most folks know I’m a man of God, and that I don’t carry anything valuable to steal.”

“Preacher Randall got robbed. And they beat him up real bad.”

Adams looked shocked. “They did?”

“Uh-huh. Ma and other ladies helped fix him up. We didn’t have church for a week. I went froggin’ with Johnny. Wanna see a rock I found?”

“Sure.”

Tyler pulled a rock the size of his small fist from his pocket

and handed it to Adams.

“It has a picture of a fish on it.”

Adams studied the rock. “It’s called a fossil.”

“A fossil?”

“Yes. A long time ago there was a lake with fish. When the fish died, his body was covered with dirt. Over time, it left an impression on the rocks that formed.”

“Wow! This was a real fish?”

“A long time ago.”

“Sam said there was more in a valley.”

“Shadow Valley.”

Tyler’s eyes opened wide. “You been there?”

“Oh, several times. And Sam is right. You can find several of these lying about.”

“Can I go there?”

“Well, maybe you need to ask you mother first.”

“Hello Clint.”

Adams looked up as Mike hobbled out the front door. “Mike, it’s good to see you. How’s the leg coming along?”

“Still hurts, but Doc says soon I’ll be back on my horse.”

“Sounds good.”

“I see you’ve met my nephew.”

“Yes, I have.”

“Uncle Mike, I found a fossil.”

“You did?”

“And you know what?”

Mike stopped and looked down at his nephew’s excited eyes. “What?”

“Preacher Adams knows where more are. And he said he can take me, if ma says it’s ok.”

Mike looked up at the sound of riders approaching. “Ah, here comes your ma now.”

Mike was the first to notice the blood covering his sister.

“Toni?”

“Ma?”

“I’m alright,” she assured her brother and son as Conrad helped her down. “I just need a moment to clean up. Preacher

Adams, if you don't mind?"

Adams expression showed his shock. "Uh, no. Not at all."

Mrs. Baines met Toni as she entered the house. "Let me help you..."

Mike turned to Conrad. "What happened?"

Conrad looked from Mike to Tyler. "Ty, why don't you check on Star?"

"Is ma gonna be ok?"

"Yes, she's fine. She just needs a moment to clean up."

Tyler looked from Conrad to the door where his mother went through.

"Ty, your mom is fine," Mike reassured him. "I promise."

Tyler seemed content with his uncle's promise. "Ok."

When Tyler left, Conrad explained what had happened. By the time he was finished, Toni was coming back outside, her face washed and her clothes changed.

Adams and Conrad rose as she came outside.

"I'm sorry for keeping you waiting," she apologized as she sat next to Mike.

The men sat back down as Toni looked around.

"Where's Ty?"

"I sent him to check on Star," Conrad answered.

Toni took a deep breath. "Thank you."

"Are you ok?" Mike asked, his concern evident in his voice.

"Yes, I'm fine now. The situation just caught me by surprise."

"I can imagine. Wait till pa hears that you shot the cat."

Toni looked at her brother. "We really don't need to tell him, or ma."

Mike wrinkled his brows. "You're right. ma will be upset. Probably ride down here personally just to make sure you're fine."

"Let's change the topic, if you don't mind. Mrs. Baines is bringing out some lemonade."

The door opened and Mrs. Baines brought out a tray with lemonade and cookies. "Just the thing for a warm day," she said as she set the tray down.

“Would you care for some lemonade, Preacher Adams?” Toni asked.

“Yes. That would be fine.”

Toni handed the glasses around to everyone. She was pleased her hands finally quit shaking.

Mrs. Baines looked up as she saw Tyler coming from the barn. “I swear that boy can smell a cookie from five miles away.”

Toni turned, a genuine smile on her face as she saw her son running towards them.

“You look better, ma.”

Toni ran her hands through Tyler’s hair. “Thank you. I feel better.”

“Would anyone like a sugar cookie?” Mrs. Baines asked as she held the plate out. “Just made them this morning?”

“Oh boy!” Tyler cried out as he reached out for the plate.

“Don’t eat too many before supper, young man.”

“Ah, ma!” Toni noticed that his disappointment did not keep him from taking the two biggest cookies.

Adams took a bite, then closed his eyes, enjoying the taste. “Mrs. Baines, these are delicious.”

“Thank you.”

“Mrs. Baines makes good oatmeal cookies too,” Tyler informed Adams.

Adams smiled at Tyler. “I like oatmeal cookies”

“I gather you met my son.”

“Yes. He kept me company when I first got here.”

“Preacher Adams don’t carry a gun!” Tyler informed the others.

“Tyler!” his mother chided.

“He don’t. Cause he don’t carry nothing valuable.”

“He doesn’t,” Toni corrected her son.

“If I got robbed, I would have a gun to protect Charlie.”

Adams turned to Toni, then back to Tyler. “Charlie?”

“He’s my pet toad.”

“Tyler,” Toni warned. But Tyler was already pulling the mentioned toad from his pant pocket.

“This is Charlie.” Tyler held out the small animal to Adams

for inspection.

“Tyler, what did we discuss about bringing home pets?”

Tyler pulled the toad back to his chest, as if to protect him. “But Charlie needs me to take care of him.”

“I’m sure his mother is looking for him. Why don’t you take him back where you found him.”

“Can’t I keep him?”

“I am sure Charlie will like it better outside in the open range than living in your pocket or a box in your room.”

Tyler looked at the toad in his hand. “But I wanted a pet.”

“I promise we will discuss a pet later. But for now, you have to take Charlie back to where you found him.”

“Oh, all right.”

Five adults watched as a sullen looking boy dragged his feet as he slowly disappeared behind the barn.

“He’s a very outgoing young boy,” Adams observed out loud.

Mike looked from Tyler to Adams. “You have no idea!”

“Are you staying for dinner?” Conrad asked.

“Well, I was hoping to take Mrs. Logan to town for dinner, but I suppose after the exciting day you’ve had, dinner here would be better.”

Toni looked relieved. “Thank you.”

“Not a problem. I usually don’t see this much excitement on my visits.” Adams looked around at several of the hands walking about. “I see a few new faces here.”

“Toni and Mike’s father sent some spare men to help,” Conrad answered as Tyler rejoined them, another cookie in his hand.

“That was generous of him.”

“Nathan and Tommy work for Grandpa,” Tyler offered as he took another bite of his cookie. “But they came here to help Mr. Morgan.”

“Don’t eat with your mouth full,” Toni softly whispered to her son.

“Yes ma’am.”

Toni excused herself to help Mrs. Baines with the dinner. The conversation was lively as everyone heard the latest news

and shared the latest stories.

“I found a rock with a picture of a dead fish on it,” Tyler informed his mother.

Toni watched as her son removed a rock from his pocket. “A rock?”

“Uh-huh. Preacher Adams says it’s a fossil.”

Toni turned the rock over, examining it in detail. “Where did you find it?”

“Behind the barn.”

“Must have come from Shadow Valley.”

Toni looked up at Conrad’s comment. “Shadow Valley? Where is that?”

“South, about half an hour ride.”

“Preacher Adams says his next visit, he’ll take me to see it,” Tyler excitedly announced.

“Remember,” Adams cautioned. “I said we need to ask your mother.”

Tyler looked from Adams to his mother. “Oh yeah.”

Toni smiled while Tyler frowned. To a young child, waiting a day or more was like an eternity.

“Maybe on your next visit,” she spoke to Adams, “we’ll take you up on your generous offer.”

“Like I said, it’s a far ride,” Conrad spoke, “but you’ll find plenty to bring back.”

Tyler’s face beamed with excitement. “Oh, boy!”

The men spent the next half hour discussing various things as Toni put her son to bed. When she returned, Clint stood up.

“Conrad, I’ve enjoyed the association, but I wonder if Mrs. Logan would join me outside before I leave?”

Surprised at the request, Toni looked from Preacher Adams to Conrad to Mike. “That would be fine,” she agreed. The three men shook hands as they said their good-byes.

Outside, the slight breeze felt cool on her face. The stars seemed to be bright tonight.

“Care for a walk?”

Toni pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders as she followed beside him.

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

As they neared the coral, Toni recognized Nate's gelding and Red's mare. The gelding came up to Toni, wanting his nose scratched.

"You gave me such a start when you rode up," he softly spoke beside her.

"I can imagine."

"I was right. You've done an excellent job with your son."

Toni smiled. "Thank you. He is my pride and joy. And thank you for offering to take him to Shadow Valley."

"I look forward to it."

Toni laughed. "He'll probably not sleep for several nights, waiting for your return."

"Time travels at a different speed when you're young. Actually, I envy him."

Toni turned to Adams. "How so?"

Adams jabbed the earth with the toe of his boot. "For a man who is accustomed to talking to many people every week, I find my words suddenly deserting me. It makes me crave your son's ability to just say what's on his mind."

Toni smiled. "He does have that ability."

Clint was quiet for a few moments as he looked at the sky. Finally, he turned toward her.

"I understand many of the available young men have begun to come around."

"It's amazing how quickly word spreads."

"Small towns are all alike in that regard. I know we've only met twice, but in truth I've heard about you from several of the townspeople. You've made quite an impression on the townsfolk. May I ask if you've been taken with any one gentleman?"

"No. In truth, I've only just realized that maybe it is time to let someone else in my life."

Adams leaned against the coral. "I'm heading to Clearwater tomorrow. I have several people to visit, then I need to travel to Russell Springs. I would like to visit again before I travel there. If you're not taken with any one gentleman yet, maybe you would consider sharing a meal with me in town?"

Toni took a moment to look at Adams. "To be truthful, I'm

not sure if I'm ready for this."

"This, or me?"

"Either. As I mentioned before, I've just realized that maybe, just maybe the time has come where I can look for someone else. And I'm not sure if being a preacher's wife is something I can live up to."

"I can understand that."

"I don't want you to think I'm leading you on. I don't want to promise something I am not able to deliver. And right now, I can't promise anything."

"That's fair. And I appreciate your honesty and openness. Believe it or not, those are qualities any man, especially a man of God, would want in a wife."

"I hate for you to travel so far out of your way."

Adams gently lifted her hand to his lips. "Believe me, the traveling is well worth it." Lowering her hand and letting it go, he took a step back. "Now, I know this day has been a trial in every degree. So I am going to be on my way. I hope to see you in a few weeks, and maybe we can have dinner in town. And if you don't mind, maybe Ty can join us."

Toni smiled. "I would enjoy that."

He placed his hat on his head, then tipped it toward her. "I look forward to our next visit."

Toni watched as the Preacher's buggy drove away. Her feelings were still confused, but she knew the time was right. Wayne would want her to continue on, to find a father for Tyler. Someone who would be a proper father figure, would take the time with him to teach him, to guide him, to help him develop into a strong man.

Who better than a preacher, a man of God?

He had asked to see her again. A Preacher!

In all her years growing up, thinking of married life, never had she thought of a life with a Preacher.

Chapter 25

Toni lowered the flame in the lamp as Tyler climbed into bed.

Before tucking the blanket under him, she held the blanket up and looked underneath. “Do you have any more pets in your pockets or in the bed?”

“No.”

Toni could hear the disappointment in the small voice.

“Thank you for returning Charlie to his home.”

“Charlie wanted to stay with me.”

She tucked the blanket under the mattress. “Well, you can visit him during the day. But at night, he has to stay outside.”

“Ma?”

“Yes?”

“Are you gonna marry Preacher Adams?”

Toni sat on the bed beside her son. “He didn’t ask to marry me.”

“But he likes you. Uncle Mike said he’s sparking you. That’s why he came to visit. Do you like him?”

“I don’t know him very well. I’ve only met him a few times.”

“You need to marry someone who carries a gun.”

“A gun? Why?”

“So he can protect you.”

“A man can protect his family without using a gun.”

“When I grow up, I’m gonna get a gun just like Uncle Mike. Then I’ll protect you.”

“I’m sure you will. Now, what story do you want to hear?”

“The Knight and the Dragon.”

Toni made a face. “Are you sure? There’s still the story of the cross-eyed horse.”

Tyler shook his head. “The Knight and the Dragon.”

“Well, I guess he can wait for another night.” She sat on the edge of the bed as she began the familiar story. “Once upon a time, there lived an ugly princess—”

“A beautiful princess.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. A beautiful princess with short red hair—”

“No, it was long and blonde.”

Toni scrunched her face. “I’m sure it was red and short.”

Tyler shook his head. “It was long and blonde.”

“Well, if you’re sure?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Ok, a beautiful princess with long blonde hair who lived in a tall tower. She had been kidnapped by a nice and kind Lord who wanted to marry her.”

Toni stopped when she heard Tyler laughing. “He was bad.”

Toni looks surprised. “Didn’t I say that?”

“No. You said he was nice.”

“Oh no. He was really bad. But her heart belonged to a handsome knight who loved her. One day, he rode to the tower on a grey pony—”

“—a white stallion.”

Toni paused. “He rode a white stallion to rescue the beautiful princess. But guarding the tower was a short, stubby dragon with green eyes.”

“No. He was a *big* dragon. And his eyes are red, not green.”

Toni shook her head. “He really wanted green eyes to match his scales. But you’re right, his eyes were red.”

“And he breathed fire when he was mad.”

Toni smiled. This was Tyler’s favorite part.

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

“And the brave knight fought the ferocious dragon with a feather.”

“He used a sword.”

“Oh. I think you’re right. It was a long battle, but the brave knight finally slew the dragon, then rode his noble steed up the tower steps and rescued the princess.”

“And they lived happily ever after.” Tyler’s voice was sleepy as Toni rose from the bed.

“And they lived happily ever after,” she softly repeated as she gently brushed her lips across his forehead.

Tyler turned on his side, snuggling deeper into the covers. “Goodnight, ma.”

“Goodnight,” she whispered as she quietly left the room, another dragon beaten by the brave knight.

Chapter 26

Conrad added boiling water to the pot of coffee grounds, then opened a cabinet, pulling out a loaf of bread. After eating several slices, he poured himself a cup of coffee. When he finished, he poured himself another cup, then headed for the front door.

“Need any help?”

Conrad turned to see Toni standing in the hallway, a light blue robe tied at her waist. It was obvious she had just woke up.

“Sorry if I woke you,” he apologized. “How’s Ty?”

“Asleep.”

“After his active day today, he should sleep for a day or two.”

“You would think so, but I guarantee he’ll be up early in the morning.”

She noticed again he was dressed and heading outside. “Is it Star?”

“Yeah. I’m sure she’ll deliver tonight.”

“Need help?”

“No.” He looked at his cup of coffee. “But if you want, I could use the company?”

Toni smiled. “Any more coffee?”

“Should be.”

“Great. I'll get a cup and meet you in the barn.”

Conrad nodded his head as he headed out the door.

Toni smiled as she headed for the kitchen. Birthing was something she knew she would never get tired of watching.

A miracle of life.

“Wacha doin?”

Tyler stood in the doorway, his sleepy eyes watching his mother as she poured a cup of coffee.

“Star is probably going to have her baby foal tonight.”

Tyler's sleepy eyes widened with excitement. “Can I come watch?”

“It's very late, young man.”

“I promise to be quiet!”

Toni could hear the excitement in her son's voice. Even if she sent him back to bed, most likely, he would not get back to sleep any time soon.

“Go get your coat and shoes. And be quiet. I don't want you waking up Uncle Mike or Mrs. Baines.”

“Too late,” Mike called as Tyler quietly ran up the stairs to his room. “What's going on?”

“Sorry we woke you. Star is ready to give birth.”

“Ahh. In that case, I'm back to bed.” Leaning on his crutches, he headed back to his room.

Conrad was gently stroking Star's neck when he heard the barn door open.

“Easy girl,” he softly spoke. “It's just Ty and his mother.”

Star began pacing in her stall, occasionally glancing at her belly. Tyler watched as she began pawing at the floor, moving the straw around.

“What's she doing?”

“She's getting ready for the birth of her baby,” Toni answered.

Star decided to lay down, then after a few moments, stood back up, pacing again. Conrad kept talking to her softly. Finally, Star laid down again, laying her head on the straw.

“Can I pet her?” Tyler asked.

“Quietly, come over here,” Conrad whispered.” Be gentle as

you pet her. She's nervous.”

“Why?”

“This is her first time giving birth.”

“Oh.” Tyler gently stroked her neck. “Ma says you're gonna be fine,” he whispered to the mare.

After a few more minutes, Star stretched out all four of her legs and began to push. Tyler saw Star strain and looked to Conrad.

“What’s she doing?” he asked.

“She's starting to push the baby out. In a moment, you'll see its little front hooves come out.”

Tyler's breath caught. “Can I see?”

“We don't want to startle her, so walk very slowly back to your mom.”

Tyler quickly resumed his place beside his mother so he could see what was happening behind Star. It took about five minutes, but finally Star pushed and Tyler saw the white tips of two tiny hooves appear.

As she pushed again, the foal's front legs came out, and its tiny nose began to emerge.

“Ma, look!!”

“Shh, I see.” Toni was not sure if she was more excited about the birth of the foal, or seeing the excitement in her son's eyes as he watched the birthing process. Tyler could not take his eyes off the partially emerged foal. His eyes widened more when, with another push, the head came out.

Conrad continued to stroke Star's neck, whispering encouraging words. Another push, and the foal's shoulders were out.

Star whinnied as she gave another mighty push, resulting in the foal's hips coming out.

With a grunt, Star pushed out the back legs and tail. The newborn quickly slid onto the fresh straw, its limbs twitching as it began to breathe its first breathe of life.

“What’s she doing now?” Tyler asked, his eyes glued to the scene as Star sniffed the baby, then began to lick it.

“She's cleaning her baby, and learning its scent. Soon, she'll

begin to nudge the baby to stand.”

It took several tries before the foal managed to stand on its wobbly legs.

“It's a filly,” Conrad informed Tyler.

“She's beautiful,” Toni agreed as the foal lowered her head below Star's belly and found the udder full of milk.

Tyler watched as the new foal struggled to stand up, fell down, then struggled back up, finding the udder again. Her long legs were almost as long as Star's.

“Ma,” he asked as he pulled on the sleeve of his mother's robe. “I saw how she got out but, how did she get in!”

Chapter 27

Conrad checked his watch again for the sixth time.

The stage was definitely running late.

“Hey Conrad!”

Conrad turned around. “Hello, Mr. Greene.”

“I have something for you.”

Conrad checked his watch again, then headed toward the mercantile store.

“A letter arrived two days ago for Mrs. Logan. When I saw you, thought maybe you could deliver it.”

Conrad accepted the letter. “Sure.”

Mrs. Greene appeared with several bolts of new material.

“Oh, Mr. Logan. How are you?”

“Fine, Mrs. Greene.”

“What brings you into town this week?”

“Dana’s coming home.”

“Oh my. I wonder how much she’s grown this last year. How old is she now?”

“She’s fourteen, going on thirty.”

Mrs. Greene chuckled. “You’ve done a fine job raising her, alone. It must be difficult letting her go off to school each year.”

“It is. But I look forward to her returning.”

“Well, tell her we said ‘welcome home’.”

“I will. And thanks again for the letter. I’ll be sure Mrs. Logan gets it.

Looking down the road, he still saw no stage, nor any evidence that it was close. He decided to head for the hotel restaurant.

Inside were several men and women eating. One particular face caught his attention.

“A cup of coffee,” he ordered as he looked at the man seated at the corner, his back to the wall. Recognition between the two men was silent.

Conrad approached the table. “It’s been a long time.”

The man tilted his head toward the empty seat next to him. “Yeah, it has.”

Conrad watched as the Marshal leaned back in his chair. “Last I saw, you were in Dakota Territory.”

“Last I saw, you were in Oregon.”

Conrad smiled. “Times have changed.”

“They have. I’ve been keeping an eye on you.”

Conrad took a long look at the Marshal. “I take that back. Old habits die hard.”

“Are you going to make that government contract?”

Conrad was not surprised Wade knew of that. Wade always seemed to know what was going on.

“Last month I hired on some seasoned men. I should be ready for the drive in about six weeks.”

“Sounds good.”

The waitress placed the cup of coffee in front of Conrad. “Anything else, sir?”

“No, thank you.”

Wade watched the waitress walk away. “Remember Joe Cill?”

Conrad’s eyes drifted to the side as he remembered. “Is his gang still in Virginia?”

“Most of them are. I arrested him six months ago.” He took a drink of his coffee. “He was asking about you.”

“I hope you explained how my life has taken a change.”

Wade watched as the waitress moved around the tables, filling coffee cups and taking orders. “Didn’t matter. After his trial, he tried to escape. Five bullets made sure he didn’t get far.”

Conrad gave a soft whistle. “I’m glad I got out of the business when I did.”

“I hope you’ve been keeping yourself out of trouble.”

“You know me!”

Wade turned his piercing blue eyes back to Conrad. “That’s why I asked. I hope your previous profession hasn’t brought any inconvenience since your retirement.”

“I try to keep a low profile. I don’t want any of them to know where I am.”

“Probably a good idea.”

“There’s a part of me always looking over my shoulder, wondering who will find me.”

Wade nodded his head in understanding. “I guess we all have ghosts in our closets.”

“Yeah. Some of us just need to put stronger locks on the doors to keep them shut.”

“I promised when you made that decision to help you whenever I could.”

“I appreciated that.” Conrad took a drink of his coffee. “So, what has you traveling all the way back to Texas? It couldn’t be just to see me!”

Wade paused, briefly wondering how much to say. “Counterfeiters,” he finally answered.

Conrad looked up, noticing Wade’s intense look. “I thought the big operations were back east.”

“Many of them are. But some are moving west. Less law.”

“Any leads?”

“A few. I’m already watching a few men.” In fact, he already had his suspicions. But he was not going to say anything in front of Conrad.

Conrad heard the stage as it approached the town. “I hear my daughter’s stage coming in.” He rose to leave. “I guess I’ll see you in town later.”

“Just remember,” Wade warned, “to stay out of trouble.”

Chapter 28

Conrad watched the passengers disembark from the stage, one by one.

“Daddy!”

“Dana!”

Her bonnet fell off as he hugged his young daughter. “It’s good to have you back.”

“I’m glad to be back. Has Star had her foal yet?”

Conrad smiled. “Two nights ago. I’m sorry. I know how much you wanted to be here for it.”

Dana’s disappointment was evident for only a moment. “Well...?”

“She had a beautiful filly.”

“I knew it!”

“And they are both doing just fine.”

“As soon as we get home, I’ll see them. What does she look like?”

“Brown. No blaze. But one back foot has a white sock.”

Conrad could see she was already trying to decide on a name. He would not be surprised if she called the filly ‘Socks’.

“I’ll have to watch her for awhile before I decide on a name.”

Conrad reached for her trunks as the stage driver handed

them down. "She was up and walking within a few minutes."

"Ooh! She might be a runner."

"Maybe."

"And how are the horses for the contract coming?"

"We have about half of them broke."

Dana paused, thinking. "You're behind."

"Don't worry. I have some extra men working for me. When the time comes, we'll be ready."

Dana gave a sigh of relief. "Good."

Conrad pulled back and looked her up and down. "You've grown."

Dana smiled. "I was wondering when you were going to notice."

Conrad's eyes narrowed slightly. The past two years, he and Dana had argued about her going away to school. She felt she no longer needed the Finishing School for Girls. She felt she was old enough and had enough schooling to be a proper wife to any man she met. She wanted to stay and work on the ranch with him.

In fact, he wanted the same thing, but he also wanted to keep his promise to Lucas.

She was going to be headstrong about going back to school next year. But he would worry about it then, when she had to leave again.

"Oh, I've noticed. For now, you're back home with me."

"It's good to be home."

Conrad turned to his daughter. "That sounds nice."

"What?"

"Home."

Dana narrowed her eyes as she studied her father. "You're different."

"Oh, how so?"

"I'm not sure. But you are." Her eyes widened as she had a thought. "Are you seeing someone?"

"What?"

"You know, seeing a woman?"

"I know what it means."

"Well, are you?"

A picture of Toni flashed across his mind. “We have someone new at the ranch,” he answered instead.

“I knew it,” she whispered as she watched her father carefully.

“Remember Mike Bradley?”

“Didn’t he hurt his leg a few months ago.”

“Well, his sister, a Mrs. Toni Logan, is helping out for awhile.”

Dana lowered her head, hiding her look of confusion. “Mrs. Logan? Daddy, don’t tell me you’re taking up with a married woman!”

Conrad came to a halt and turned. “Dana! I thought that school was teaching you better manners than that!”

Dana smiled. “Then don’t send me back!”

“Come along,” he ordered as he loaded her trunks on the buckboard. “Mrs. Logan is a widow. She has a six year old son name Tyler. In fact, when Toni stayed to help, Mike brought Ty down, so now all three are at the house.”

“Oh. *Toni and Ty.*”

“Dana,” her father’s tone warned.

“Well, I was right. You’re seeing a woman. She just happens to live at our house too.”

For the first time, Conrad considered the repercussion of Toni living under his roof.

“Everything is above reproach,” he confessed as he helped her into the seat. “Don’t forget, her brother and son are there too. Not to mention a new cook.”

“It will be good to see Mike again. So tell me about this woman you are *not* seeing. Is she anything like Mike?”

Conrad gave up and talked about their company. He had been hoping Dana would not be jealous of another female at the house.

Wade leaned against the post as he watched the buckboard roll away. He hoped he had not said too much.

Chapter 29

Through the window, Conrad watched as Tyler followed Dana around the courtyard, talking and asking questions to no end. He was surprised at Dana's patience with the young boy.

Dana led Star from the barn and tied her to the coral, the young filly following behind. As she began to brush her, it was obvious that Tyler wanted to help.

Conrad watched as she first got a bucket from the barn, stood Tyler on it so he could reach higher, then showed the boy how to hold the brush and in what direction to brush.

He was not sure what to expect when he brought Dana home. But he was surprised at her ready acceptance of Toni's help. He was sure there would have been tension.

He watched as Dana showed Tyler how to braid Star's mane. Tyler was enjoying himself and the attention Dana was giving him.

He was going through some papers when he saw Toni come down the stairs. "I forgot to tell you when I came from town the other day, there was a letter for you."

"For me?"

The letter was from her mother.

"Have you seen Ty?" she asked while opening the letter, her

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

eyes searching for her son.

Conrad nodded his head toward the window. Toni watched as Tyler petted the filly. He was asking Dana something, and she was trying to explain.

“He’s really taken with her,” she observed out loud.

“I was just thinking the same thing. I’ve never seen her with kids before.”

“She’s a natural. I hope Ty doesn’t run her ragged with all his questions.”

“I think they’ll be fine.”

“Ty is probably giving her suggestions on what to name the colt.”

“As of last night, she still had not come up with a name yet.”

Toni could barely hear Tyler still talking as he opened the barn door for Dana as she led Star and her young filly back inside.

“She’s a lovely young lady,” she commented as both kids disappeared.

“She looks a lot like her mother.”

Toni took a deep breath. “Speaking of mothers...” She read the letter from her mother and smiled.

Dear Mom:

I am:

fine

good

not doing so well

The weather in Texas is:

clear and warm

clear and cold

raining

snowing

windy

Tyler is: (check as many as needed)

doing great

being a pest

Charmain Callaway

___ becoming a rebel
Tyler is growing like a weed. He's height is now:
___ (Please fill in the blank)
Tyler's favorite game is:
___ still hide and seek
___ another game (Please specify)
I plan to be coming home:
___ almost immediately
___ within the next week or two
___ sometime after two weeks
___ not sure when
I have met:
___ someone really nice
___ nobody worth mentioning
Sending my love, your daughter
 Anthonia

Conrad watched the play of emotions cross Toni's face as she quickly read the letter.

"It's from my mother," she reaffirmed as she noticed his curiosity.

"She must have said something funny."

"It's not what she says, but how she says it."

"Oh?"

"She has a less than subtle way of telling me I've not written in some time."

Conrad glanced over the letter Toni offered, then whistled. "I don't recall my mother ever sending me one of these."

"My mother is unique."

Conrad handed the letter back. "Looks like all the basic topics are covered."

Toni smiled as she read the letter again.

"Do you ever fill one of those out and send it back?" he asked.

"Sometimes, but mostly I just write my own."

"Then I would say her mission is accomplished."

Chapter 30

“There are six kittens, ma. I counted ‘em.”

Putting the finishing touches on a pair of mittens she was crocheting for Tyler, Toni smiled as her son continued to draw.

“One is black with white on his nose and paws. The others are black and orange.”

Conrad sat in front of the fireplace trying to read a paper that was already several days old. Mike was sitting with his leg propped up playing cards with Dana. While Tyler continued to draw, Toni put away her crocheting and headed to the kitchen to help Mrs. Baines with the dishes.

“I named the black one Sam,” Tyler added.

Toni’s back straightened. “Sam?”

“Uh-huh,” Tyler nodded as he filled in a circle he had drawn.

Toni gave a silent prayer. Tyler had a habit of naming animals after people. Most of the people back home were not offended that they shared a name with a snake or a toad. They were used to Tyler’s ways.

But this was different. People out here were unaware of Tyler’s innocent gesture.

“Why Sam?” Dana asked as she laid a card down.

“Because he meows so much.”

Conrad watched as Toni's eyes rolled up in disbelief.

"Uh, Ty? Did you by any chance tell Sam you named the kitten after him?" she hopefully asked.

"Uh-huh." Tyler's head bobbed up and down again.

Toni closed her eyes. "And what did he say when you told him?"

"He spit on the ground."

Toni sat down next to Michael with a thud. "He did?"

"Uh-huh. Then he laughed real hard."

Toni's look of relief was short-lived as Tyler continued.

"Ma can spit!"

Toni almost choked.

"She can spit farther than any of the other boys—"

"Tyler!"

"Uncle Mike said so."

"Michael!"

Michael suddenly raised his hands in defense as his sister cast him a frosty glare. "I didn't think he would remember that!"

"And she can belch too—"

"WHAT?" she almost screamed as she turned back to her son.

"—real loud."

"Tyler Wayne Logan—"

"Uncle Mike said it's better to belch through your mouth than your butt."

Toni grabbed her son's chair and quickly pulled it out. "I think it's past time for bed young man."

Conrad tried to hide his smile as Tyler looked up, confused at his mother's tone.

"But Uncle Mike says—"

"I don't think either Mr. Logan or Dana is interested in what Uncle Mike says I did when I was young."

"Oh, but I am."

Toni turned to see a silly grin on Conrad's face.

"I really am."

Embarrassed beyond belief, Toni led her son up the stairs. "I want you to wash up so I can come back and fix Uncle Mike's

cane.”

“What’s wrong with Uncle Mike’s cane?”

“He’s going to need another one.”

“Why?”

“Because I just may break his other leg,” she whispered under her breath.

“Ma, can you teach me to spit?”

As the voices faded upstairs, Michael rose and headed toward his room.

“Where are you going?” Dana asked. “I was finally winning!”

“I’m man enough to admit that I’m hiding.”

“From your sister?”

“If you knew Toni’s temper, you’d be hiding too.”

Michael closed his bedroom door only moments before Toni came stomping down the stairs.

With hands on hips, she glared at the closed door. “Michael?”

No response.

Conrad almost expected her to stomp her feet, she was so mad.

“Do you remember Stanley Weaver?”

Conrad was further surprised to hear a groan coming from Michael’s room. There was another long silence before Michael finally opened the door.

“Toni, I’m sorry. I really am sorry.”

“MO-OM, I’M READY,” Tyler called from upstairs.

“I’ll be right there, honey. Go ahead and pick out a story for me to read.” Toni stepped up to her brother and in a low voice whispered something to Michael. When Toni turned and went back up the stairs, Conrad noticed Michael’s face was slightly paler than before.

Michael looked over at Conrad, then gave a big grin while he closed his door.

Conrad sat in his chair and listened to the now familiar sounds around him. He could hear Toni’s muffled voice as she told her son *the Knight and the Dragon* bedtime story, the fire beside him as the wood crackled and snapped, Dana’s soft hum

as she played a game of solitaire, the bed in Michael's room as it creaked under his weight while he tried to position his leg, Mrs. Baines putting up the dishes in the kitchen, and Tyler's giggle as he and his mother played a last game together.

For the first time that he could remember, the house felt comfortable.

For the first time, the house sounded like home.

Chapter 31

“Who’s Stanley Weaver?”

Michael looked at Conrad. “Where did you hear that name?”

“Toni mentioned him last night.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot.”

Entering the barn, Conrad grabbed a curry brush and began to brush Dancer as Michael explained.

“A few years back, Toni taught at the school when the regular teacher came down with a bad case of the flu. There was this one boy, Stanley, who was always teasing the girls. One day, he locked little Jenny in the outhouse. When Toni found out, she was livid. Told him he had to apologize to Jenny.”

Michael grabbed the other brush and began brushing the other side of Dancer.

“What did Stanley do?”

“He took off with Toni right behind him. He thought he was smart by shimmying up an old oak tree. Toni told him to come down, but of course he said no. She said ‘*fine. I can sit here longer than you can stay up there.*’ And she did just that. She had one of her students bring her the papers from the classroom and she sat there and graded them while Stanley watched from up in the tree.”

“I guess I can figure out who outlasted who.”

“Yeah. Stanley finally came down. She grabbed him by the ear and dragged him all the way home. The next day he was more agreeable and good-natured.” Michael gave a chuckle. “Of course, his father made sure he couldn’t sit for several days.”

Conrad smiled as he gave Dancer a final pat, then put the brush up. “Your sister has a stubborn streak in her.”

“Stubborn . . . tenacious . . . obstinate . . .”

“Michael?”

Hearing his sister’s voice, Michael groaned. “I hoped for a few more hours before she found me,” he whispered.

As Toni walked into the barn, she saw Conrad first. He tipped his hat toward her, then smiled. For some reason, she was sure there was laughter in his eyes. It reminded her of the first time they met.

“Yeah, I’m here,” Michael called from behind Dancer.

Toni shifted her glance. “Michael. I would like to talk with you.”

“I figured.” He hobbled around Dancer. “Remember,” he whispered to Conrad. “Women never forget.”

“Never forget what?” Toni asked.

“Nothing.”

“Never forget what?” she repeated as her hands rested on her hips.

Michael hobbled toward the house. “Anything! Women don’t forget anything! That’s it!”

“Yes we do.”

“No you don’t. Women never forget, ever.”

“You’re exaggerating, Michael.”

“You will go to your grave remembering,” he called out as she followed him to the porch. “And when you’re resurrected, you’ll still remember,” he added as he held the door open for her.

Conrad saw Michael shaking his head as he followed her through the door, the words ‘women never forget’ silently spoken on his lips.

Chapter 32

Dana scrunched her nose as she pushed the hook through the loop, reached over her finger to grab the yarn, then tried to pull it through the loop without dropping it.

“How come I can’t start a doily,” she asked as she pushed the hook through the loop again.

“Because you won’t be happy with it. Believe me,” Toni insisted.

Dana looked at the square she was working on. “Why does mine look so sloppy?”

Toni smiled. “Because you’re learning how to hold and keep the tension of the yarn. When you learn that, *then* we will start on the doily.”

Dana looked from her block to the one Toni was working on. Toni’s, she noticed, was neat. All the stitches were even and straight. Looking at hers, the stitches were lopsided, and definitely uneven.

“Are you sure I will learn this soon?”

“If you practice, then yes. Once your block looks even, then you’ll be ready for the doily.”

“Frank better appreciate this,” Dana muttered to herself as she again pushed the hook through the loop, grabbed the yarn,

then tried to pull it through the loop without dropping it.

“I’m sure he will,” Toni answered beside her.

Dana turned to look at Toni. “Thanks for teaching me. Frank’s parents twenty-fifth anniversary is next month, and I wanted to give them something special. I honestly couldn’t think of a thing until I saw the doilies you made in the living-room.”

“Frank must be an exceptional person.”

Dana’s cheeks flushed. “He is.”

Toni watched as Conrad’s daughter bent her head back down and tried to keep the yarn in her left hand from pulling the work in her right hand apart.

Dana did a few more rows, noticing the results. “I do believe my rows are getting neater,” she proudly announced, her excitement evident in her voice.

Toni looked at her work, nodded her head and smiled. “Good. Now keep going. Soon we’ll start on the doily.”

“I was thinking of a matching pair.”

Toni nodded her head. “That’s a good idea.”

Dana turned her square and started another row. “What else have you crocheted? Besides doilies?”

“Oh, many things. I’ve made several shawls, blankets, curtains...”

Dana looked up. “Curtains?”

“Yes. And before Ty was born, I made him several little booties and hats and outfits. And of course, baby blankets.”

“Wow. I didn’t know you could make all that stuff with a ball of string.”

“Once you learn the basics, anything you can make with fabric you can make crocheting.”

“I like the doilies in the house. When I have my own place, I want to have them too.”

Toni smiled. “I’m sure Frank would like them too.”

Dana stopped and looked up, studying the woman beside her. “You know?”

“I think everyone but your father knows. I saw the way you two were together when we went to town last week. He went out of his way to make sure he said hello to you. And he was very

gentlemanly in helping you onto the buckboard when we were ready to leave. And you! You smiled at everything he said and did.”

Dana almost groaned. “Was I really like that?”

“I’m afraid so.”

Dana returned to the square she was making. “You know, you’re nothing like what I was expecting when I came home.”

“And what were you expecting?”

“I’m not sure.” She laid her work down as she stared into space. “I love my father greatly, and I missed many years with him. Years I’ll never get back.” She grinned as she looked over at Toni. “I never expected you to be so... caring.”

Toni knew Dana was remembering last week. Saturday was the day for stripping the beds. She had been surprised that Dana had already pulled her sheets off. Toni found them laying on the floor, so she gathered them and headed downstairs.

Dana saw her and intercepted her before she entered the kitchen.

“I’ll take those,” she quickly said as she reached for the sheets.

Toni kept walking. “It’s not a problem.”

“I’ll take care of those,” Dana was insistent as she again held out her hands for the sheets.

Toni heard the almost panic in the young voice. “Dana, it’s not a problem. We pull the sheets off all the beds every week. This is not a bother.”

“But...”

Toni watched as Dana’s face turned scarlet, tears filling her eyes.

“Dana, what’s wrong?”

“Please...” Dana began to softly cry.

Toni looked from Dana to the sheets, confused for a moment. As she shifted the sheets in her hand, Toni saw why Dana was so embarrassed.

Toni put the sheets down, then gently gathered the young woman in her arms.

“Honey, it’s alright. Believe me, you are not the first, nor will

you be the last woman who misjudges that time of the month.”

Dana sniffled, then pulled out a handkerchief to wipe her nose. “It’s so embarrassing.”

“Honey. Almost every woman has had that accident. Believe me. When it happened to me, I almost died when my grandmother saw it. I cried too. But do you know what she said to me?”

Dana shook her head as she hic-cupped. “No.”

“She said, *‘Be grateful you still have your monthlies.’*”

Toni was rewarded with a smile from Dana.

“Come on. Let’s go wash these before Mrs. Baines finds us.”

That day had bound the two together. Toni smiled at the shared memory.

“If you had come a year ago,” Dana said, bring Toni back to the present, “I’m not sure I would be so willing to share Daddy with another woman.”

“Why a year?”

“Well, when I first met him, I wanted him all to myself. I had been denied this life with him, and I think I would have been jealous of anyone or anything that got between us. I’ve cherished my time here, working with him, and alongside him.”

“I’m sure you’ve learned a lot here.”

Dana took a deep breath. “If it wasn’t for the school, everything would be perfect.”

“Why do you go to school back east?”

“Daddy made a promise to my Grandfather that I would go there. School is fine, but what I’m learning there is not going to really benefit me out here.”

Toni tilted her head. “How so?”

Dana rolled her eyes. “How many of the ranch hands really care if you use the proper fork? Or set the table with the proper centerpiece? Or care if you hold your teacup in the proper manner?”

Toni tried not to smile. “I think all the ranch hands should hold their coffee cups with their pinkies sticking out.”

Both starting laughing at the image.

Dana picked up her crocheting and continued to practice.

After a few minutes, Toni asked Dana a question.

“How long ago did your mother die?”

Again, Dana set her crocheting down. “About eight years. I never knew much about my father. Mother was usually quiet whenever I asked. I thought she was still mourning his death.”

“She thought he was dead?”

“That’s what she said. But after she died, I went through her things and found the letters he wrote to her. At first I thought they were letters from when they were courting.”

“How did you know they weren’t?”

“I noticed the dates. After the initial shock of learning he was still alive, I read each letter. Anyone could tell he really loved her, and was doing what he could to fix a home for her. But knowing my mother, she never would have survived out here. She was not strong enough, and she never had the desire to move west of the Mississippi.”

“Many people are content to stay in the area where they were born and raised. They don’t like change.”

“I guess when they were younger, mom thought his dreams sounded romantic. But she never would have moved.”

“But when you read about the life he was creating out here...?” Toni encouraged.

“It was like, I knew this was where I wanted to be, to meet my father and be a part of this life. Grandfather tried to talk me out of it, but he finally understood how important this was for me. Life here is perfect. If only Daddy would drop the Girl’s School.”

Dana looked closely at Toni.

“He likes you.”

“What?”

“He does. I can tell.”

“Well,” Toni practically stuttered.

“And you like him too. I see how you two are together.”

“And you are an expert on this subject because...?”

“My Grandfather used to say: *‘You’ll never understand why your mother did what she did until you face the same situation and have to make the same decisions.’*”

“Sounds like he and my mother were cut from the same cloth.”

“I see the way Daddy looks at you, the way his gaze follows you when you cross the room.” Dana looked down at her hands. “It’s the way I hope Frank looks at me one day,” she whispered.

Dana picked up her work and looked at her crocheting. “Now, I think I understand more, because I think I feel the same way. I want to share my life with someone special.”

Toni placed her hand on top of Dana’s. “You will.”

Chapter 33

Toni enjoyed the evening breeze as she sat on the porch, her crocheting in her lap. The sounds of the night were calming after a hard day of work.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Baines was a worker. Toni only helped her when she needed it. Otherwise, she kept the rest of the house in order.

She was falling into a familiar routine:

Monday: Wash day

Tuesday: Ironing

Wednesday: Mending and sewing

Thursday: Help in baking bread and cakes

Friday: Cleaning

Saturday: Strip beds

Taking her yarn, she continued the doily she had started last night.

“Started another one?”

Conrad sat beside her, watching in fascination as she continued to crochet.

“It helps to calm me.”

“Well, I’d say you must be the calmest woman in Texas.”

Toni smiled. “I do like to crochet.”

Conrad watched as the hook quickly pushed through the previous work, the yarn being pulled and looped in all directions.

“It’s amazing how one strand of thread could be twisted and looped and knotted in such a way that produces such a lacy item.”

Toni laughed. “Believe me, several times it ends up in tangles that I have to pull apart.”

Conrad watched as she crocheted another section.

“I have to admit, I like the lacy doilies around the place. It makes it feel more. . . comfortable.”

Toni laughed. “Not all things crocheted are lacy.”

“Oh?”

“It depends on the yarn used.”

It was obvious by his expression that he did not understand.

She held up the thin yarn she was using. “When the yarn is thin, and the pattern is right, then the effect is a lacy look. But when the yarn is thick, like the mittens I made last week, then the effect is different.”

Conrad’s brows rose. “Ah. Thin yarn makes lacy things, thick yarn makes warm things.”

Toni smiled at the analogy. “That’s about it. I’m glad you like it, because Dana asked me to teach her.”

“Really?”

“Don’t sound so surprised,” she scolded with a smile.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that Dana always wants to be outside, working with me. Sitting inside with a small hook and deliberately tangling and knotting thread was not what I would have guessed she would do.”

“I think you are going to discover that what interests your daughter is changing.”

“Oh?”

She saw his intent look. “It’s not my place to say.”

His right brow rose. “You started this.”

She looked at his face. His hazel eyes were direct as he looked at her. She was about to change the subject, but then remembered the conversation between her and Dana. Maybe she could do something to help.

“Dana is becoming a beautiful young woman,” she started.

“I would have to agree with you there.”

Toni paused for a moment to collect her thoughts. “What do you expect from her in the future?”

Conrad blinked, clearly not anticipating that question. “I guess I want her to settle down and be happy.”

“And what would make her happy?”

Conrad took a deep breath as he looked around the yard. He knew what made him happy. But what about his daughter? Did he really know what she wanted, what she needed?

“She talks about working on the ranch,” he finally confessed.

“Is she any good?”

Conrad’s smile was genuine. “She sure is. She’s taken to life on a ranch faster than anyone I’ve known. She can already do many of the chores needed to keep the place going. And she knows how to keep the books.”

Toni heard the pride in his voice. “Where is she going to learn how to run this ranch, or any other ranch for that matter?”

Conrad looked at the ground. “I see you’ve been talking to Dana about her schooling.”

Toni picked up her crocheting, then placed it back in her lap. “If she was going to live back east, then I could see the extra schooling, learning the proper etiquette for how to stand, sit or walk, or how to properly converse with a business associate of her husband. Many of those rules are lost out here. People here just don’t care if you address your letters properly, or wear the latest fashion when attending a ball. People here are more concerned with honesty, and working for what they get paid.”

“I know. But I made a promise.”

“A promise that you have kept. That promise may have been right for her Grandfather, but is it right for Dana? Has she already learned what she needs to be a proper wife to some rancher?”

Conrad’s shocked look almost made Toni laugh. Clearly, he had not considered anyone being interested in his daughter.

Well, he was in for a surprise.

“What age were you when you were thinking of settling

down and starting a family of your own?" she asked.

Conrad thought a moment, then gave a heavy sigh. "Oh dear," he whispered. "I didn't even think about that."

"Well, I think you are going to discover that she *has* been thinking about that."

"Is that why she wants to learn this stuff?"

Toni picked up her work again. "I think she already has someone in mind."

Conrad looked from his hands to her hands as they guided the hook and thread. "I guess I should expect more of these lacey things around."

He closed his eyes, listening to the familiar sounds of the night.

"How did you meet Wayne?" he asked. "And Stewart?"

Toni folded her crocheting and set it aside again. For the past few weeks, she had been expecting this conversation. She looked up to the night sky, remembering.

"Wayne and I grew up together. We lived less than a mile apart. I knew I wanted to marry him the day he beat up Lenny Cooper after school..."

Chapter 34

Nebraska Territory, 1846

“Anthonia, we’re going to be late for school.”

“I’m coming, Wayne” she shouted out of her bedroom window. “My petticoat is crooked.”

“Girls! You sure have a lot of different clothes to put on.”

Anthonia came out the front door and looked at her friend since childhood. “Well, that’s the way it is.”

“Come on. We need to get going.”

“Alright.”

Wayne looked around. “Where’s Michael?”

“Mother says he’s running a fever, and has to stay home.”

“Oh. Did your ma and pa expect a boy when you were born?”

“What?”

“Your name, Anthonia. It’s such a long name. It would be easier if you had a shorter name.”

“Well, my name is Anthonia, and I’m not going to change it!” she replied.

“Well, how about Toni. Toni is easier to say. And it’ll only be between me and you. When we’re at school, I’ll call you

Anthonia. But when it's just you and me, I'll call you Toni."

Anthonia thought on the idea, and like it. "Ok. But only between the two of us."

They had sealed the idea with a spit pact, something her mother would have been appalled at if she found out.

As they walked to school, they talked about their homework assignments. Wayne took the opportunity to call her Toni whenever he could.

After school, Miss Jackson wanted Toni to stay behind.

"Anthonia, you need to work on your history. Your tests are below the rest of the class."

"I'm sorry, Miss Jackson."

"Is there a problem?"

Toni shrugged her shoulders. "I just don't care about what happened in the past."

"But so much of our life is shaped by what happened in our past. The fact that we broke away from England and sailed to this new land, to how the states are being formed and aligned, and then brought together to form this country."

"Yes, Miss Jackson."

Miss Jackson heard her exasperation. "I want you to advance to the next grade. Which means, you need to study harder on your history subjects. Now, I want you to think about your favorite thing to do. Then write an essay on how that particular thing has changed and been molded over the past fifty years. Alright?"

"Yes Ma'am."

Toni walked slowly from the schoolhouse. She was wondering how this new assignment was going to help her like history any better. She seriously doubted that could happen.

Before she headed home, she headed to the school outhouse. While inside, she heard someone outside giggling, then a loud thud.

Toni knew it was Lenny Cooper. No one giggled like Lenny.

When she tried to leave, she discovered the door was stuck. Lenny had somehow wedged something against the door, preventing it from opening.

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

Toni cried out for help, but none came. After several minutes, her crying out turned to screaming. Toni was truly scared.

With tears streaming down her face, she continued to pound on the door and scream, hoping anyone walking by would hear her.

An hour later, help finally arrived.

“Toni?”

“Wayne? Is that you?”

It took Wayne a few minutes to get the piece of wood wedged against the door loose. When he finally opened the door, Toni ran into his arms. Her face was red from crying and stained with dried tears.

“Lenny locked me inside,” she whimpered. She really hated to cry in front of any boy, but Wayne was different. Wayne was closer than a brother to her. As he walked her home, which he usually did, Toni noticed he was quiet.

She was afraid he was mad at her because she had been crying and scared. He probably would never have cried like she did.

The next day after school, Wayne cornered Lenny behind the big oak trees behind the school. With all his friends around, Lenny laughed about how he trapped Anthonia inside the outhouse, and how he heard her calling out, then crying, and then screaming. While he was laughing at his little joke, quiet Wayne surprised everyone by punching Lenny to the ground and knocking out three of his front teeth.

Lenny spent the rest of the school year speaking with a lisp.

From that day on, Toni knew one day, she would marry Wayne.

For several years, Wayne worked after school, saving his money to one day build a house.

Three months after they finished school, the two were married. People were moving west, looking for better land, better opportunities. Young pioneers were putting wagons together with all their life’s belongings in them, preparing to move to the promised land.

Wayne purchased a modest wagon and a team to pull it. When they left, their parents were sad, but understood.

The days were long and hard as they traveled west.

After traveling several months, Wayne decided he liked where they were. A town was two hours away. The land was fertile, with a river running through it. Hills and plateaus were plenty. The place had everything.

Except trees.

“A cave?” Toni asked when Wayne suggested they make one their home temporarily.

“Why not. It’s a roof over our head and walls to surround us. We’ll make adobe bricks, then make our own home. But for now, we’ll just make do with what we have.”

And they did.

Actually, life was not so bad in the cave. It was cool during the day and warm during the evening. Looking around her new home, their furnishings were simple, but they had all they needed. The only problem came when it rained hard.

Then she was battling mud for a day or so.

The third time they went to town, Wayne met Stewart, who mentioned how he had started a shipping & freighting company in several nearby towns.

“If you ever need anything shipped in or out, just let me know,” he offered.

After they planted crops for the coming year, they started the work of making bricks.

Work was hard mixing the mud and clay together. Wayne had built a wooden form divided into equal sections. When the packed clay mixture dried, their bricks were all the same size.

Their home was small, but it was enough for them. Toni enjoyed working beside her husband. He always did the heavy work, but together, they started their life.

Stewart delivered the few items they needed to order. Hospitality dictated that she invite him for supper for his trouble. Wayne listened as Stewart talked about the possibility of investing in the shipping business, thereby expanding to other towns.

“No matter where you live, shipping is something people need.”

For several months, Wayne tried to learn all he could about shipping. Then he talked with her about investing in the business.

“Shipping? With Stewart?” she asked.

“He’s right about the business. Shipping is something that will always be needed.”

Wayne was always thinking of the future, what was going to be important next year, a few years, or even further.

“But, do you even like Stewart?” She knew it was a strange question to ask, but she knew her husband, and Stewart was not someone Wayne would normally go out of his way to visit.

Wayne laughed. “Honey, I don’t have to like Stewart, but I know the investment is sound. Besides, we have to look to the future. Especially if we start having children.”

One year later, she learned she was pregnant. When Tyler came along, she thought her life could not be more complete.

At first, Wayne was content with being the silent partner in the business. He knew his investment would pay off in the future. And he wanted his family taken care of.

But Toni noticed a change in Wayne after the first year. Several months later, he talked with her about his concerns.

“Something’s not right,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not really sure. Do you remember when I said I looked the business over while Stewart was taking a delivery to Dakota?”

“I remember you were gone a lot.”

Wayne smiled as he held his wife. “You know that everything I do is for you and Ty.”

Toni kissed her husband. “I know.”

“Good. Anyway, while I was looking over the business, I noticed that it was doing just fine. I mean, the business was making money, but not a great amount.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“Have you notice the times we see Stewart, he always has a lot of money. And the rings he wears?”

Toni laughed. "He wears more rings than any woman I know. And they look expensive."

"But, how did he buy them?"

Toni's brows knitted together as she thought about what Wayne was saying. "You think he's cheating, or stealing?"

"Something doesn't add up. Stewart always seemed to have more money than the business is bringing in."

"Have you talked with him about it?"

"He tried to explain it, but I wasn't satisfied with the answers."

Toni heard the firmness in his voice as she looked at her husband. "I know that look! You're thinking of dissolving the partnership."

"I still think investing in shipping is a good investment."

"Just not with Stewart."

"Right. After all, I'm already familiar with how a shipping company runs."

"Is there another company you can look at?"

"There's one in Shelbyville."

"Shelbyville? But that's about four hours away!" Toni thought a moment. "Stewart is not going to be happy."

"That's his concern, not mine. I can't work with someone who's business practices are questionable, especially at the expense of my friends."

Indeed, Stewart was not happy. He tried to talk Wayne out of pulling out of the business, but Wayne was firm.

Wayne started looking for another company to invest his money in. He talked with several business managers, questioned them about their practice, asked to see their books.

Wayne was an expert rider. But two months later, unexpectedly, he was thrown from his horse.

Tyler was only two.

At first, she tried to run the homestead by herself. Stewart came by several times a month to check up on her and Tyler.

"Since Wayne and I were partners, I feel a responsibility to you and Tyler."

"Thank you for your concern, Stewart. But we're doing fine."

And besides, my family will help if I need it.”

“Well, your family is not as close as I am. And I did promise Wayne that I would look after you if anything should happen to him”

That surprised Toni. “You did?”

“I know we were not partners any more, but I still considered him a friend.”

Toni was unsure what to make of that. Declining his help, she continued on, taking care of the home and Tyler.

Three months later, she came home from visiting a neighbor to find her home torn apart. The furniture was turned over, every cabinet was opened and emptied, every dresser drawer was pulled out, the contents scattered across the floor.

They never had much money in the house, and she assumed whoever broke into the house did not know that. When Stewart heard about it, he took the opportunity to call again.

“Anthonia, I’m so sorry about what happened. It was a good thing you and Tyler were away.”

“Maybe. Maybe if I was home, they would not have come.”

“People know there is no longer a man around to protect. Maybe, well,” he stammered. “Maybe this would be a good time to ask you to marry me!”

Toni turned to Stewart. “Thank you for the offer, but I could not.”

“Why not?”

“Stewart, I don’t love you.”

“Many people marry without love.”

“Not me!”

“Anthonia, think of Tyler’s safety. Without a man about, one or both of you could come to harm.”

In the back of her mind, Toni wondered if Stewart had been behind the break in. No matter what, looking around, she saw the truth in his words. “You’re right. I need a man around.”

Stewart stood tall, sure his ace was finally played.

“I’m sure you’re making the right decision.”

“I believe I am.”

While Stewart watched, Toni began packing.

“Anthonia, what are you doing?”

“I’m packing.”

“Packing? I thought you would come into town with me.”

“I’m not going with you.”

“You’re not? Then where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Home?”

“My father wrote and told me I was welcome to come home anytime. He promised to keep the ranch for when I could run it, or keep it for Ty. You just convinced me to take him up on his offer.”

As persistent as Stewart was, Toni would not change her mind. In fact, he opened an office in her hometown. He would show up at the ranch at odd times and insist on taking her riding, or for a picnic. Again, he asked her to marry him.

“I don’t think I’m ready to marry again so soon.”

“It’s been a year, Anthonia. I’ll wait as long as I have to.”

“Please don’t. I only want to think of taking care of Tyler.”

Stewart still found his way to visit every month or so.

She began to feel comfortable in the routine of daily life. With the chores around the house and taking care of Tyler, Toni barely noticed where the time went.

Mike left to work for Stewart for a short time, then hired on another ranch. About a year later, he returned with his leg in a cast. When he told of the fire he had accidentally started, which burned the bunkhouse down, Toni knew what she needed to do.

Figuring she was only going to be gone less than two weeks, she traveled to Texas to take care of the debt.

To take care of family.

Chapter 35

Toni looked at Conrad seated next to her. “While Mike was in Round Rock, I’m thinking he met you.”

“Yeah. I hired him for a few months, and he ended up staying over a year.”

“Sounds like my brother.”

Conrad considered what Toni had said. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Are you sure Wayne got out of Stewart’s business?”

Toni looked at Conrad. “I believe so.”

“Did he ever mention the name of the new shipping company he wanted to invest in?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

Conrad leaned back, trying to lighten the mood. “Just a question.”

“When Wayne died, I put all his stuff in several trunks and stored them at home. I looked at most of them, but at the time, I know I wasn’t focusing right. I’m sure whatever papers he had would be there.”

“It’s always a good idea to go through important papers whenever you can.”

“I guess you’re right. I’ve been so busy with Ty, I just never thought about it again.”

Toni turned to face Conrad. “Your turn. Tell me about yourself.”

“Conrad took a deep breath. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

Conrad scuffed his boot in the dirt as he collected his thoughts.

“I grew up in Boston. My mother worked in a hotel as a cook while my father worked at the General Store. They both believed in an honest day’s work. I was in my last year of school when I met Diane. I can still remember the day she came to our school, our teacher introducing her to the class....”

Chapter 36

Massachusetts, 1842

“Class, before we begin, I would like to introduce our new student, Diane Parsons from New York.”

Conrad looked from the schoolbook he was reading to the young girl standing next to Miss Clark, the schoolteacher.

“Diane, have a seat next to Mary Michaels,” Miss Clark instructed.

Conrad watched as the new girl walked toward the only seat available, across the aisle from him. He noticed how graceful she walked, how she quickly scanned the room before she sat down. When she looked at him, he gave her a brief smile. For some reason, his heart skipped a beat when she shyly smiled back.

“I hope everyone will make her feel welcome,” Miss Clark continued. “Being new in town can make a person very nervous. Now, let us open our History book to page 37.”

Conrad tried to concentrate on the lessons, but his gaze kept returning to the girl with honey-colored hair sitting across from him. Twice, Miss Clark had to bring his attention back to the lesson at hand.

At lunchtime, Conrad noticed Diane sitting alone on the bench outside. He looked around, making sure all his friends were eating somewhere else. Taking a deep breath, he walked up to her.

“Mind if I sit here?”

Diane looked up, her shy smile all the answer he needed.

“My name is Conrad Morgan.”

“I’m Diane Parsons.”

Conrad smiled as he opened his lunchbox. “I live across town. My pa works at the General Store.”

Diane took a delicate bite from her biscuit. “My pa is buying the hotel in town.”

Conrad looked duly impressed. “Wow. I know Mr. Harkins was looking to sell it so he could go back home to Virginia. Do you live near town?”

“Right now, we’re staying in a room at the hotel. Pa is hoping to buy a house, or have one built later on.”

Again, Conrad was impressed. Building a house cost money. Mr. Parsons was obviously a wealthy man.

“Pa wanted to wait another year before we moved out here so I could finish my last year of school. But he was afraid someone else would buy the hotel.”

“This is my last year of school too.”

“Do you live at home?”

“Yeah. I work with my dad at the store, helping stock and deliver things.”

“That must be nice, working with you pa.”

“Yeah. He’s great. He helps when I get stuck with my homework, too.”

Diane giggled as she looked down. “Maybe I should have him help me too. Miss Clark is covering several subjects different from my other school.”

Conrad took a bite of his apple as he looked at the girl before him. He liked her quick laugh, and her bright brown eyes. “Tell you what. During lunch, I’ll try to help you with the assignments.”

“That would be great.”

For the next several months, during lunches, they discussed their assignments. During the walks home, they talked about everything else. He talked about his dream to own his own land someday.

“Out west,” he clarified.

“Why west?”

“Cause there’s not much chance to make your own mark here. Out west is where the opportunity is.”

She gave a soft chuckle. “I think I’ll start calling you *The Dreamer*.”

He smiled. “For the past few years, I’ve been saving my money.”

His heart swelled with young love. A year after they finished school, they had convinced their parents they wanted to marry.

To save money, they moved in with her parents. But news of land west of the Mississippi was sweeping across the land. And to a young boy in Boston with big dreams, the news was confirmation that it was time to go.

“I’ll be back, hopefully by the end of the year,” he promised.

Diane watched as he finished packing his satchel of extra clothing, a bed-roll, his toiletries, and an extra bag of food for the long journey.

“That long?”

Conrad saw the uncertainty in his new wife's face. “News has it, the government is giving land away to anyone willing to work it. If we wait much longer, there may not be any left.”

Missing his wife, but knowing he was building a future for them, he had faithfully written each week, informing her of each leg of his journey. When he reached Texas, he knew he had found his dream. There was no need to travel any further.

The nearest town, Round Rock, was about an hour's ride away. With the money he had been saving for the last five years, he bought the selected parcel of land. He worked at the general store to help pay for the needed supplies. He wrote about the design of the home he was slowly building for them, how he cut down each of the trees that became the walls and roof of his modest two-room house. He even apologized for the dirt floor,

promising that later he would lay wood down.

Once a month, he mailed some of his wages to her. He knew her father was more than capable of taking care of his daughter, but Conrad's pride would not allow it.

She was *his* wife.

During one of his trips into town, he passed the shack of the older man who lived on the parcel next to him.

"Name's Ustis," he volunteered as Conrad stopped his wagon.

"Conrad," he returned. "I'm heading into town for some supplies. Need anything?"

Ustis scratched his balding head as he took measure of the new stranger. "Guess I could use a few things. Care for some company? Don't get many visitors on the Chaparral."

"The Chaparral?" Conrad repeated as the old man climbed into the wagon.

"Ever been to the desert Chaparral in California?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Well, the first time I laid eyes on his place, it reminded me of that. So, I reckoned it was fittin' to call it Chaparral. I run the Boxed S brand."

Conrad smiled. "My spread doesn't have a name yet, nor cattle, but I was thinking of registering my brand as the Circle M."

Their talk was easy as Conrad told of his travels, his dreams, and his wife. Ustis was a good listener. He never interrupted, but only made a statement or asked a question when Conrad was done talking.

Over the next few weeks, Conrad learned a great deal from the old man. He learned how to be patient. Learned that an hour of listening gathered more information than a week of searching.

Several times a week, Conrad would visit the old man in his shack. They would share a meal, a cup of coffee, and the kind of conversation that only friends could have.

While building his modest home, Ustis would come over and help. Conrad learned early in their developing friendship that Ustis knew a lot about many things. Looking at him, with his

worn out flannel shirt and pants, suspenders so old the elastic was worn out, and his hat that had three bullet holes in the rim, you would never know he struck it rich in California while panning for gold.

Ustis was unique. He knew when to be satisfied with what he had, and knew when to quit while he still had enough.

With all that gold safely in the bank, he still enjoyed the quiet, simple life. But he had one dream. His daughter lived in New York. Before he died, he wanted to build her a decent home where she could come out and live with him.

“When Diane gets here, I’ll help you,” Conrad promised.

“Aww, you’re gonna be too busy with your new wife.”

Conrad shook his head. “There’ll be plenty of time to help.”

Every week, Conrad wrote to Diane about the progress of the homestead, how the new wheat was standing tall in the field, and the few head of cattle he had bought from another farmer was just the beginning of their new life.

When he had the home ready, he proudly sent for Diane, and waited. After a month, he traveled back to collect his wife. Obviously, his letters had been lost in the post.

When he saw her again, the long year of work seemed as nothing. Their reunion was sweet and urgent. Over the next few days, he told her of the land, how the river ran across the edge of it for several miles. He excitedly told of the old miner who owned the land next to him. It was not until the end of the first week that he noticed there was a problem. Every time he began to make plans for them to leave, Diane had a reason they needed to stay awhile longer.

“We need to leave.”

“Mary and Tom are getting married in two months, and I promised Mrs. Jones I would help with the Honeymoon quilt.”

Conrad looked confused. “Why would you promise that when you knew we would be leaving soon?”

“You just returned home. I think you need time to rest.”

“Diane, Texas is going to be our home, not here. We can’t stay here.”

Diane turned her face away. “I don’t see why we need to

leave so soon. You barely had time to scrub off the dirt from your travels, and already you're planning to head back."

"But... this is what we discussed. What we planned together."

"Pa needs me here. I can't just leave him alone."

Conrad's eyes narrowed as understanding quickly took root. "My letters weren't lost. You just never answered."

Diane shrugged her small shoulders. "I read some of them."

"*Some of them?*" What wife doesn't eagerly read the letters from her husband? "Then why didn't you answer them?"

"There was nothing to say. I don't understand why you want to leave such a good life here to go roaming around a god-forsaken piece of land."

Conrad took a deep breath. He was surprised he did not really know his wife. Or had she changed once he left?

"We talked about this," he reasoned. "You said you understood."

"I did. But I have friends and family here. I don't want to leave them."

"But your place is with me."

"Why don't you just stay *here*. Father already said he could give you a job working with him."

Conrad knew Mr. Parsons had influenced Diane. "Why would I want to work for your father when I have my own land, my own home?"

"But you don't have the luxuries we have here, do you?" she challenged back. "You said yourself the town is an hour's ride away. Here, when I need something, I don't have far to go to get it."

Conrad rose, his anger and disappointment evident in his stance. "Diane, tomorrow I am going back to Texas, like we originally planned. I am hoping you will join me. Your place is with me, your husband, not your father." Conrad was unmoved by her shocked expression.

"You would have me choose between my father and you?"

Conrad walked to the door, then turned. "Your decision should have already been made."

When he left, he was sure she would change her mind. After all, her place was with him, by his side, was it not? He decided to give her a few months to think about it. Before, when he left, they both knew he would be back for her. Now, he was gone and not coming back. He was sure the knowledge of him not returning would change her mind.

He was wrong.

During the first few months, he wrote her many letters, telling of the beautiful land, the simple yet sturdy home he had finally finished. He wrote of the plans to ride to Mexico and purchase a bull for breeding and a hundred head of beef to add to his already small herd. He had discussed with Ustis how many men he would need to hire to drive them back to his place.

But before he made that drive, he needed to help Ustis build his house. Ustis was getting more and more letters from his daughter Stacy. She was eager to come out. Both men noticed the almost urgency in her request.

Ustis wanted enough room so when she married, she could fill the house with his grandchildren. Four bedrooms were planned for upstairs. One for Stacy and a future husband, two for his long-awaited grandchildren, and one for visitors. Another room downstairs would be for him.

He talked to different women in town about what they wanted in a home. Was a porch important? Should the kitchen be in the front or the back of the house? A window in the kitchen? What size window?

Should the kitchen be large with a table, or did women like a dining room, like at the local restaurant? Did they like a mantle above the fireplace?

As he learned what most women liked, he built the house to accommodate the new design.

A door from the kitchen to the outside? Another door was added. The house itself was modest, but care was taken with every design.

Ustis loved the taste of lemonade. So he had several lemon trees planted behind the house. "I want to be able to enjoy a glass whenever I want to," he said.

When they finally finished, Stacy moved down. For almost a year, Ustis enjoyed being with his daughter.

Then she died unexpectedly. Both men figured she knew she was dying, which is why she urgently wanted to come down. Conrad helped him bury her by a tree she liked to sit beside during the evenings.

"I'm glad I had the time I did with her," Ustis admitted.

Conrad was silent as he considered the difference in their situations. When one year followed another, Conrad knew Diane was not coming. He had a moderate herd grazing on both his and Ustis's land. Ustis had joined with him and bought fifty cattle for himself. The herd grazed together on the open range.

He had told himself that the letters he wrote to Diane were lost again, misdirected. At least he had been hoping that was true. But he knew she was ignoring him. Like the letters before, she probably never even opened them.

She probably thought he would come back, like he did before.

Conrad's pride dictated his next move. Ustis did not even try to stop him as he packed his horse.

"I'll keep the ranch running," he promised as he watched his young friend tighten the cinch under the horse's belly.

Not trying to hide his anger anymore, Conrad snapped, "You can have it!"

Ustis shook his head. "When you're ready, the Circle M will be here waiting. There's enough men to help keep everything in order."

Conrad turned to the older man, his anger somewhat abating. "I may not return."

Ustis simply smiled. "Every man wants a place to rest his old bones. When you want it, it'll be here."

Conrad held out his hand, the firm handshake somewhat comforting.

"Heading anyplace in particular?" Ustis asked. "In case I need to find you?"

Conrad looked to the mountains. "I don't know yet. Guess I'll just see where the trail leads me. But I promise I'll let you

know.”

Ustis stepped back as his young friend mounted his horse. “Take care, my friend.”

He traveled across Texas, through the Indian Territory, to California and Oregon. There were various jobs he did, some he wanted to forget. Some jobs he wished he could go back and undo. But one thing he learned is that life only goes in one direction. Once something is done, it can only be undone by another action.

Ten years after he left his ranch and Ustis, Conrad found himself back in Texas. A letter from a Lawyer had finally caught up to him in the Kansas Territory informing him that Ustis had died. And in his will, he had left the Chaparral to him. On his way back to Round Rock, Conrad tried to imagine the ranch without him.

In a small town in the upper part of Texas, he was coming out of the General Store when he collided with an older man who was coming in.

“Excuse me,” Conrad began as he slowly recognized the face. “Mr. Parsons?”

Lucas Parsons stood to his full height, surprise evident in his expression and tone. “Mr. Morgan, I finally found you.”

Before Conrad would ask him about Diane, he saw a young girl run up behind him, her eyes worried.

“Grandpa?”

Lucas Parsons dusted off his jacket as the young girl placed a hand on his arm. “I’m fine. Mr. Morgan and I were not paying attention to where we were going.”

Conrad heard the sharp gasp as she quickly looked at him, her eyes narrowing, as if searching.

“Mr. Morgan?” she repeated to no one in particular.

Conrad could not help himself as he practically stared at the young girl. She could be no more than twelve years old. With her honey-colored hair and brown almond eyes, she was a mirror image of Diane. The age was right.

This girl was his daughter!

Why had no one told him?

Ready to confront him, Conrad noticed Lucas seemed more relieved than nervous.

“Dana, I’m fine. Why not go inside and see if the package I’m waiting for came in?”

“But—”

“Now!”

Dana looked from her grandfather to the strange man. She knew her grandfather wanted her out of the way while they talked.

When she was out of earshot, Lucas turned back to Conrad, saw the unspoken question on his face. “Yes, she’s your daughter.” He looked up and down the street, then back at Conrad. “Look, I don’t want to have this conversation on the public street. We have a place just up the street, next to the Doctor’s office. Why not join us for dinner, say around 5 o’clock. I promise to explain everything to you.”

Conrad looked again in the direction of the young girl, then to Mr. Parsons. “Diane?”

Mr. Parsons shook his head. “She passed away almost five years ago.” He looked toward his granddaughter, obviously not wanting to talk in front of her. “5 o’clock. You’ll come?”

As if there was any force of nature that would keep him away. “I’ll be there.”

Conrad went straight to his hotel room. For the next few hours, his head was spinning with new feelings, mixed emotions and unanswered questions.

All the years he wrote to Diane, she never mentioned she was pregnant. Never told him of the birth of their daughter, her first word spoken, her first step taken.

Conrad calculated the time. She would be eleven.

Would Lucas stand in his way? After all, Dana was *his* daughter. Surely the law was on his side. True, Lucas was her Grandfather, and she had lived with him for the past eleven years.

But if he had known about her, would he have gone back east for her? Brought her out to his ranch in Texas?

Diane had denied him that option.

Would Dana be more like Diane, wanting to stay with her Grandfather? If so, would he be willing to stay to be near her? Did she know he was her father? What had Diane and Lucas told her about him?

Conrad rose from his hotel bed, washed his face, then combed his hair. If Dana did not want to come with him, or Lucas refused him, he would deal with it then. Now he needed to meet them both, and listen. Then he would know what action to take.

He was surprised when Dana opened the door to let him in. He saw the excitement in her eyes, the warm smile, the eagerness to get acquainted. For the first time today, Conrad felt a measure of hope.

“Mr. Morgan,” she invited as she stood aside, her hand extended to take his hat.

She had nice manners.

“Miss...” He hesitated. Did she go by Morgan or Parsons? “Miss Dana,” he decided instead.

“It’s Morgan. Dana Morgan,” she corrected, a smile in her eyes. He knew then, she knew who he was.

During dinner, the conversation was neutral. Dana was full of questions. She wanted to know if he had cattle, and if so, how many. Did he own horses? Did he ride very often? What was his home like? How did he manage all the cattle? How big was the nearest town? Was it far away? Were there many families? Did the town have a school?

Conrad could not help but smile at the enthusiasm of the young girl. She obviously was interested in ranch life.

“I have to go back east for schooling,” she almost pouted as her eyes slanted towards her grandfather.

“I promised your mother you would have a proper education,” Lucas explained. “She wanted you to know how to act like a proper lady.”

Conrad was surprised by the unladylike snort.

“Dana,” Lucas warned. “Why not say goodnight. Mr. Morgan and I have several things to discuss.”

Dana’s eyes darted from her Grandfather to Conrad. As

much as she wanted to stay, she knew when to obey. "Yes sir."

Conrad's eyes followed the young girl as she left the dining room. He was still in awe that he had a daughter.

"A bit headstrong, but she's a fine young girl."

Conrad's gaze returned to the older man before him. Instead of challenging him, he did what he learned to do over the years. He listened and waited.

"I accept most of the responsibility for Diane not following you."

Conrad was slightly taken back. He had forgotten how Mr. Parsons believed in getting right to the point. "You have to understand, she was my only child," he continued. "Naturally, I wanted her here with me."

"She was *my* wife!" Conrad had to keep himself from shouting.

"I thought of her as my daughter first. That was wrong of me, and I'm sorry."

As angry as Conrad was, he recognized the sincerity in the man's words and expressions.

"I should have encouraged her to follow you," he continued. "But, what is past is past."

Conrad's thoughts were going in multiple directions. "What happened to Diane?" Might as well start at the beginning.

Lucas took a deep breath as he pushed his dinner plate away. "Five years ago, her buggy overturned. Her head hit a boulder and...well, she died the following day."

Something in Conrad died.

"A year later," Lucas continued, "Dana went through her mother's things and found your letters. Understandably, she was upset. Diane told her you were dead."

"Dead?"

"Well, to her, you were dead."

"Lucas?"

Lucas did not let the frustrated tone bother him. "Once she learned you were alive, Dana was determined to meet you. She opened all your letters, read every one and collected all the money you sent. Then told me she wanted to find you, that if I

didn't help, she would take the money you sent Diane and go herself." Lucas chuckled. "Like I said, she's a bit headstrong."

Conrad looked again to doorway Dana walked through. "So she knows?"

"That you're her father? I told her on the way home today. She has this dream of living with you."

Conrad's head snapped back. "Live with me?"

Lucas took a moment to really look at the man who married his little girl. "Like I said before, I realize now I made several mistakes. I cannot change the past, but I can try to set things right."

Conrad's narrowed his eyes. "How?"

"I want you to take Dana back with you. Since she's learned about you, she's been singularly focused on finding you and moving west."

"And how do you feel about that?"

Conrad measured the man carefully. Lucas had already admitted to being partially responsible for Diane not following him to Texas, like they had planned. He wanted to know exactly where Lucas stood.

Since seeing Dana early this afternoon, Conrad had thought a lot about her coming to stay with him. He had weighed the advantages and disadvantages, then organized his arguments in a logical order. He had thought about his small home and the one he and Ustis built, which was now his. Before today, he was not sure what he was going to do with Ustis's land.

Now, he had no doubts.

He knew the exact layout of the large home. After all, he helped build the two-story home. He knew which room he was going to take, knew which room would be perfect for Dana.

He would use one of the rooms downstairs for an office.

Suddenly, he had his life all mapped out, which now included his daughter.

"I have one request," Lucas interrupted. "A promise I made to Diane."

Conrad leaned back in his chair, a silent signal that he would listen to the following request.

“She wanted Dana to go to school back east. She wanted to make sure she was properly educated in how to be a lady.”

Conrad’s first impulse was to say ‘NO’ right out. He had already missed precious time with her.

“I would say you’ve done a good job already with her training,” he said instead.

“She is her mother’s daughter.”

Conrad thought back. “From the first day I met her, Diane knew how to be a lady.”

Lucas Parsons’s eyes began to tear up. “Thank you.”

Conrad pushed his chair back, then rose. “Understand, there’s much we have to learn about each other, and as you can imagine, we are going to need a lot of time together. I can only promise to do the best I can. I have to meet with a lawyer tomorrow about a business matter. Then I plan to head back to Texas. I want to take Dana with me, if she wants to come. I know it’s going to be difficult for all of us. I can take a few days and visit, help us all get acquainted, if you like.”

Lucas nodded his head. “I have several business deals I have to see through, which is going to take quite a while. You have every right to say no, but I would like to visit from time to time, when I’m in the area.”

Conrad saw the doubt in his expression. Taking a deep breath, he promised, “Family should be held together, not torn apart. Like you said, the past is the past.” He held out his hand to his Father-in-law. “You’re welcome at the Chaparral any time.”

Chapter 37

Mrs. Greene was straightening the shelves when she heard the bell above the door ring. Turning, she watched as Preacher Adams walked in, looking around hesitantly.

“Good morning, Preacher Adams. How are you?”

Adams looked up. “Fine, fine. Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Mrs. Greene tried to hide her confusion. “I wasn’t expecting you for another few months.”

“Yes. Well, I promised to visit someone before I left for Clearwater.”

“Oh, well of course. Is there something I can help you with?”

Adams cleared his throat. “I would like two pennies worth of peppermint candy.”

Mrs. Greene dutifully placed the candy sticks on a sheet of paper, then wrapped them up. “Let me just tie them so they won’t fall out.”

“That would be fine. I’m heading to Morgan’s ranch.”

Mrs. Greene’s eyes widened. “Oh, then these must be for Ty.”

“Last time I visited, he mentioned how much he liked them.”

Mrs. Greene laughed. “He does. Mrs. Logan almost always buys him one when she comes in town.”

Charmain Callaway

She took the offered silver dollar, then counted out the correct change. “What boy doesn’t have a sweet tooth,” she added as she handed the package over to him.

Adams put the change in his vest pocket, then picked up his package. “Thank you.”

“Will you be visiting others while in town?”

“There are a few I was thinking of visiting while I’m here.”

“Sort of like mixing business with pleasure!”

Adams looked up, a sparkle in his eye. “I guess you could say that.”

Chapter 38

Conrad shook the dust off his pants as he walked to the house. The cattle and horses were coming along nicely. Toni's father's men were good workers. He rarely had to tell them what to do. And they were learning the lay of the land quickly.

He wondered if any of them would want to stay and work for him. Loyal workers were hard to find. Many were just riding through, earning enough to continue their journey as they drifted.

He remembered doing just that.

He looked at the house. The lamps were lit and he could see the shadows of the women inside as they moved around. He could hear Dana talking to Mrs. Baines.

He was glad she was back. It was like pulling his arms off each time he sent her back east for school. Maybe Toni was right. What Dana needed to learn to run a ranch, she would learn here, from him.

He would have to think on it some more.

Meanwhile, several of the men had been coming by the house more often, like Pat Curry, Stewart Hughes and Preacher Adams.

Conrad remembered yesterday when Preacher Adams paid

another visit. It was obvious he was becoming interested with Toni. He was definitely going out of his way to visit with her. But, was Toni interested in Adams?

He mentally shook himself. Toni was merely being friendly. He noticed she treated Adams the same as any other visitor.

This morning, Pat had seen him on the northwest range and rode over for a visit.

"Found some of your beef on our north pasture," Pat commented. "Had the boys send them back the other day."

"Thanks. We've been working in the east valley. Not seen any of yours that far out."

"That's good. Notice you're pickin' up the pace."

"Yeah. Have some new men helping me."

"Heard there were some men riding through. Surprised Mr. Cole didn't grab 'em first."

Conrad smiled. "He tried."

Pat's brows rose. "Oh?"

"Toni wrote her father and had him send some extra men down to help."

Pat nodded his head as he looked from his land to Conrad's. "She's a mighty fine lady."

"That she is."

"I visited last week, met her son Ty. He's a great boy. He talked about you almost the whole time. In fact, he went into great detail about Star's foaling."

Conrad chuckled. "The boy's never at a loss for words."

"I would agree with you there. Mrs. Logan's done a good job with him, alone and all."

Conrad nodded his head in agreement. Each man was silent for a moment with their own thoughts.

"Conrad?"

Conrad turned to Pat.

"We've been friends since the day we met. And I don't want to cause any problems between us."

"I appreciate that. And I agree. In fact, I was planning on talking with you."

"I had a feeling." Pat took a deep breath as he stared at the

horizon. "She feel the same way?"

Conrad remembered holding her after she shot the cat, then kissing her before Sam interrupted them. He saw her expression when Star delivered her foal, Ty's excitement making her smile. The look she shared with him made him realize he felt more complete when she was around.

"Yea," he finally answered. "Nothing's been said yet, but it's there."

Pat nodded. "Between you and me, best beware of Hughes."

Conrad tilted his head, his brows narrowing. "Stewart Hughes?"

"Yea. He's been spreading the word around that he's gonna marry Mrs. Logan soon. Most folks stay clear of him." Pat laughed at a thought. "My ma just learned a new word, *ostentatious*. She would say he's a little on the ostentatious side, if you get my drift."

Conrad laughed. "The word fits."

"I figured, he's just talking and hoping. When I talked with her, she never gave any indication there was anything between them."

"He's been gone for several weeks. Had some business in Middleton, or somewhere."

"Well, he's back. Saw him in town yesterday."

When Conrad said a few words under his breath, Pat had to smile. He raised his hand as he turned his horse back west. This was Conrad's problem.

"Talk with you later."

Conrad raised his hand in return. "Take care," he called out, then turned his own horse back south.

Looking back at the house, he saw Toni's shadow as she helped Mrs. Baines setting the dinner table.

Stewart had been away, but now he was back in town again.

There was something about Stewart.

He needed to talk with Mike.

Chapter 39

Ryan had worked on his latest invention for several hours. Now, it was close to being completed. He only needed another week or so.

Finally, it looked like something he made would actually work. There were so many failures over the years. Many of his ideas never even developed past the drawing paper.

Taking a deep, satisfied breath, he decided that maybe, just maybe, his time had finally come.

As the sun set, he lit the lamps, illuminating his small living area. It was time to fix his supper. After eating at the hotel last night, he had saved several biscuits and pieces of steak for tonight. He started to put the biscuits on a plate when someone knocked on his back door.

He turned, his heart suddenly racing as he considered who it could be.

The men had already been by to collect the bags!

His eyes narrowed.

It couldn't be him!

Ryan opened the door at the persistent knock.

“What are you doing here?” Ryan whispered as he stepped back, allowing the man inside.

“Don’t worry,” the man’s voice was harsh. “People in town are used to seeing me around.”

Ryan took a look outside, making sure no one followed him before quickly closing the door. “I wasn’t expecting you so soon.”

The man looked at Ryan, who tried not to squirm from his intense stare. “The men said you only had half of the coins ready. What’s taking so long?”

Ryan’s palms began to sweat. “I can’t work in the evening. The machine makes too much noise.”

“That’s not my problem,” the man growled as he walked toward the hidden door, then entered the secret room. On a table near the door were several bags of counterfeit coins.

Ryan forced himself not to cringe as the man practically stood over him.

“It takes time,” Ryan nervously added.

“I’ve given you plenty of time. In fact, I’m starting to wonder if you’re trying to keep some of the coins for yourself!”

Ryan visibly paled at the accusation. “I would never do that to you,” he stuttered as he looked around the room. “I promise, I’m working as fast as I can.”

Ryan wondered again why he had allowed himself to be involved with this man. He knew of his temper, and what he was capable of.

The man picked up the bags, one at a time, mentally weighing each one.

“There’s less than I was expecting.”

“Like I said, it takes time. Coins take longer than bills to make.”

Ryan tried to keep his legs from shaking. If this man learned that the reason he had not been working on the coins was because he was working on his inventions, he would be dead.

Again, he wondered at the situation that linked him and this man together. Quickly going in debt with his inventions, Ryan had agreed to help in the making of counterfeit coins. Previously, his sole operation of shaving the edges of real coins and using the shavings to make additional coins had been enough to buy a few items here and there. You could not do this indefinitely, as the

coins slowly dwindled in size. He had seen several coins that were already half their original size, the result of others shaving the edges, just as he had done. The process had been slow and tedious, but he answered to no one.

Now, as he looked around the room, he could visualize the operation from start to finish: there were molds, a pot to melt the base alloy, filing the edges, then plating with either gold or silver. The process was fairly easy, but very time consuming.

He even churned his finished product in a barrel of sawdust, which rubbed the shine off the new coins and gave them a much-handled appearance. Most merchants did not notice the coins if they looked like they had been used by several people.

“The boys will be here in two days,” the man stated as he sat the bags back down, interrupting Ryan’s thoughts. “I expect these to be filled.”

“Yes sir,” Ryan promised as he swallowed hard.

This man, he knew, he should not irritate.

Chapter 40

“What do ya do?”

“There are all kinds of events, and games.”

“Games?”

“Sure,” Conrad confirmed as he brushed Dancer’s back. “They usually have a horse race, a roping contest, and a three-legged race.”

Tyler’s eyes lit up at the mention of the three-legged race. “Uncle Mike and I are real fast!”

“I bet you are.”

Tyler’s smile turned into a frown. “Uncle Mike can’t run with me right now.”

“Maybe you can find someone else.” When Tyler’s frown stayed in place, Conrad decided to change the topic. “But the best event is the picnic basket auction.”

Tyler looked up. “What’s that?”

“That’s when all the unmarried girls make up a picnic basket. Then the men bid on the basket they want.”

“Wow. You get to eat it all?”

“Well, you usually share it with the girl who fixed it.”

Tyler wrinkled his face in distaste. “Can’t you eat it without the girl?”

Conrad chuckled as he swapped the curry brush for the brush. "That's not the point. The guy usually *wants* to spend time with the lady."

"Why?"

"Because the lady he chooses is special."

"Special?"

"Very special."

Tyler thought for a moment. "How much are the baskets?"

"Well, now that depends."

"On what?"

"Several things. Like, for instance, how good a cook she is."

Tyler became deep in thought as he wrinkled his face again.

"Mary Ellen made cookies," he finally said.

Jeffrey Selton's daughter? Dana's friend? "When did you visit the hotel?"

"When me and Uncle Mike came on the stage. Uncle Mike was hungry so we went to the hotel. Mary Ellen gave us some cookies she made."

"I like cookies."

"She burnt 'em."

Conrad turned his head to hide his smile.

"I ate one, but I spit it out."

"That bad?" Conrad chuckled.

"Uncle Mike ate his real quick."

"Sometimes that's what men do. We take the good with the bad."

Tyler's expression and pose clearly said he was not going to suffer through that again for no girl!

"The other thing the price depends on is how pretty she is."

Tyler looked up. "How pretty?" he repeated.

"That's the main reason you bid on the basket, because she's the prettiest girl there is." Conrad stole a peak at Tyler when he became very quiet.

"Ma has my allowance. But I might need more."

"Well, let's see." Conrad rubbed his chin. "I could use some help around here."

Tyler's face lit up. "Can I help?"

“I don’t know. It’s almost a man’s work.”

“I’m real strong!”

Conrad patted Dancer on the rump, then put up the curry brush before looking down at Tyler. “Well, if you do the work, I’ll pay you.”

Tyler’s eyes widened. “You will?”

“If you do the job right.” Conrad looked. “I’ve been neglectful of the stalls lately. I’ll pay you . . . five cents a day to clean the stalls out.”

Tyler eagerly looked up and down the stalls. “Five cents? I’ll start right now!”

And true to his word, Tyler grabbed the pitchfork and began clearing away the soiled and dirty straw.

“I’ll check on your work later,” Conrad called out as he headed back to the house.

Burnt cookies.

Conrad freely smiled. “Shouldn’t take too much to buy Mary Ellen’s basket.”

A week later, Toni watched as Tyler ran from the barn up to Conrad.

“I finished putting the new straw down.”

Conrad reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin. “Here you go.”

“Thank you.” Tyler took the coin and ran inside the house.

“I’ve noticed a box of coins growing each day,” Toni observed from the porch as she darned another sock. “I’ve been wondering where he’s getting them.”

“He’s been working real hard doing odd jobs. He wants enough money to bid on a picnic basket next weekend.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Seems that burnt cookies can’t keep a good man down.”

Toni raised her brows. “Burnt cookies?”

Conrad told her the story of Tyler and Mary Ellen. “He’s a real hard worker.”

Toni smiled. “The proud mother agrees.”

Chapter 41

Tyler's chalk could be heard as he slowly copied the numbers his mother wrote one at a time. Mike sat in the corner with his leg propped on a stool as he reread a week-old paper while Toni sat in a chair beside him, her fingers flying with the crochet hook, a round doily materializing with each row.

Sitting across from her, Dana was a picture of intense concentration as she slowly worked on her own doily. Conrad was at his desk, working on the books.

"I'm done," Tyler announced as he placed the chalk on the small chalkboard.

Toni set her crocheting aside. "Very good," she commended as she checked her sons work.

"Can you recite the table to me?" Mike asked as he set the paper aside.

Tyler turned to his uncle, and began to recite his multiplication table.

"5, 10, 15, 20, 25..."

Everyone listened as Tyler recited the multiplication table to 100. Toni had to coach him from 65 to 80.

"That was very good," she commended as she ruffled his hair.

Tyler smiled as he walked up to his uncle and held out his hand. "All done!"

Mike reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a nickel. "For working on your numbers all week," he said as he placed the coin in the small outstretched hand. "You'll need to practice a little bit more, though" Mike warned. "The picnic is in three days."

Toni watched as Tyler's eyes lit up, another nickel earned. "You better put that away before you misplace it or lose it."

"Ok."

Mike watched as his nephew ran upstairs. "He must have close to a dollar by now."

Toni smiled as she watched her son enter his room. "He's worked hard for it."

Mike picked up the paper and began to read it again while Toni checked on Dana's work.

"Something's wrong," Dana complained as she held her doily up.

"Let's see." Toni inspected the work and found where the problem was. "Ah, we'll just have to take out this section, then you'll be back on track."

She saw the disappointment in the young woman's face.

"I did all that wrong?"

"I've done the same thing, many times. And I promise, you will make more mistakes along the way."

"Do you?" Dana asked.

Toni smiled as she pulled the work apart. "You would be surprised at how often I have to pull my work out and start again."

Tyler came running down the stairs.

"I need to see a man about a horse."

"What?" Michael asked, his paper forgotten as he and Toni watched Tyler head for the front door.

"I need to see a man about a horse," Tyler repeated.

Toni looked at her brother, then back at her son. "Where did you hear that?"

"Sam. He says it means—"

“I know what it means,” Toni interrupted. “Go ahead.”

Everyone watched as Tyler walked out the door, heading to the outhouse.

Toni and Michael each looked at each other, then started to giggle.

“My, he’s growing up.”

Toni looked at her brother. “Faster than you know.”

Chapter 42

“What-cha packin’?”

“Fried chicken, boiled ham, buttered rolls, pickles, apple cobbler and lemonade.”

Tyler watched as his mother put each item into a basket lined with red napkins. Dana came in, her basket already packed.

“What-cha pack?” he asked.

“Roasted chicken, tortillas, apple tarts and some lemonade.”

“Is Mrs. Baines gonna have a basket too?”

Toni placed a blanket over her basket. “I think so. I saw her packing it up this morning.”

Mrs. Baines came in, checking the kitchen before everyone left.

“Mrs. Baines, what did you pack?” Tyler asked.

“Well, I have some chicken, hard boiled eggs, rolls, pickles, peach cobbler and lemonade.”

Tyler looked at his mother. “How come they sound alike?”

“Because you need to pack something that won’t spoil and tastes good cold.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

“Glad you approve.”

Tyler raced out of the house when he heard the wagon pull

up. "Come on, ma. We gotta go."

"I'm coming, I'm coming."

Toni sat in front with Mrs. Baines and Conrad.

Michael sat in the back with Dana on a blanket to keep her dress from getting dirty. Tyler stood behind the seat the whole trip, excitement radiating from his eyes.

Once there, Tyler was eager to explore.

"Tyler?"

As the boy turned around, Conrad was reminded of a coiled rattler, ready to spring at any moment.

Toni bent down as she inspected her son. "Remember what I said—"

"I know. Stay outta the way. Be polite. And don't run."

"And have fun. I'll be over by the oak tree."

Tyler only gave a passing glance at the tree when he heard a loud voice announcing it was time for the calf-roping contest. In less than a blink, he was gone, practically running to the first event.

"I'll see you around," Michael said as he headed toward a group of men.

Conrad watched as Dana waved to a small group. Mary Ellen waved back as Dana headed for the group.

"Let's walk around."

Toni automatically followed Conrad as they made their way through the crowd. By mutual consent, they ended up at the corral for the calf-roping contest.

"Lefty and Pete are entered in this," Conrad commented as he found a space for them both to watch.

"Who do you predict to win?"

"If Pete wins, it'll be hard working with him. Most of my men will be wanting to rope and bind him after just a few days."

"Well, I think Nate will give him some competition. He's good."

"Ah, there you are."

Toni and Conrad turned around.

"Hello Stewart," Toni greeted

"I was hoping to escort you here, but you had already left."

"I'm sorry, but since we were all coming this way . . ." Toni let the sentence hang as she glance between the two men.

"Stewart," Conrad tipped his hat.

"Conrad," Stewart did the same.

Toni gave a heavy sigh. This was going to be a long day.

After an hour of watching the events, Tyler came running through the crowd.

"Ma, hurry." Grabbing her hand he began pulling her in the direction he came from. "The race is gonna start."

Toni glanced up at Conrad, then Stewart. "Please excuse me."

"Which race?" Stewart asked.

"The three-legged race," Tyler informed him as he continued to pull his mother toward the race area.

Stewart put his hands in his back pockets. "Well, son, wouldn't you want a man instead?"

Tyler stopped and looked at Stewart. "You have to be family."

"It's a tradition in our family," Toni offered as Tyler pulled her arm again. "But thank you."

"Ma, we're gonna be late."

"Ok, ok."

Conrad watched as Tyler went to the table and claimed his piece of rope. As the contestants lined up, Toni lifted her dress enough to let her son tie her right foot to his left. Scanning the group, he noticed Toni was the only woman in the race. Toni, though, did not seem to mind.

Instead, she was intently listening as Tyler was obviously explaining how to run. Keeping a serious look, she nodded her head at his explanations. Conrad glanced at the other contestants, mostly young men. Brian and David were together. They were the ones always clowning around and causing a show. They would probably make a big fall just for a laugh.

"Are you ready?" Cal called out. All the contestants answered yes and then turned toward the paper ribbon strung between two trees at the end of the path.

"On your mark . . . Get set . . ."

The gun shot and everyone began cheering as the line of contestants began to move forward. After several steps, Brian and David fell, each yelling to draw the most attention to themselves.

But Conrad was moving down the line, cheering Toni and Tyler on as they moved along. Toni had one hand on her bonnet to keep it on while her other hand was around Tyler's shoulder. One team fell in the path of another team, all four falling in a heap. A few sympathetic "ohs" could be heard behind him.

Toni and Tyler crossed the finish line right behind Charles and Jake Ferguson.

"We have a winner!" the announcer's booming voice called from the finish line. Cal presented Charles and Jake each with a blue ribbon for first place. Then he handed Toni and Tyler each a red ribbon for second place.

After Tyler untied their feet, Toni bent down and hugged her son. Tyler looked at his ribbon, then pinned his on her dress.

"You're not as fast as Uncle Mike, but you did good," he proudly claimed.

Toni almost cried. Her little boy was growing up. She pinned her ribbon on his shirt too. "Thank you."

Tyler gently stroked the ribbon with pride, then looked up at his mother, a big grin across his face. "Gotta show Uncle Mike."

And he was off again.

Chapter 43

“Will all the ladies who made these delicious baskets please step up front?” Cal announced to the growing crowd. “This is the last call for the Picnic Auction.”

Conrad stood near the front, his hand resting on Tyler’s shoulder as Cal explained the rules of the auction to everyone.

“Remember what I told you,” Conrad spoke as he bent down to Tyler’s level.

“Uh-huh,” Tyler nodded his head.

“Wait till the basket you want comes up for bid, then wait for a pause in the bidding.” Conrad had a thought. “If no one starts the bidding, then you bid first.”

With Mary Ellen’s burnt cookies, she may have no one to bid on her basket.

“How much?” Tyler asked as he eagerly scanned the line of baskets.

“Twenty-five cents is usually the starting bid.

Tyler looked at his money again.

“How much do you have?”

“One dollar and five cents,” Tyler informed.

Conrad nodded his head. He had already watched Tyler count his money three times before they left. “And how much do

you bid each time?”

“Five cents.”

“Right. Remember your multiplication table you practiced.”

“And the first basket belongs to Sally Ferguson,” Cal announced as he lifted her basket to his nose. “Smells good fellas. So who wants to start?”

“25 cents.”

“30.”

“35.”

“40.”

After a few minutes of quick bidding, Nate’s back was slapped by the surrounding men as he went to claim both Sally Ferguson and her basket for \$1.35.

“All right men, the next one belongs to Mrs. Baines.” Cal lifted the basket to his nose again. “And I think I smell her famous peach cobbler. Who will start the bidding?”

Again the bidding went fast. Conrad was not surprised when Sam was cheered on as he escorted Mrs. Baines and her basket to the picnic area.

Conrad stood silently beside Tyler as Millie Staton’s basket went through the bidding as well, with Pat Curry being the winner.

“Next,” Cal announced, “we have Dana Morgan’s basket.”

Conrad watched Dana shyly lower her head as the bidding started. He turned to see who was bidding on his daughter’s basket, eyeing each man with a critical eye. It was obvious that Frank Taylor wanted the basket, but his buddies were making him pay for it by upping the bid each time. He noticed Dana’s smile as Frank finally bought the basket for \$2.60. Conrad’s eyes narrowed as he watched them, hand in hand, make their way to the picnic area.

“And now we have Mrs. Toni Logan.” Conrad turned his attention back to the bidding. He noticed Toni looked more embarrassed than anything.

The bidding started, and for the first time Conrad himself bid. “50,” he upped the previous bid as he raised his hand.

Stewart raised his hand. “55 cents.”

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There was a slight pause when a new voice joined in.

“60 cents.”

Conrad looked down at Tyler, then quickly at the remaining girls beside Cal. Mary Ellen was not even up there.

Conrad felt like slapping his forehead.

“65 cents,” Stewart called out.

Conrad turned to give Stewart a glaring look, but Stewart kept his gaze focused ahead.

On Toni.

Toni, though, was not looking at Stewart. Her gaze was fully on her son.

Conrad nudged Tyler. When Tyler looked up, Conrad nodded his head.

“70 cents,” Tyler bid out loud.

“\$1,” Stewart bid.

Conrad looked around and eyed his men. Lefty was heading toward Stewart.

“\$1.05,” Tyler called out.

“\$2,” Stewart bid again.

“\$2.50,” someone called out behind Conrad, followed by a *thud*. “What?” the same voice called out.

“You never bid against a son,” a female voice whispered back.

Conrad was wishing the woman behind him would move over to Stewart and hit him.

“\$3,” Stewart bid again, an arrogant smile on his face.

Conrad looked down to see a small crushed face.

“What?” Stewart yelled as Lefty whispered something in his ear. Whirling around, he made his way through the crowd. “Outta my way, outta my way.”

Conrad looked from Stewart’s retreating back to Toni’s worried look, to Tyler’s almost panicked look.

Tyler had all his money in his two hands. “I ain’t got enough,” he almost cried.

Conrad knelt down. “Maybe I forgot to pay you for your work in the stalls.”

Tyler shook his head. “No, you paid me.”

Well, the kid was honest. Conrad looked up at Cal, a silent plea for some time.

“Folks, we have a bid of \$3. How about someone to top that? I’ll even give you fellas a few moments to check your pockets. Surely someone deserves this wonderful basket.”

“Did I pay you for cleaning the saddles? You know I forget sometimes?”

“You paid me,” Tyler confessed.

Any other kid would have taken the opportunity. But not Tyler.

“How about for watering the horses?”

Tyler shook his head again. “Uncle Mike paid me for that.”

Another silent plea to Cal as Conrad furiously thought.

“And I guess I already gave you your \$2 your uncle Mike was holding for you, from the stage ride?”

Tyler’s head snapped up as he shook his head again. “Uh-uh.”

“I didn’t? Are you sure?” Conrad tried to look confused.

“I’m sure.”

Conrad stood up and began to search his pockets. “I’m so sorry, Ty. I thought I gave you those.”

Tyler’s eyes beamed as he saw the two large silver dollars.

“How much do you have now?”

Conrad thought it took forever for Tyler to count the money. In fact, he had to hold himself back from grabbing a dollar in coins and exchanging them with another silver dollar. But Tyler had worked hard both for the money and to learn his multiplication table.

“\$3.05.”

“Then bid it.”

“\$3.05,” Tyler yelled out.

“Sold,” Cal boomed just as quickly.

The crowd applauded as Tyler stepped up front.

“That’s quite a bit of money, son,” Cal observed as he collected all the coins.

“I’ve been working for it.” Tyler proudly claimed.

“Well, you just bought yourself a wonderful picnic basket.”

“She’s my ma.”

“Oh?” Cal feigned surprise.

“I had to bid on her basket.”

“Really? And why is that?”

“Cause she’s special.”

“She is?”

“Uh-huh. And she’s the prettiest girl.”

Cal turned to Toni and gave her a wink. “I won’t argue with you there, young man.” He turned and handed the basket to Tyler. “Here you go, son.”

“Thanks.” Tyler grabbed his mother’s hand. “Come on, ma. I’m hungry.”

Conrad noticed a huge grin on her face and the start of tears in her eyes.

“I’m coming.”

Cal’s voice boomed as he addressed the remainder of the crowd. “For those who didn’t buy a basket, the women of Round Rock have made several lunch boxes, which can be bought for fifty cents each.”

As Tyler pulled Toni through the crowd, he stopped and turned around. “You can eat with us, Mr. Morgan. Ma always makes a lot.”

Conrad pulled his hat down over his brow. “I think I’ll take you up on the offer.”

The crowd parted as Tyler led the three of them to the picnic area. Conrad helped Toni spread the blanket on the ground, then watched as Toni began to unpack her basket.

“Ma makes good chicken.”

“She sure does,” Conrad agreed as he leaned back on the blanket and bit into another piece of chicken.

“When Uncle Mike eats, he eats the whole platter.”

“Tyler!”

“There you are.” Stewart stood at the edge of the blanket, his eyes going from Toni to Conrad.

Conrad just smiled.

“Seems someone let my horse loose,” his voice was accusing.

“Sorry to hear about it.”

“I see you took advantage of my absence,” he observed.

“I think the best man bought Mrs. Logan’s basket.”

“That’s your opinion.”

“I bought it.”

Conrad watched Stewart’s cocky expression dissolve as he turned to Tyler.

“You?”

“Uh-huh. I bought it. Huh, ma?”

Toni smiled at her son. “Yes, you did.”

Conrad could tell Stewart was trying to decide where the young boy got the money. Tyler himself answered the unasked question.

“I’ve been working real hard.”

Stewart looked at the boy, obviously not sure of the truth.

Before Stewart could question him further, Tyler turned to his mother. “Ma, can I go see the pig race?”

“Yes.”

Like the wind, Tyler was off again.

“Ty was right,” Conrad observed, ignoring Stewart.

“About what?”

“You are the prettiest girl here.”

Toni blushed as she watched her son disappear in the crowd again. “One day he’ll find someone else, and I’ll have to step down to second place.”

Conrad also watched Tyler. “I’d say you have several years to bask in the glory.”

Chapter 44

“Well,” Stewart stammered as he looked to Toni. It was obvious he was not accustomed to being ignored. “I was hoping to take this opportunity and talk with you.”

Toni looked from Stewart to Conrad. “Please excuse us.”

Stewart silently followed Toni as they walked through the line of oak trees. Toni gave a sigh of relief as the leafy shade blocked the scorching heat.

She was uncomfortable with the silence between them. He stole a glance at her, his gaze following Toni’s hand as it gently touched the ribbon she still wore.

Stewart gave a huff as he suddenly stopped, his hands on his hips. “Honestly, Anthonia. What would your friends back home say if they saw you running in races?”

“It was for my son, and I don’t think anyone would think badly of it.” Toni was surprised at how quickly his good mood fled.

“Well, your mother—”

“—would be the first to agree with me.” She turned and continued walking. Right now she did not care if Stewart knew she was upset.

“I’m sorry, Anthonia,” Stewart quickly regained his position

beside her.

“Toni.”

Stewart came to a halt, surprised at her angry stance. “Sorry?”

“Toni. My friends all call me Toni. Why have you never called me that?”

Stewart snorted. “Toni is a masculine name. Anthonia is a delicate name, well representing its owner.” His smile was suppose to appease her, but it failed.

“Stewart, why are you here?”

“Pardon?”

“Why are you here?”

Stewart looked confused at the question. “Really, Anthonia. A man does not let his future bride travel—”

“No!” She interrupted.

“No, what?”

“I am not your future bride.”

Stewart smiled as if he dealt with female outrages all the time. “Well, it may never have been spoken, but—”

“It never has been spoken. I have several times told you I do not love you.”

“That can come in time.”

“It has never come in all the years I have known you.”

“Well, it’s just a minor thing—”

“It’s a major thing to me. If and when I remarry, it will be to someone I both love and respect.”

“Anthonia—”

“You cannot even use my name as an endearment!”

Stewart’s eyes glazed over as he suddenly pointed back towards the townsfolk. “And I suppose *he* does.”

Toni took a step back, surprised at the sudden change in the man before her.

“I have been patient with you, Anthonia. I have treated you like a lady, given you every measure of respect I thought you deserved. But now . . .”

“I think we best get back.” Toni made to walk around him, but he suddenly grabbed her arm.

“I have been more than patient with you.”

“Stewart, let go of my arm.”

“I’ve treated you with kindness and gentleness. But you never wanted that, did you?”

“Stewart—”

“No, you wanted something else. You wanted an animal, like him.”

“You’re hurting me.”

“Well, I think you owe me.”

Toni was really frightened now. She did not recognize the wild man before her. How far had they walked? Was there anyone around?

“Stewart, let’s talk—”

“Time for talking is over.”

She felt the large tree behind her as he pushed her back. She was still coming to terms with who this man was before her when she felt her left sleeve rip. She opened her mouth to scream, but Stewart was faster.

He had his large hand over her mouth as she felt the neckline of her dress also rip.

She tried to kick, but his large frame was pushed up against hers. She tried to use her arms, but his elbows permitted little movement.

Fear of attack was suddenly replaced with fear of death. Stewart’s large hand not only covered her mouth, but also covered her nose.

She could not breathe.

As she tried to claw her way to freedom, Stewart’s hand was everywhere as she felt another part of her dress rip.

“*No, please don’t*” she tried to speak.

She became dizzy from lack of oxygen. She knew Stewart was speaking, but she could not hear the words. She thought of Tyler.

She could not leave Tyler alone. He already lost a father. Would someone take care of him? Would Conrad miss her?

Her last thought as oblivion overtook her was: *Would Tyler know that she loved him?*

Chapter 45

“How long are you going to hobble around on those?”

“Doc Slater says another few weeks. I’m tempted to toss them now, though.”

Conrad saw the exasperation in Michael’s eyes. “Doc usually knows what he’s talking about.”

“Yeah, but you’re not the one hobbling.”

“True. But then, I’m not the one who caused the accident which made you hobble.”

Michael sneered. “Rub it in, why don’t ya.”

“Think I will.”

Both men laughed as they slowly walked around the field.

“Are you entered in the shooting match?” Michael asked.

“Thought I might give it a try.”

“Don’t give me that. You’re good and you know it. Thought you might want to impress someone with your manly skills.”

“I got the impression she’s not easily impressed.”

“She’s not. But she recognizes a good thing when she sees it.”

From the corner of his eye, Conrad saw Tyler running. He turned toward him and noticed Tyler was running for all he was worth.

“Tyler?”

Tyler came to a halt before the men, his breathing labored as he grabbed Conrad’s hand.

The boy was frightened.

“He’s hurting her—”

Tyler did not need to say anymore as Conrad ran in the direction Tyler came from. He did not know if anyone else was following, he only knew he had to get to Toni.

As he came through the line of trees, he called out, “Toni.”

No answer.

He went deeper into the trees and listened. To the left he could hear a slight scuffling. Turning, he headed that way.

“Toni,” he kept calling.

Still no answer.

As he came around the large oak tree, he saw them, Toni against the tree, her eyes rolling back. Stewart did not hear the bellow as he was bodily thrown aside. He did not have a chance to raise his arms in defense as a fist came crashing across his jaw, first from the left, then from the right. As he stumbled backwards, Stewart felt the pain in his chest as another blow sent him sprawling on the ground.

Stewart rolled to his hands and knees. He tasted his own blood as he spat on the ground, his rage now turned to the man before him. Shaking his head to clear the confusion, he charged at Conrad, his head lowered as he butted the man in the chest. Conrad fell backwards, then quickly got back on his feet as both men faced each other.

Conrad noticed Stewart’s left eye was already beginning to swell. He heard Michael and Tyler as they came to the clearing. He knew they would go to Toni.

Stewart saw his distraction and threw two short rights to Conrad’s stomach, followed by a solid left hook that knocked Conrad off his feet.

Stewart tried to kick him, but Conrad was quicker as he rolled and regained his stance. When Stewart tried to kick him again, Conrad grabbed his boot and twisted his leg, forcing Stewart to the ground. Before Stewart could get up, Conrad

leaned down and smashed a blow to his face, followed by two more blows, a right and a left to both sides of his jaw.

Stewart's body fell to the ground and did not move.

Breathing heavily, Conrad took only a moment to make sure Stewart was out, then turned to Toni.

Michael was patting Toni's face trying to get her to open her eyes as Tyler was calling her to wake up.

"Let me see," Conrad spoke as he bent down.

Toni's dress was torn in several places, and there were bruises already starting to form on her face and neck. He was relieved when he felt her still breathing.

"Let's get her to Doc's office."

"I'll get a buggy," Michael offered as he began to rise.

"No," Conrad whispered in a low voice as he gently placed his hands under her knees and neck. With a swift movement, he rose with Toni in his arms. "It'll be faster if I just carry her."

"Is ma gonna be ok?"

Conrad saw the fear in the small face. "She's going to be fine, Ty."

"What about him?"

Conrad turned around and looked at the man still laying on the ground. "Let the other men lock him up," he answered Michael.

Using his jacket, Michael took a moment to cover his sister as best as he could. They were not even halfway back to the picnic area when Mrs. Greene noticed them. Conrad noticed Frank helped Dana get the wagon ready. He heard Michael briefly explain what had happened, heard several men say they would take care of Stewart.

Most of the people stood back as Doc Slater came forward. He took one look at her, then pointed to town.

"Take her to my office," he shouted as he climbed in the back of the wagon too. Doc did not ask any questions about what had happened. At his first look, he knew the whole story.

Conrad gently held Toni on the bed of the wagon, Tyler and Michael sitting on Toni's left, Doc Slater on the right. Dana sat up front as Frank took the reins and began the ride into town.

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

He was trying not to let Tyler know how concerned he was that Toni had not come around yet. Both Michael and Conrad had looked at Doc, then each other. They both saw the same thing.

Doc Slater was worried.

Chapter 46

Toni awoke suddenly with a gasp. Her heart was racing and she was afraid.

“Shh, it’s ok. You’re fine,” her brother reassured her as she suddenly sat up in bed, a frightened look about her.

Toni looked at Michael and saw the concern on his face.

“You gave us quite a scare.”

Toni looked around, confused. “What happened?” Her jaw hurt for some reason.

“Don’t you remember?”

Memories flooded in as she raised her hand to her mouth. “I couldn’t breathe.”

“We barely got there in time.”

Toni closed her eyes as the event replayed in her mind. “He was so angry, and I couldn’t stop him.” She remembered her dress being torn. “Did he . . .?”

“He didn’t hurt you that way,” Michael reassured her as she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Your dress was ruined, though. Conrad brought you here and Mrs. Baines managed to change your clothes.”

“I’ll have to remember to thank her. How, how long have I been out?”

“Almost a full day.” Her eyes widened in surprise. “But Doc Slater said it would be normal, to sleep that long.”

“I don’t know what happened to him.” She remembered his accusations. “Was it my fault? Did I lead him—”

“No, you did nothing wrong.”

“But he was—”

Mike placed his hands on hers. “Toni, look at me. You did nothing wrong. I know you told him you were not interested in him, but he didn’t want to hear it.”

“Maybe I should have said it differently.”

“It would have made no difference. He believed what he wanted to believe.”

Toni thought for a moment. “How did you find me?”

“Conrad and I were walking when Ty came running from the forest.”

“Ty? He saw?”

“Yeah, and he was pretty upset.”

“Oh, no.”

“When Conrad pulled Stewart away, you fell to the ground. Ty tried to wake you up, and he thought you were dead. Conrad had to place his hand on your stomach so he could see you breathe, as shallow as it was.”

“How is he now?”

“He’s just outside. He wouldn’t leave the house all day in case you woke up.”

Toni looked at the closed door to her room. “Tyler!”

She heard a scuffle, then the door slowly opened and a small, dark haired head emerged.

“Ma?”

Toni’s heart was squeezed by the small, insecure voice that belonged to her son. “Come here.”

He walked inside, unshed tears in his eyes. “Are you ok?”

“I’m fine,” she said as she patted the side of the bed. “Come here.”

He climbed on the bed. “Your face looks funny.”

She smiled, then winced at the pain.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

“Just a little.”

Tyler intently looked at each bruised cheek. “Want me to kiss it and make it better?”

Toni felt her own tears start. “That would be nice.”

She felt his face as he pressed his small lips to each cheek.

“Better?”

No amount of pain would have stopped her smile. “It feels very much better. Thank you.”

Tyler wrapped his small arms around her neck and hugged his mother. “I was so afraid, ma. I thought you were dead, like pa.”

Toni squeezed her son back. “I’m fine now. Thanks to you.”

She felt the slight hiccup. “I saw him hurting you.”

She rubbed her hand on his back. “You did the right thing.”

“I should have made him stop.”

Toni pulled Tyler away and looked him in the eye. “Stewart is a lot bigger than you or me. If you had stayed and tried to help, he would have hurt you too, and then who would have gone for help?” She wiped the tears from his cheek. “You did the best thing you could have done. And I’m very proud of you.”

Tyler hugged his mother again. “Promise you won’t die.”

“I can’t promise that.” She pulled her son away to look him in the eye again. “But I can promise you this: I will try to be very careful from now on so that we are together for a long, long time. How’s that?”

Tyler thought the words over for moment, then smiled. “Ok. Mrs. Baines made some cookies. Want one?”

“What kind?”

“Oatmeal.”

“Ohh, your favorite. A cookie would be great.”

With a smile and a bounce, Tyler was out the door and heading down the stairs.

“Glad to see you smile again!”

Conrad walked through the door, his hat in his hand.

“Well, I think I’ll make sure my nephew leaves a few cookies for everyone else,” Michael spoke as he headed out of the bedroom. He was not sure if either Toni or Conrad had even

heard him leave.

“How you feeling?”

“Better, thanks.”

“Doc says the swelling will go down in a few days.”

Toni gently touched her face. She knew she must look a fright. “Thank you.”

Conrad nodded his head as he walked around the bed.

“What happened to Stewart?” she finally asked.

“He’s in jail. I won’t lie, but several of the townsfolk wanted to hang him. Including me.”

Toni’s eyes widened in alarm. “Oh no, please don’t do that.”

“People take a stern view on those who would harm a lady. Sort of an unwritten code of honor.”

“I know. But I’m sure it wasn’t all his fault.”

Conrad’s right brow rose. “How do you figure that?”

Toni took a deep breath as she looked from the man standing before her to her hands laying on top of the comforter. “I don’t know. But he’s never done anything like this before.”

Conrad was surprised when he felt relieved at the statement. At least he now knew Stewart had not raised his hand to Toni before.

“I just don’t know what happened. One minute we were talking, then suddenly he became so enraged. I tried to leave, but he had me cornered.”

“Sheriff Tooley wants to know if you’ll press charges?”

Toni shook her head.

“Mike said you wouldn’t. Well, he’ll stay in jail for several days. Sheriff Tooley says by then, maybe the town will have cooled down.”

Toni tried to smile. “Thanks.”

She watched him swallow, his eyes going from his hat to her face. “Doc said best thing for you was rest.”

She leaned back against the headboard. “Easier said than done. I’m afraid to close my eyes for the nightmares.”

Conrad’s eyes became intense as he leaned forward. “I can take care of that.”

His promise was spoken in a husky whisper. His lips were

gentle as they softly brushed against hers once, then twice. He smelled of sunshine and horses, earth and sweat.

He smelled like Conrad.

She lifted her face and allowed him to kiss her again, this time with more feeling. She allowed herself to wonder what life would be like with this man. Allowed herself to wonder what it would be like to be loved by this man.

Conrad raised his head, his breathing as fast as her own. “Now you have something else to dream of.”

Chapter 47

“What story do you want to hear?”

“The Knight and the Dragon.”

“Are you sure? I still haven't told you the one about the cross-eyed horse!”

“The Knight and the Dragon,” Tyler insisted.

“Ok.” Toni made sure the blankets were tucked in, then sat on the edge of his bed and began the bedtime ritual. “Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful princess with long red hair—”

“Black hair,” he corrected.

Toni looked at her son. “What?”

“She had long black hair.”

“Black hair? Are you sure?”

“Uh-huh,” his small head nodding up and down. “Black hair.”

Toni tried to keep the confusion from her voice. “Ok, the princess had long black hair, and lived in a tall tower. But she had been kidnapped by an evil Lord who wanted to marry her. But she could not, because her heart belonged to a short and stubby knight—”

“a tall, handsome knight.”

“a tall, handsome knight—”

“and he wore cowboy boots.”

“He what?”

“And he had brown hair,” he added.

Toni paused again. “Brown hair, and wore cowboy boots?”

“Uh-huh.”

Toni was intrigued. This was the first time Tyler changed the details.

“Right. Her heart belonged to a tall, handsome knight... with cowboy boots. She loved the cowardly knight—”

“The brave handsome knight!”

“Oh, I’m sorry. She loved the brave handsome knight, and she knew he would one day come and rescue her on his black stallion—”

“It was spotted.”

Toni paused again. “Spotted?”

“Uh-huh. It was an appaloosa.”

Toni slightly tilted her head as understanding quickly sank in. “An appaloosa!”

“Uh-huh,” he agreed again.

Toni was momentarily surprised. “Tell you what. Why don’t *you* tell *me* what this tall, brown-haired knight riding his appaloosa did!”

Tyler excitedly sat up in his bed. “He went to rescue the princess—”

“—with black hair,” she reclarified.

“Uh-huh. But there was a mean dragon in the way. And the knight had to fight him. The dragon was real strong, but the knight was stronger. So he...”

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Toni listened as the brave knight, riding an appaloosa and wearing cowboy boots with his shining armor, battled the mighty fire-breathing dragon, defeated the evil Lord, and eventually rescued the beautiful princess with black hair.

“And they lived happily ever after,” he finished. He looked so proud of his story. It was obvious that Tyler looked up to Conrad, maybe because he rescued her from Stewart.

“That was a wonderful story, young man.” She was rewarded

with a smile as he snuggled under the covers.

“Ma? Are we going to stay here, or go home?”

“Why do you ask?”

“I like it here.”

“And what do you like best?”

Tyler scrunched his nose as he thought. “I like my kitten, Sam. And Mr. Morgan.”

Toni wondered what Conrad would think about being rated below a kitten.

“Do you like Mr. Morgan?” he asked.

Toni bent down and kissed her son on the cheek. “Yes, I like Mr. Morgan.”

As she blew the lamp out, Tyler asked another question.

“Ma, do you think Mr. Morgan likes me?”

“I think he likes you a lot. Now, it's time to go to sleep.”

“Night, ma.”

“Goodnight. Sleep tight.”

Thankfully, he asked no more questions as she closed the bedroom door. With a start, she realized Conrad was leaning against the wall.

“I like him a lot,” he whispered. “And I like his mom a lot, too.”

Toni smiled. “That's good to know.”

Conrad smiled as he pushed himself from the wall. He took his time as he studied her face, noticing the arched brows, clear eyes, and a mouth that was quick to smile, to laugh. A mouth he had already kissed. A mouth he wanted to kiss again. Instead, he reached out, letting his right hand gently caress her cheek.

“Goodnight,” he gently whispered as he made himself turn around and walk back down the hallway, toward his room.

“Conrad?”

He stopped and turned. Her eyes traveled from his head to his feet.

“Nice cowboy boots!”

Chapter 48

Jeremy ran into the store, his excitement evident in his face. Today he was going to get some penny candy.

Mr. Greene turned around from behind the counter when he heard the footsteps. Jeremy slapped the coin on the counter, a huge smile showing two missing teeth on his face.

“Some penny candy, please.”

Mr. Greene picked up the coin. “That’s a nice shiny dollar you got there. I don’t remember you ever having a whole dollar before.”

Some of the excitement left Jeremy’s eyes as he watched Mr. Greene inspect the coin. “Some penny candy, please,” he repeated.

Mr. Greene looked at Jeremy and smiled. “Of course.” He laid the coin back on the counter, then opened the candy jar and put several sticks of candy in a bag.

Jeremy’s eyes lit back up, his tongue licking his lips as he reached for the bag. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” As he counted out his change, Jeremy checked inside the bag, making sure all his candy was there. “Come back anytime,” Mr. Greene called out as Jeremy almost ran out the door.

Marshal Wade dodged the young boy as he ran out the door. “Can I see that?” pointing toward the coin still laying on the counter.

Mr. Greene looked at the coin, confused. “Sure.” He handed the coin over and watched as the Marshal took his knife out and scratched the coin.

Wade’s eyes slightly widened when he saw the result. Reaching in his pocket, he took out another coin and tossed it on the counter. “I’ll trade you,” he called out as he quickly went out the door too.

He spied the young boy sitting on the boardwalk two stores down. “My name’s Wade.”

Jeremy looked up, his lips already red from the peppermint. He eyed the star on the vest and a wary look appeared. “Hi.”

Wade sat next to the boy. “I saw you inside buying the candy. I was wondering where you got the dollar.”

Jeremy looked down at his feet. “It’s mine.”

“I’m sure it is. But where did you get it?”

Jeremy stood up, his bag of candy clutched in his right hand. “You a real Marshal?”

“Sure am.”

“How come you here?”

“I’m looking for people with coins like the one you had.”

“I have another.”

“You do?”

“Yep.”

“How many do you have?”

Jeremy looked around, making sure no one was listening. “I got two more. Wanna see ‘em?”

“You got ‘em with you?”

“Uh-huh.” Jeremy pulled out two more coins. “They’re mine.”

Wade examined them resting on the boy’s sticky palm. “Did you earn them, or find them?”

Jeremy closed his hand and put the coins back in his pocket. Wade could tell the boy was deciding how much to tell.

“Why ya interested in ‘em?”

“Cause they’re very special coins, and I’m trying to find out who has them.”

“Oh.” Jeremy looked behind him, then back at the Marshal. “I found ‘em.” He turned and pointed down the street. “Found ‘em down there?”

“Where bouts?”

“Behind Mr. Ryan’s.”

Wade’s left brow rose. “Peter Ryan?”

“Uh-huh. A man was coming out and dropped the bag and a lot of the coins fell out. He got most of them, but I found these.”

“Did you recognize the man?”

Jeremy shook his head. “None of the men who take the bags away are from here.”

Wade nodded his head. “Can you tell me about the men?”

Wade sat and silently listened as Jeremy told in great detail who came to visit Ryan Peters. Wade was surprised when Jeremy mentioned a familiar name.

“Are you sure it was him?”

“Yeah. When he comes to town, he always goes to Mr. Peter’s. He thinks no one sees ‘em cause he goes in the back, but I see ‘em.”

“You do?”

“Uh-huh. Did he do something wrong?”

Wade took a deep sigh as he looked out in the street. “Yeah.”

Jeremy was silent for a moment as he considered the situation. “You gonna put me in jail?”

Wade smiled. “No.”

Wade could not tell if the boy was happy or disappointed at that.

Chapter 49

Conrad walked up to his horse with long easy strides. The street seemed quiet with Mike and Tyler out of town.

Mike had recognized the signs from both him and Marshal Wade and wisely decided to take Dana and Tyler home.

Dancer was patient as Conrad leaned his head against the saddle for a few minutes.

There was no thinking about it.

With a heavy sigh, he opened the saddlebag and pulled out the bag he had hidden on the bottom.

The weight of the bag felt familiar, like it belonged in his hand. Another heavy sigh, then Conrad opened the bag. He silently stared at the items inside, especially the shiny silver shining back at him.

Chapter 50

Wade stood in the street, his eyes scanning the street and the buildings around. He noticed every scene, every detail.

Mr. Greene was helping load a customer's wagon while chastising a group of young boys running in his path. Charlie, the barber, was sitting in a chair, whittling a piece of wood while talking with anyone passing by, his feet propped on the hitching post. Medical bag in hand, Doc Slater was getting into his buggy, probably to check on a patient.

People were milling about, oblivious to the fact that he now knew where the counterfeiting operation was, where the coiners collected their sacks and headed to towns round about to exchange them, and where they returned to drop off the real coins and start again.

He also now knew who was behind the operation.

Even after five years, he recognized the slow steady footsteps behind him.

"Had a feeling you would show up," he said without taking his eyes off the street.

"Good to see your gut instincts are still sharp."

"This isn't your job."

"You didn't really think I'd let you do this alone, did you?"

Conrad stood beside Wade, the pose of both men almost identical. Both men eased their guns half out of the holster several times before letting them fall back naturally. Wade took a moment to look over at his friend and noticed the star on his shirt, the same star that he wore.

“You were right. Old habits die hard.” Wade looked back at the street and the buildings. “You retired, or did you forget?”

“I didn’t forget.”

“You know you don’t have the authority to wear that anymore?”

“Figured you could take care of that.”

Wade’s eyes cut to the man beside him, then quickly looked back down the street. “Yeah, guess I could. I was afraid I told you too much when I first met you in town. I knew you would feel the need to help.”

“You’re right.”

“You worked real hard to bury your past as a Marshal so the family and friends of those you put away or killed would not bother either you or your daughter. You realize that by wearing that badge again, people are going to know. And you know how fast word spreads.”

“That’s something I’ve decided I can live with.”

“You have a daughter, and a mighty fine woman waiting for you. I can’t ask that of you.”

“I don’t recall asking.”

“I could order you to stay out.”

“You could try.”

Wade gave a heavy sigh. “You always did have a hard head.”

“Learned it from the best.”

Wade chuckled. “We had some good times.”

“Is that what you called ‘em?”

Both men looked at each other, brief memories shared between them.

“You were the best partner I ever had. Wish you would reconsider, though.”

“You’re wasting time we don’t have.”

“Guess I am.”

“Gotta plan?”

“Always do.” The two men were silent for a moment as Wade looked at the gun strapped on Conrad’s leg. “Still remember how to use that?”

“Well enough to cover your backside.”

One last look at his friend’s determined stare, then Wade turned and walked towards Ryan’s office.

“Think he knows you’re coming?”

“He knows. You watch the front while I go in the back. First, though, I need to deputize you. I won’t ask you to raise your right hand, but do you solemnly swear—”

Conrad was the first to see the glint of steel through Ryan’s front window. He pushed Wade behind the wagon Mr. Greene had been loading as a shot rang out, the dirt spitting dust clouds under their feet.

The women on the streets screamed as they grabbed their children and ran into nearby stores and offices.

With their guns drawn, both men quickly made their way to the next building, their backs flat against the wall. The next shot splintered the wall only a few inches from Wade’s head.

Their guns cocked and ready, Conrad followed Wade.

“—to support the Constitution of the United States—” Wade continued in a whisper as he reached the right side of Ryan’s office, Conrad on the left.

Conrad took a quick peek inside through the broken window, then nodded that it was clear.

“U.S. Marshal, Come on out!” Wade called out.

No answer.

Wade opened the door and signaled to Conrad. They were going in.

“—and the laws of this Territory—”

Wade made his way inside. A quick inspection showed three doors. Conrad went to the door closest to him and opened it, his gun ready.

No one inside.

“—That you will true faith and allegiance bear the same—”

Wade opened the middle door as another shot shattered the

doorframe. Wade ducked back, then quickly ran through the doorway, Conrad right behind him. They heard footsteps in the next room.

“—and defend them against all enemies whatsoever—”

As he turned the doorknob, Wade jumped back as another shot hit the door, throwing it open.

“There’s nowhere to run, Ryan,” Wade called out. “We know all about your operation here.”

Another shot came through the wall six inches from Conrad’s shoulder.

“That was too close,” Conrad whispered back.

Wade and Conrad ran through the doorway, their guns aimed and ready.

No one inside.

Wade took in the smelting pot in the fireplace, an assortment of molds on the table, several coins cooling, and brass plates used for filling.

Another door.

As Conrad reached for the door, Wade noticed the marks on the floor next to the wall.

A secret panel.

The panel could only go to the front or back of the building. Wade signaled Conrad to go to the back while he ran to the front. As Wade went around the building, wondering where the exit was, Conrad came around from back, a confused look on his face.

“Where did he go?”

Wade looked from the back to the front, then up. “The roof.”

They backed up enough to see Ryan drop onto the next building.

“That’s Millie’s Dress Shop,” Conrad shouted as Wade ran around to the front.

Again, they each took their place on each side of the door.

“U.S. Marshal, Ryan. Give is up.”

A shot through the door was his answer.

“—and that you will faithfully—”

Wade swung open the door and stepped inside. A sound to the left made him turn, his gun steady. He heard a shuffle behind

the counter.

“Don’t hurt me!” Millie cried out as Ryan stood up, a frightened Millie standing in front of him.

“You’re not taking me!” Ryan shouted as he pulled Millie closer to him, his gun pointed at her head.

“Please,” Millie cried out.

“Let her go.”

“Shut up!” he screamed at Millie.

Wade walked toward the back of the store, his gun and gaze never leaving Ryan.

“I want a horse, right now!” Ryan demanded.

“—and impartially discharge the duties—”

“Stop! Right there,” Ryan shouted as he kept Millie between him and the Marshal.

Wade kept walking.

“I mean it. Stop!”

Wade reached the far wall and stopped, his eyes locked on Ryan. His voice was calm. “I’ll only ask you one more time. Let her go.”

“Not till I get my horse.”

“—of the duties of the office—”

“I want that horse, now!”

“—of Deputy United States Marshal—”

Ryan’s face frowned in confusion. “What are you talking about?” he practically screamed.

“—according to the best of your abilities—”

Ryan’s shoulder suddenly exploded in pain, the momentum of the shot spinning him around as he fell to the floor.

Millie screamed as she ran forward. Wade grabbed her and shoved her out the door, his gun still trained on Ryan.

Re-cocking his gun, Conrad carefully walked over to Ryan, who was clutching his shoulder, and kicked Ryan’s gun over to Wade.

“You could have been shot,” he spoke to Wade over his shoulder as he inspected Ryan’s injury.

“You *are* rusty, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?”

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

“He was empty.”

Conrad quickly accounted for all six of Ryan’s shots. “He could have reloaded.”

“Ryan is a crooked inventor, not a gunslinger.”

Conrad grabbed some material from the countertop and put it on Ryan’s shoulder to stop the bleeding. “Guess you’re right.”

“—so help you God?” Wade finally concluded.

Conrad looked up, a crooked smile on his face as he rose. Lifting his right hand, he vowed, “So help me God.”

Wade retrieved Ryan’s gun next to his feet, then holstered his own. “Good. After all, we want this all to be legal.”

Chapter 51

Like the other residents of Round Rock, Stewart watched the scene in the street from his office window. He had heard the whole conversation between the two men. His eyes narrowed as his face took on a worried look.

Conrad Morgan was a U.S. Marshal!

That was a problem.

Did he suspect?

Had he left any clues behind?

Even as a retired Marshal, Conrad would be observant. He would notice the little things, shuffle the pieces together until they finally fit into place.

That was the nature of the lawman.

He watched as the two men finally led Ryan Peters from Millie's place. He knew the two would have talked together at some time.

Would they have compared notes, figured it out?

How much did they know of his operation?

Stewart stepped away from the window. He knew he had made a big mistake with Anthonia last week. He should have kept his temper in check. He knew he was lucky the town did not string him up from the nearest tree.

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

After four days in jail, the Sheriff finally released him, his stern look telling him his act would not easily be forgotten.

He was angry with himself for allowing his anger to overcome him. He usually had better control over it.

He was angry with Anthonia. She had deliberately led him on all these years.

And he was angry at Conrad Morgan for taking what he clearly felt was his property.

Stewart looked around his office. He had worked so hard. Now, it was probably lost.

Making his decision, he quickly began packing. He knew the next stage would not come through for another two days. Delivering a wagon shipment from his office personally would slow him down.

No, he needed to get a horse and ride out of town, now.

Before he was caught!

Chapter 52

Toni sat on the chair on the porch, followed by Adams. She knew in her heart that any future visits would have to stop. She had already made up her mind about Conrad.

She loved the way he took time with his daughter, and her son. The men that worked for him had respect for him as well. He took care of his ranch in much the same manner as her father did his.

She realized she had never encouraged any other suitor because she was waiting for Conrad, hoping he felt the same way.

Tyler already liked him, and she liked Dana. More importantly, Dana and Tyler got along great.

She knew several families that married, only to have the individual members constantly battling against each other. She did not want that for either herself or Tyler.

What she wanted in life, Conrad also wanted.

She watched as Adams looked along the horizon, then back at her. There was no time like the present.

“I’m glad you came for a visit.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I know you’ve been taking some of your personal time and visiting here, and I appreciate it.”

“Well, I did fancy there was a special reason for my visit. But, I have noticed a strong attraction between you and Mr. Morgan over the last month. Am I correct?”

Toni’s surprise was obvious. “You know?”

“My dear, I am a man of God. I notice when affairs of the heart are at work.”

Toni was physically relieved. “I’m glad you know. I was afraid I was going to have to...” She paused, embarrassed in case she had been wrong.

“Afraid of having to let me down easy?”

Toni saw the laughter in Adams eyes, then chuckled herself. “I was also embarrassed I may have misunderstood the reason for your visits.”

Adams shook his head. “You did not misunderstand. But I do understand, and I wish you all the happiness.”

Toni blushed. “Thank you.”

“Have you talked to him yet?”

“Not yet. Conrad’s been busy trying to meet the contract deadline.”

“Ah, yes. The government is always making it difficult for us simple folk to make a living.”

“Sometimes it seems that way.”

Adams pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his brow. “It sure has been hot the past few days.”

“It has.” Toni suddenly rose. “I’m sorry. I should have asked if you would like a glass of lemonade. Mrs. Baines always keeps a pitcher for the kids.”

“That would be nice.”

Toni turned at the sound of the buckboard approaching the yard, Tyler and Dana sitting on each side of Mike.

“You’re back early,” she called out.

“Ma! You know what?”

Toni watched as her son jumped from the wagon before it even came to a halt. “What?”

“Mr. Ryan is a bad man.”

“What?”

“Mr. Ryan is a bad man,” Tyler repeated as Dana and Mike

climbed down. “Mr. Morgan and the Marshal are gonna arrest him.”

Toni looked from Tyler to her brother. “What is he talking about?”

“Looks like Ryan is involved in some counterfeiting scheme,” Michael clarified. “Seems Marshal Wade’s been sent here to find out about it and shut it down.”

“Mr. Ryan? Peter Ryan? The inventor?”

“Yeah. The Marshal found out about Ryan and was about to go after him. Conrad decided to help him. I figured there was going to be shooting, so I decided to bring the kids home before it started.”

Toni naturally reached out to touch her son. “Thanks.”

“Is my daddy going to be ok?”

Toni looked at Dana. “I’m sure he is being very careful.”

Dana did not look convinced. “Maybe I should have stayed, in case he got hurt.”

Toni looked to Mike, the same thought running through her head. She placed her other arm across Dana’s shoulder.

“If I were you, I would feel the same way.” Toni thought how natural it felt, her arms resting on both their shoulders, like they were a family. “But we have to remember that sometimes it’s best to be out of the picture.”

Dana looked up. “Why?”

“Well, if your father is busy doing something important that he needs his full attention on, if someone they love is around and could get hurt, then his attention is divided, and he’s not able to fully focus on the task at hand.”

Dana looked from Toni to the barn, her eyes narrowing as she considered Toni’s words.

Conrad did the same thing when he was considering a problem.

“But what if he gets hurt?” she asked.

“Then I’m sure Doc will fix him up, and then the Marshal will bring him home.”

“Well, I guess so.”

Dana noticed Adams sitting on the porch. “Hi,” she called

out.

“Hello there,” Adams returned as he joined the group in the yard. “I hear there was some excitement in town today.”

“Mr. Ryan made some bad money,” Tyler explained, “and the Marshal and Mr. Morgan went to get him and put him in jail.”

Tyler turned to his mother. “Why did Mr. Ryan make bad money?”

“Because some people are not satisfied with what they have, and they always want more.”

“Oh. I bet Uncle Mike could have caught him.” Tyler turned to his uncle. “Huh?”

Mike tousled his nephew’s hair. “It’s always nice to have help.”

Tyler turned to Adams. “Are you staying for supper again?”

“Tyler!” Toni chided as she turned to Adams. “I’m sorry.”

Adams shook his head. “Not to worry.”

“Mike, why not take these two back inside. I think Mrs. Baines made some cookies an hour ago.”

“Oh, boy!” Tyler cried out as he practically ran inside.

“Make sure you don’t ruin your appetite,” she called out as Dana followed Tyler inside.

Mike hobbled behind. “I think I’ll just rescue a few of the cookies before they all disappear.”

Toni smiled. “Then you had better hurry.”

Toni turned to Adams. “I’m sorry about that.”

“No need for apologies. Actually, the reason I came by was to tell you I need to be leaving today.”

“So soon?”

“I have a wedding I need to perform in Middleton. But before I leave, I wanted to show you Shadow Valley.”

“Oh, that’s right.” Toni turned toward the south. “How far is it again?”

“It’s about a half-hour ride.”

Toni looked back to the house. “If you have a prior engagement, I would not want to keep you. I’m sure that Conrad will show us later on.”

“Mr. Morgan will be focusing on finishing with his herd of cattle and horses.”

“You’re right. He’s very busy right now. I guess I should take the opportunity while you’re still here.”

“I’ll get the horses ready.”

Mike appeared on the porch. “He’s taking a nap. I had to limit him to two cookies.”

“That’s fine. Preacher Adams is going to show me Shadow Valley before he leaves.”

Mike looked at the position of the sun. “You should make it there and back in a few hours.”

“Don’t tell Ty where I am. He’ll be disappointed. This way I can surprise him.”

“Be careful.”

Mike went back inside the house as Adams came out of the coral with her horse already saddled.

“Shall we go?”

Chapter 53

For the past half hour, Ryan had sat in the Sheriff's office being questioned by the Marshal while Mr. Morgan had left to check on everyone else in town.

He was nervous. He tried to appear calm, but he knew he looked nervous. He looked up as Conrad entered the office, saw the silent signal given between the two men.

Conrad poured two cups of coffee as he listened to Wade question Ryan.

"How did he find you?" Wade asked as Conrad placed a cup of coffee before Ryan.

"I was already making a few coins by myself. I was getting more and more in debt, and I needed the money."

"What for?"

"I have many inventions that I've exhibited. Several of them I've been endeavoring to make improvements on. My latest invention I've been trying to market back east. People don't understand, it takes money to make things better. I've spent thousands of dollars while working on my inventions."

"So you turned your attention to counterfeiting."

"I only meant to do it for the time being, in order to make a new start in a legitimate business."

“How did he find you?” he asked again.

Ryan shook his head. “I don’t know. He just did. Told me he knew all about my inventions, my financial situation, and my operation. Said it was becoming more difficult back east, so he wanted to establish an operation out west. Since I was already in the business, he told me he wanted me to work for him.”

Ryan took a drink of the bitter coffee. “Actually, he didn’t give me a choice. Either I worked for him, or he was going to turn me in.”

“The lesser of two evils, I guess.”

“You don’t know him. He has a terrible temper. But he mostly keeps it in check. Very few people have seen him lose his temper.”

Conrad remembered seeing Toni with Stewart’s hands around her neck, remembered seeing the hate in his eyes.

“He was always coming and going”, Ryan continued. “It was easy for him since he was already established in other towns. In his line of work, no one suspected him of being the head of this operation.”

Wade looked at Conrad, a look Conrad recognized as a job almost finished. Just a few details to tie up.

“I saw your operation in your house. I must admit, it’s one of the most sophisticated and complete operations I’ve seen.”

Conrad noticed the slight smile play across Ryan’s face. “Yeah. It is.”

“I went back and had another look,” Wade casually commented as he poured himself a cup of coffee. “You got a crucible for melting the metal, a charcoal furnace made of boiler-iron and lined with fire-brick, two rollers for pressing the metal into flat plates, and a press for cutting out round bats of metal. Then you have steel dies for stamping on the impression. Pretty powerful machinery. How did you get the equipment?”

“He had it shipped in, then placed in the attic.”

“So, when did this last batch of silver arrive?” Wade asked.

“About four months ago.”

“How did it arrive?”

“Several men brought it to me.”

“All at once?”

“No. They brought it over several days.”

“Were the men from town?”

“No. I only see them when they ride through.”

“Did you get their names?”

“Sure.”

Wade turned to Conrad who turned a wanted poster over, then grabbed a pencil, ready to write the names.

Ryan named the four men.

“How regular did the men show up?” Wade asked.

“About every two weeks. Sometimes every week. Depended on how far away the towns were. If they were shoving coins far away, I just shipped the satchels to the town.”

“Stewart’s freight line came in handy.”

“Like I said, nobody suspected. They hired other men and women to help in shoving.”

Wade already knew the answer, but he asked anyway. “Describe the shoving operation.”

Ryan drank the last of his coffee, then placed the empty cup on the table before him.

“Two men had a town assigned to them, usually a large town that had several stores and business operations. One man was assigned to carry the satchel with the counterfeit coins. The other man’s job was to buy a small priced item using one of the counterfeit dollars. Then he collected good money in return as change. The first man was usually within a block, usually looking at a convenient store window while his partner was in the different shops.”

“Any particular shops?”

Ryan shook his head. “They were not partial to any one particular commercial business, but they were told to be very frugal at all times. They would try to buy things they would need anyway. Like buying a half pound of meat at one store with one dollar. At another store, they bought a small amount of sugar, then half a pound of coffee at another store. Sometimes they bought small trinkets for their family and friends, if the cost was small.”

Wade looked from Ryan to Conrad, who was still sitting on the desk, quietly listening.

“I think that’s enough for today.”

Conrad walked outside as Wade placed Ryan in one of the empty cells. Taking a deep breath, he watched as life returned to the streets. People were again milling around. His gaze turned to Stewart’s Freighting Office.

He did not turn as Wade stood beside him.

“This three-month chase is almost over,” Wade announced. “We’re close to putting the big man behind bars.”

“What’s your next move?”

“I need to check on some towns and see where he’ll be. It would be best if we caught him before he realizes we’re on to him.”

Conrad turned to look at Wade. “He’s across the street.”

Wade turned to Conrad, a confused look on his face. “He is? I thought he left town.”

“No. Stewart should be in his office.”

“Stewart?”

“Yeah.” Conrad had a bad feeling from Wade’s reaction. “Ryan said no one suspected the counterfeit coins were shipped to the faraway towns. And the machinery was shipped here by Stewart.”

Wade shook his head. “But Stewart was just the business used. Not the Boss.”

“Then *who is the Boss?*”

“Preacher Adams.”

Chapter 54

Toni rode beside Adams for several miles in silence. Accustomed to the constant chatter of her son, the silence was usually a time for her to relax.

But for some reason, she was not feeling relaxed.

“How often do you come this way?” she asked to break the silence.

“Several times a year.”

“Ahh. And how long have you been a Preacher?”

“Three years.”

Toni noticed that Adams demeanor had suddenly changed. Gone was the happy, care-free man. In his place was this cautious, nervous man. His answers for the past twenty minutes were mostly monosyllables. And she noticed he made several excuses to look behind them.

Suddenly, Toni felt uncomfortable.

She reined her horse to a stop, then turned to Adams.

“I think I’ve changed my mind. I really don’t want to waste any more of your time.”

She looked toward Shadow Valley. “I’m sure Conrad or Sam will bring Ty here later on—”

The sound of a gun’s hammer being pulled back made Toni turn around. With the reins held in his left hand, Adams held a

colt revolver in his right hand, aimed at her.

“Ty was wrong” she said. “You *do* carry a gun.”

“Like your son said, a man needs to protect himself.”

Toni narrowed her eyes as she suddenly understood.

“This has something to do with what Ty said was happening in town.”

His slight nod was all the confirmation she needed.

“You’re involved with the counterfeiting.”

“I’m afraid so.” His gun waved toward the south. “Let’s keep moving.”

Toni turned her horse and rode ahead of him. She realized the land all around was flat and bare. If she made a run for it, he could easily shoot her before she rode ten feet.

And she was sure he would not hesitate to do so.

“What part did you play in this operation?” she asked.

“My dear, this was *my* operation.”

“So you just used Ryan.”

Adams laughed. “I used many people.”

Toni turned around as understanding became clearer. “Including me!”

“You were a legitimate reason to come back to town so soon and often without people being suspicious.”

Well, I feel like the fool, she thought.

Ahead was the basin where several rock faces showed signs of fossils. She knew Tyler would love to explore this place.

Ty.

“Take the right trail,” he shouted.

Toni looked ahead. “But I thought Shadow Valley was up ahead?”

“It is.”

Trying to keep herself from panicking, Toni turned her horse at the trail. If Conrad was going to follow, which she sincerely believed, she needed to let him know they left the path.

And she needed to do it before they traveled too far.

She quickly thought of dropping her scarf, handkerchief or hat, but was sure Adams would see it.

Toni’s eyes narrowed as she had an idea.

Leaning forward, she stroked her mare's neck, then patted it.

"What's wrong, girl," she asked as she patted her neck again. Reining the horse to a halt, she dismounted.

"What are you doing?" Adams yelled as he stopped beside her.

"I think she has a stone."

"I didn't see her limping!"

"Well, I felt it. And unless you plan to carry us both on your horse, give me a minute to check her out."

Before Adams could object, Toni lifted the left front hoof, inspecting the soft tissue.

"She has a stone."

Toni dropped the foot as she looked up to Adams. "Do you have something I can use?"

She gave him only a few seconds before she snapped her fingers. "Ah, I have something." As she reached for her saddlebag, she heard the colt's hammer pull back again.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Relax. I don't have a gun or a knife. But I do have this."

She pulled out her flute, examining the mouthpiece.

"This should pry the stone loose."

Adams looked behind him, then watched as Toni used the end of the flute to remove the imaginary pebble.

"There. She should be fine."

Patting her mare, she remounted, riding ahead of Adams.

Adams did not see the flute slip through her fingers as it fell to the ground.

Toni did not see his horse walk over it, crushing the delicate flute with his large hooves.

Chapter 55

Conrad rode at a full gallop, Dancer's legs stretching to cover as much ground as possible. Wade kept pace riding beside him.

Both had been quiet during the ride. When Conrad learned Adams was behind the counterfeiting, it had felt like someone was squeezing the life out of his heart.

"Adams?" he had said, slightly confused.

Wade had followed as Conrad ran to his horse. "Where is Adams?" he asked as Conrad lifted himself on his horse.

"Visiting Toni, at *my* place."

Wade swore as he ran to his own horse.

As they approached the ranch, Conrad noticed the buckboard in the yard. Mike and the kids were already back. His heart sank more when he considered the possibility of one of the kids being harmed.

A quick look around showed Adams's horse was nowhere in sight. Of course, it could be in the barn.

"Toni?" he called out as he quickly reined his horse to a stop beside the buckboard.

"Toni?" he shouted again as Wade halted beside him.

Tyler came running out of the house. "Ma's gone."

“Where?”

Dana followed Tyler outside. “Preacher Adams wanted to show her something.”

Conrad looked around. “Which way?”

Mike hobbled out of the house. One look at Conrad’s expression and he understood. The situation was grave.

“South,” he said, not wasting any time.

Conrad looked south, understanding.

Even for her young age, Dana recognized something was drastically wrong. And somehow, Preacher Adams was involved.

“Daddy?” she called out as she approached his horse.

Conrad looked down, saw the concern on his daughter’s face.

“Bring Mrs. Logan home!”

Conrad took a moment to stroke her cheek. “I will.”

He turned to look at Tyler, and Mike. “I will,” he promised.

Both men turned south.

“Where’s he going?” Wade asked as he caught up with Conrad again.

“Shadow Valley.”

“Are you sure?”

“There’s some fossils there he promised to show Ty. I’m guessing he took her in that direction.”

Both men were silent as they rode ahead. After awhile, Wade signaled to stop.

Conrad looked around. “What’s wrong?”

“The tracks have disappeared.”

Conrad looked to the ground. “He went off the path somewhere behind us.”

Both men spread out, each looking for where Adams turned off the trail.

“Conrad,” Wade called out a few minutes later.

Conrad joined Wade, who was looking at the ground.

“Toni’s flute.” Conrad looked from the crushed flute to the direction she was obviously now taking.

“What’s in that direction?” Wade asked.

“There’s a line shack a ways down.” Conrad turned west. “I

know a shortcut we can take.”

Both men turned their mounts west. They rode for almost fifteen minutes when Conrad saw the line shack ahead, with two horses tied out front.

“Toni’s and Adams’s,” Conrad whispered as he pulled his horse to a stop, then dismounted, each man taking their rifle.

Both men left their horses a far ways down. They did not want the horses at the line shack to catch the scent of their horses and alert Adams. Crouching low, they dodged between bush and rock as they moved closer to the shack.

They knew they lost their element of surprise when they heard the window break.

“Adams,” Wade shouted as he peeked out from behind the rock. “This is Marshal Wade. Throw out your guns and come out. We can end this peacefully.”

Both men ducked as two shots ricocheted off the boulders.

Wade turned to Conrad. “See if you can get over to that side. And when you shoot, shoot high. I don’t want to hit Mrs. Logan.”

Conrad looked at his friend. “I would appreciate if you didn’t hit her either.”

Before Wade could respond, Conrad rolled on the ground away from Wade. As another shot kicked up the dirt beside him, Wade fired a shot into the shack. As Conrad made a run for the other boulder, he fired two more shots, making sure he kept his aim high.

Conrad reached the boulder and positioned himself. The next several minutes, all he could hear was the sound of gunfire.

The sound of the next shot caught his attention.

Adams had a rifle.

He kept his head down as several more shots nicked the rock in front of him. With a rifle, accuracy was increased greatly, and at a greater distance. He took a look at Wade to see what he was planning.

Wade began to signal to him when he heard Toni scream.

Chapter 56

“You’ll be fine,” Adams said as he had her sit down, then tied her hands behind her. “I’m sure your friends will be here shortly.”

“And if they’re not?”

“Let’s think positively about this situation. I am.”

With a final pull of the rope, Adams straightened up and headed for the door. “I’m sorry about taking your horse—”

Adams stopped at the window, then darted behind the wall. Slowly looking out the window, he saw two men, low to the ground, taking their position behind large boulders.

“Conrad,” he whispered as he identified one of the men. He was sure the other was the Marshal Tyler had mentioned.

Conrad was here, already? She thought.

With his attention at the window, Toni twisted her hands, trying to get loose. But the rope would not budge.

For the past fifteen minutes of riding, Toni’s anger had been building. The more she thought of Adams and his hypocritical kindness, the more she thought of the many people who put their trust in him. Even she had fallen for it.

Was he even a Preacher?

Mrs. Baines had confided in him.

Mike had joked with him.

Tyler even liked him.

Then she had a terrible thought.

What if she had been inside when they rode up? Would Adams have taken Tyler, or Dana? Mike would not have been difficult to deal with.

She thought of how scared Tyler would have been. Or Dana. She was only fourteen, but she was still a beautiful young woman. Would she have been assaulted?

Would he have hurt either one of them?

When his horse caught a stone and started limping, Toni smiled.

What did they call it?

Poetic justice!

A few miles ahead, they had found this line shack. By the time they reached it, Adams's horse could barely walk. Toni knew he was going to take hers. There was nothing else for him to do.

"Inside," he ordered as he dismounted.

The furnishings were simple: two cots, two chairs, one table, a fireplace with a dutch-oven hanging on a swing arm. A few pans, plates, silverware, cups and a coffeepot sat on a shelf on the back wall. A few canned jars of fruit and various other items lined the shelf above it, along with several large containers containing, she guessed, beans and coffee.

Next to the fireplace was a neat stack of wood and kindling. Leaning against this stack of wood, a broken chair rested.

Enough for a ranch hand to weather out a bad storm.

"Sit down," Adams ordered as he pulled some rope from his jacket.

Again, she thought of Tyler. How easily Adams could have taken him instead of her if they had rode in a minute or two later.

She tried several times to free her hands, but the rope was too tight.

The window broke as Adams hit his gun against a pane, giving him a clear shot.

"Adams? This is Marshal Wade. Throw out your guns and come out. We can end this peacefully."

Adams answered with two shots in their direction. She notice Adams held his colt and a rifle. She never saw him with the rifle.

He must have hidden it under his saddle blanket.

Adams looked out the window, then fired another shot.

An answering rifle shot broke another window pane and shattered one of the canning jars on the wall.

Toni jerked her head down and to the left, trying to stay out of the line of fire. A few more bullets shattered the wall behind her when she realized, all the shots were high.

They must be afraid of hitting me.

Toni knew that if and when they had an opportunity to shoot Adams, they would take it. Hopefully, she would not be directly behind him.

Toni listened to the exchange of gunfire, a pause, then more gunfire.

Relaxed as she was at the moment, she noticed the rope around her wrists were not as tight. In fact, she could almost slip one hand free.

Trying to keep her muscles relaxed, she wriggled her hands back and forth, feeling the rope as it moved from her wrist to her palm.

Adams had already reloaded his colt. Now he shot his last bullet from the smaller weapon. Putting the colt back in the holster, he took the rifle and aimed several shots at the men.

Adams went from one side of the window to the other, scanning the area. He was focused on the fight.

Toni felt her hand finally slip through the rope. She looked at Adams, then pulled the rope off her other hand. Keeping her hands behind her, she debated what to do next. While he was on the far side of the window, she was in his peripheral line of vision. If she moved, he would see her.

She waited till he moved to the other side, his back to her. When he did, she slowly went to the fireplace and grabbed the dutch-oven. She knew she needed to hurt him immediately. Otherwise, he would quickly overpower her, and she would be right back in the same situation.

Adams was concentrating on the scene outside as she tip-toed behind him. With her eyes keeping aim at his right arm, she pulled the pot back as far as possible, then swung with all her might. As she hit him, she screamed.

All her frustrations at what he did, and rage at what he could have done, were in that swing.

Adams yelled at the impact, dropping his rifle as he rolled on the floor, trying to protect his injured arm.

Toni's fingers let go of the pot as it rolled away to the opposite corner. Looking around, she grabbed the largest piece of the broken chair, then turned and hit Adams again as he began to rise.

"How dare you lie to me!" she screamed as she hit him again on his right arm.

She swung the piece of wood again, hitting him on his shoulder. "How many people have you stole from?"

She hit his left hand as he tried to protect his head. "Did you even think of their families?"

She hit his injured right arm. "Mothers,—"

Adams tried to roll away. Another swing hit him on his back. "—wives,—"

She hit him on his leg. "—sisters,—"

She hit him on his back again. "—all waiting to hear from their loved ones!"

Toni heard the door swing open, saw two shadows fall across Adams as he rolled toward them. She raised the broken chair, taking aim again when Conrad caught her hands in his.

Her eyes went from Adams to him, her breathing labored.

"He could have taken Ty, or Dana," she whispered as her shoulders slumped, the fight suddenly leaving her.

What frightened her the most, Conrad realized, was the thought of the loss of her child, or his.

If he had any doubts before about this woman, they disappeared at that moment. He removed the broken piece of chair still clutched in her hands.

"We have him now. And he will never hurt anyone again."

Toni laid her head on Conrad's shoulder as she tried to

control her breathing.

Adams groaned as he tried to double over. She noticed he was bleeding from several cuts on his face and arms.

“Well,” Wade calmly stated as he rested his rifle in his arms, surveying the scene before him. “I would say she has definitely put the fear of God in him.”

Chapter 57

Toni followed Conrad as he walked around the front yard.

“We should be ready to drive the herd north next week,” he spoke out loud.

Toni nodded her head. “And how long will you be gone?”

“About two months. Maybe less. We have five Forts we’re stopping at to deliver the cattle and horses.”

“You’ll be busy,” she admitted.

“I’m looking into buying a new purebred bull from Clearwater.”

“That’s a ways away.”

“Yea, but if what I’m hearing about this bull is right, the herd will greatly improve, in more ways than one.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Toni nodded her head again as she looked up to the sky, enjoying the silence.

“The night is so beautiful,” she whispered. “I always enjoy looking at the stars. It’s like they hold a secret, and they’re winking at me.”

Conrad looked up, then at her.

“Toni,” he began, then took a deep breath. “Let’s have a seat,” he said as he directed her to the tack box against the barn. Toni sat down as Conrad paced a few times. Then he surprised

her by pulling another box across from her and sat on it.

“I want to tell you a story.”

Toni tilted her head. “A story?”

Conrad smiled. “Yeah.”

Toni placed her hands in her lap. “Ok.”

“Once upon a time, there lived a man who was bitter at life. He had such great dreams when he was young. But like many dreams, they fell through.

“Feeling he had no reason to stay, and angry at the direction his life was taking, he left his new friends and home and decided to wander around and see this great land.

“He found numerous jobs: he was a miner, a ranch hand, shotgun rider for a stage, even a Deputy Marshal. There were things he had done he was not particularly proud of. But he reasoned, it was his job to protect the stage line, or his job to protect the people.”

Conrad took a deep breath as he continued.

“Then he discovered he had a daughter, a beautiful daughter who wanted to live with him. He reclaimed the land he abandoned years ago and tried to make up for the lost years without her.

“Two and a half years later, a woman literally fell into his arms.”

Conrad smiled. “He would like to say she fell from heaven, but in truth, she actually fell from a tree.”

Toni tried to hide her giggle.

“She was stubborn,” he continued, “but soon, he began to realize how special she really was.”

He turned and pointed toward the porch.

“One night, right over there, he decided he wanted to know this woman. Really know her. But he knew first, she needed to know some things about him, things he had not told another person. So, he opened his heart about his past. She listened patiently, and to his surprise, did not judge him.

“That was the first time he considered a life with someone else, a life maybe with her. And he suspected the feeling was mutual.”

He smiled at a memory. "She even helped him understand his daughter. In truth, the more he learned about her, the more he knew he wanted her in his life.

"But, it was not until she had been kidnapped that he knew for sure. He was so scared, his heart literally ached. When he found her, her concern was not only for herself or her son, but for his daughter as well."

Conrad looked up to see her reaction so far, then took a deep breath, collecting his thoughts to continue.

"A few days later on a night when the sky was clear and the stars were unusually bright, he took her for a walk. He sat her down and told her how he felt. In fact, it was right here," he pointed to where they were sitting, then looked straight into her eyes, "that he asked her, 'Will you marry me?'"

Toni's eyes were misty as she smiled.

"Yes," she answered, her voice just above a whisper.

Smiling, Conrad stood and opened his arms, closing them around this special woman as he kissed her, this woman he loved so much.

They sat side by side as they talked.

"I would marry you before I left, but the new Preacher is not due back here for three months."

"You'll be gone for two of them."

"True. I want you make the house your own while I'm gone. I want you to feel like you belong here."

"I already do."

"You know what I mean."

Toni nodded her head. "I won't change it too much. I want you to recognize your own place when you return."

Conrad leaned over and kissed her again.

"When I come back, I'll bunk with the men until the wedding." He turned and looked at her. "I'll have no gossip of impropriety. Besides, I think we'll be busy."

Toni looked up. "Oh?"

"I think the men and I will be building a small house, just over there."

Toni looked in the direction Conrad was pointing. "A

house?”

“If I’m reading the signs right, Sam will be needing another place.”

Toni smiled as she finally caught on.

“I have noticed he’s been spending most of his evenings sitting out back with Mrs. Baines.”

“Well, at least they both will stay on. I would hate it if either of them left.”

“Me too.”

Toni leaned her forehead against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her.

She smiled as she held his arm tight. “Thank you.”

He turned to look at her again. “For what?”

“For the lovely story.”

“Oh. Well, I know how much you like stories.”

“I do. And I will remember and treasure that story all my life.”

Chapter 58

With the curtain slightly pulled back, Michael sat at the window, watching as his sister and Conrad were talking. He could not hear what they were saying, but he was hoping Conrad finally asked her to marry him.

His family had given Toni plenty of time to mourn Wayne's death. Toni needed someone to look after her and Tyler, someone she could look after. Wayne would have wanted that.

The three of them had been friends since they day they met.

He remembered when he realized that Wayne was interested in Toni.

Michael had laughed.

After all, we *were* talking about his sister.

But Wayne did not think the situation was funny. He had a hard time trying to explain to ma about the sudden bruises on his face that day. Looking back, he was sure his pa knew even then.

Wayne had been good for Toni.

It was difficult when they both moved away. Ma was so distressed, wondering how she was getting along. Did they run across Indians or bandits? Were they able to buy a decent piece of land with what money Wayne had saved up? Were they eating enough?

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

Then she started worrying about children. If in time Toni was expecting, would there be someone nearby? A medical doctor? Or at least a midwife? How primitive was this place they had moved to?

He never told Toni how worried ma had been.

Conrad was a good man. Like many other men, he had a past he tried to shield from other people, especially his daughter.

Michael smiled as he leaned back in his chair, letting the curtain fall back in place. He had been surprised to learn that Conrad had been a U.S. Marshal before. He had never considered that. But it explained the way he thought, the way he carried himself.

After he had worked for Conrad for a few months, he began wondering if Toni would like him. Feeling that Toni had had plenty of time to mourn Wayne, he began wondering how to get her out for a visit. Burning the bunkhouse down and breaking his leg was not how he planned it, but it had worked out in the end.

He knew when Toni learned about the mishap, she would try to make it right. It was the way pa had been taught. It was the way they had been taught.

He worried the first week when she had left. Would she just settle the debt and then return home, without getting to know the man? He had kept his fears and expectations to himself.

When they received her letter saying she would be staying on longer than expected and requesting some of the extra men come down and work for Conrad, he knew there was a chance.

Ma and pa would like Conrad. He had the same qualities he saw in his pa.

Bringing Tyler down was a good plan. He knew if Toni was worried about her son, she would not allow herself to get to know Conrad.

With a satisfied sigh, he looked out the window again. Toni and Conrad were still talking. He saw the smile on his sister's face.

It was good to see her really smile again.

Chapter 59

With a surprisingly steady arm, Conrad held Toni's right hand, a sense of pride at the woman standing beside him. Trimmed in ivory lace, her dress was simple. A short veil covered her face, almost touching the small bouquet of wildflowers in her left hand.

Beside him stood Tyler, looking serious as he held his mother's new wedding ring.

Beside Toni stood Dana, dressed in a similar dress. Dana leaned forward slightly to look at him, giving him a smile when he looked her way. Conrad smiled back, then caught Toni's smiling glance. Without thinking, he winked at her.

He heard Dana giggle as everyone turned to the preacher when he began,

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today. . .”

Chapter 60

Surrounded by family and friends, Toni enjoyed her wedding day. Her family had come, and she was proud to walk down the aisle holding her father's arm.

Her mother and father had heartily approved of Conrad. And Tyler already thought the world of him.

Dana was growing into such a beautiful young woman. It would not be long before she also made her own family. Conrad may not want to see it yet, but it would happen.

Toni was surprised when Conrad handed her a box.

"It's your wedding gift," he said as he kissed the top of her head.

She looked at the box, then to him. "But, you already gave me a present two days ago."

"That was not your *wedding* gift."

Toni's eyes widened. "It wasn't?"

"No. I would have given it to you no matter what."

Toni remembered opening the envelope Conrad had handed her two days ago.

"For you," he had simply said.

She had looked at him, looking for the twinkle in his eye. It was there.

“I... don’t...” she began.

“Just open it.”

Toni opened the large envelope, then looked at the several pieces of paper inside. They looked important, almost legal. She quickly glanced at the papers, then looked at Conrad, who was smiling at her.

Taking another look, she tried to understand what the papers were for.

One was a legal paper, declaring a partnership in the Hughes Shipping Line between Wayne Logan and Stewart Hughes. It had been signed and dated over seven years ago.

Several pages were the terms of the contract.

“I don’t understand,” she said as she looked from one page to another. “Wayne was no longer a partner in this business.”

“He was hoping to get out,” Conrad clarified. “You yourself said he was going to look into another shipping business.”

“I thought he did.”

“He probably did look into some. He realized this was a business that would continue to grow. But he never got a chance to dissolve his partnership with Hughes Shipping.”

Toni looked up to Conrad. “You mean he died *before* he got out?”

Conrad nodded his head.

“How did you...? I mean, how...”

“After you told me your story, I had Michael send a letter back to your father. I had my suspicions, so I asked him to search Wayne’s belongings.”

“What made you suspect the contract was still valid?”

“Well, Stewart was pressing for a marriage. Mind you, I don’t blame the fellow. But there were several things that didn’t add up. Like Stewart constantly following you. And your house being ransacked.”

“You think he was looking for this?”

“I think so. He knew as long as you had the contract, you held equal rights to the company. And equal profits.”

“But, Wayne suspected he was stealing from the company.”

“He was. Your father made plans to audit the company, and

found a lot of money is missing. Stewart just pocketed it over the years. But he was afraid you would make your claim to your share of it, and ruin him.”

“All this time, I thought Wayne already dissolved the partnership.”

“That was what Stewart was hoping you would keep believing. But he needed to be sure. He was hoping to destroy the contract before you found it. Without the contract, you would have no claim.”

Toni had looked at the contract, still confused. “But where was it? I never saw it.”

Conrad had smiled as he rocked on the balls of his feet. “You remember a drawing of Tyler?”

“The one a friend of Wayne’s did when Tyler was a baby!”

“Yea. Your father found it behind the picture. Wayne wanted to make sure you and Ty were provided for.”

Toni took a moment to digest this information. “So, all these years, Stewart only wanted to marry me because he wanted this contract!”

Conrad did not look away. He knew she would be hurt when she realized this part of the story. “He was hoping to gain full ownership again.”

For a moment, Toni was so angry, she literally could not see straight. She held the contract with both hands, about to shred the document into pieces, when she suddenly thought better.

“I want nothing to do with that man,” she almost screamed. It took less than a minute for her to calm down. “But, Wayne wanted it for Tyler.” She looked at Conrad. “Does that mean I have to work with him?”

Conrad’s face hardened, his voice becoming firm. “No. Definitely not! Your father is going to have someone he knows run the business for awhile. You will eventually need to sit with him and figure out what you want to do. The business is very profitable. And, according to your father, there’s potential for expansion. But you don’t have to decide anything for awhile. Your father said when you’re ready, you can get together and decide.”

Toni placed the papers back inside the envelope. "Thank you for what you did."

"Consider it Wayne's wedding gift to you and Ty."

That was two days ago.

"*This* is your wedding gift," Conrad brought her attention back. "From me."

Toni slowly opened the wedding gift from Conrad.

Carefully unwrapping the tissue, she was speechless as she looked at the beautiful wooden flute resting in the box.

"I know how much the one your father gave you meant," Conrad softly spoke beside her. "And, I enjoy listening to you play."

With tears in her eyes, she hugged her husband.

"I gather you like it?" he almost laughed as he held her tight.

"There is no better gift you could have given me," she cried.

"Ma?"

Toni wiped her eyes as she turned to her son. "Yes?"

Tyler eyed his mother, noticing the tears in her eyes. "Are you mad?"

Toni smiled as she knelt before her son. "No, I'm very happy."

"Oh." She was not surprised when he asked: "Are you gonna cut the cake?"

Mrs. Baines made the wedding cake. And like most things Mrs. Baines made, it was delicious. Conrad helped Toni cut it, then gently fed a small piece to his bride as family and friends gathered around and cheered them on.

"Such a lovely ceremony," she heard several people comment. She was glad everyone was having a wonderful time.

Toni and Conrad watched as Tyler and Dana talked with Mike, who was finally out of his crutches.

"My, how things have changed," Toni whispered as she thought of Tyler and herself, alone for so long.

"Yeah," Conrad watched Dana. "She grew up before I had a chance to take it all in."

"That's the way it happens. Seems like almost yesterday when Ty was born."

“Only yesterday when I saw her for the first time.”

“Before I knew it, he was crawling.”

“She reminded me of myself, when I had such dreams.”

“I don’t think he ever walked. He just started running.”

Both paused as they each pondered on their own lives.

“Sometimes,” Conrad thought out loud, “I wonder what it would be like if we had made different decisions.”

“Very different. I may never have come here. And I might have married...someone else.”

Conrad looked around. “Next week, we’ll do this all again when Sam and Gladys get married.”

Toni shook her head. “I’m having a hard time calling her Gladys and not Mrs. Baines.”

Conrad stood and held out his hand as the music started up. “Dance with me.”

Toni placed her hand in his. He turned and stepped close to her. “You fit just right in my arms,” he whispered.

As he led her around the dance floor, she rested her head on his shoulder.

Conrad enjoyed dancing with his wife. It was one of the few times he could touch his wife in public without public censor.

He loved everything about Toni. He had not realized how incomplete he had felt all these years. He remembered the Preacher’s words only a short time ago:

“When God made Adam, he was perfect. Adam had all the characteristics that would make him happy, complete. When God made Eve, his wife, he took a rib from Adam and along with it, the female characteristics and qualities that were originally in him. We know this because the Bible says at Genesis *From man*, woman was created. When God presented these back to him in the form of a perfect woman for his wife, he was again complete. His wife made him whole.”

When Conrad looked at Toni, he did not see all he had missed, but instead he saw all his future could hold.

“And what are you looking at so intently?” she asked.

“I’m looking into your eyes.”

“Really? And what do you see?”

He paused, tilting his head slightly as he thought. “Forever,” he finally confessed.

“Forever?”

“Uh-huh. I see us together, forever.” He smiled as they circled the dance floor. “And you know what?”

“What?”

“I like that you’re in it.”

Toni smiled. “I’m glad.”

“Me too.” He paused as the music came to a stop. “I like that.”

Toni looked up, loving the way he looked at her. “What?”

“Seeing forever in your eyes.”

Conrad kissed his new wife.

“You know, I think Ty was right,” Toni whispered as she leaned against him, loving the smell of him.

“About what?”

Toni let her gaze roam from his freshly shaved face to his newly cleaned and polished boots. “The knight *does* look good in cowboy boots!”

A Knight in Cowboy Boots

A note from the author:

Thank you for downloading this free e-book. I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

I would love to hear what your favorite scene was, or your favorite character.

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Again, thank you,

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