



*STEAM!*  
*ROMANCE AND RAILS*

A large, central image of a person with long hair, wearing a dark cowboy hat, a dark vest over a light-colored long-sleeved shirt, and dark pants. The person is seen from the back, holding two pistols in their hands. The background is a dramatic, cloudy sky with a bright light source, possibly the sun or moon, creating a silhouette effect. At the bottom of the image, the dark silhouette of a steam locomotive and its train cars is visible against a dark blue background.

HER  
BODYGUARD  
E.E. BURKE

# HER BODYGUARD

STEAM! ROMANCE AND RAILS, BOOK 1



E.E. BURKE

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E.E. Burke

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## CHAPTER 1



*March 1, 1870*

*Former Cherokee Neutral Lands, Southeast Kansas*

*H*ell must be like this. Not lit with blazing fires, but cold and gray. As barren as the desolate prairie. Out here, even the wind howled like a deranged demon.

Buck drew the blanket tighter around him and flexed his fingers inside the leather gloves to get the blood flowing. Nothing would warm the persistent chill in his bones, which had gotten worse as he'd headed north through Indian Territory into Kansas.

Ice coated endless mounds of switch grass and the stunted trees so common in this part of the country. It was a far cry from the verdant hills and lush forests he'd grown up with, which weren't all that far east of here although it seemed a world apart.

The saddle creaked as he stood in the stirrups and stretched to his full height. *Nope*. The view was no better from up here. Not a house or barn in sight, or they were invisible in the poor light. He swore, his breath a white cloud. The wind snatched it away.

“Girard can’t be far,” he muttered. “Got to be road around here somewhere.” He patted Goliath’s neck, glad for the company of his horse. He had few acquaintances, even fewer friends, and none who would risk their necks for another man’s cause. In fact, he wouldn’t have risked his own neck had the plea not come from his only remaining kinsman. At this point, however, freezing to death seemed more likely than being lynched.

The dark shape of something that didn’t resemble grass mounds or scrub brush caught his eye. He touched his heels to Goliath’s side. As he rode closer, he could make out a black buggy slumped to one side. It had lost a rear wheel.

A horse remained hitched to the lame conveyance. Next to it, someone huddled in a cloak. From the size and general shape, he guessed a woman. He didn’t see a man with her, or anyone else, for that matter. Out here was a dangerous place for a lady to be alone, especially in this weather and with daylight fading.

Buck set Goliath into a fast trot. He rode past a wheel caught in the brush. Odd, he’d rarely seen one fly off like that. Generally, the metal rim popped or a spoke snapped. The axle nut must’ve been loose when she’d started out. She was damn lucky the buggy hadn’t rolled over and crushed her.

Goliath whinnied excitedly.

The other horse threw its head up and answered.

Its owner whirled around. A hood drawn low shadowed her expression, but it was clear enough by her reaction that he’d startled her.

“Looks like you could use a hand,” Buck offered.

The woman made a dash toward the buggy. At her sudden movement, the mare shied away and then came up on its back legs with a squeal.

The buggy rocked.

“Look out!” Buck yelled.

The crazy woman grabbed the seat handle and hoisted herself into the compartment. Scared or unbalanced? She'd be just as dead if that horse pulled the contraption over on top of her.

"Get out of there! Your horse is gonna bolt!" His warning got lost in the wind.

Buck threw himself out of the saddle. He dropped the reins on the ground, and in a few long strides, he'd reached her. As the vehicle rocked, he grabbed her around the middle and hauled her away from danger. "What the hell are you doing?"

She twisted in his arms with a furious yowl. "Get your hands off me."

The buggy gave a hop.

"Quit screeching, lady. You're scaring your horse—"

Pain blistered Buck's cheek.

"Ow!"

"Let me go!" She went for his face again with her claws.

"Stop that." He blocked her strikes, yet somehow managed to keep a hold on her to prevent her from going back to the buggy. "I'm trying to help —"

Her teeth sank through the leather glove into his finger.

"Blazes!" Buck yanked his hand away. *Enough.* He locked his fingers around her flailing arm, jerked her to him, and pinned her head flat against his coat with one hand.

Her furious screams became muffled growls. She lashed out with her legs, which dangled above the ground. Thank God her skirts were in the way or she would've hammered his shins. "Stop fighting me, you loony woman."

"I...can't breathe," she rasped.

He checked the strength of his hold. Large as he was, and with her no bigger than a minute, he could easily break her.



As he drew her away from him with a firm grip on both of her arms, the hood of her cloak fell back, releasing a mass of honey-streaked hair. Her eyes widened, the black centers nearly eclipsing the lighter color.

*Terrified.* He sometimes had that effect on folks, though generally not when he was trying to be helpful.

“Easy now,” he said softly. “I’m setting you down. Don’t fly at me with those claws. Your horse about pulled that buggy on top of you. That’s why I grabbed you.”

“Y-you want to h-help me?” she stammered through chattering teeth.

“That was the plan.” He picked up his blanket from where it had fallen during their tussle and flung it around her before he set off to retrieve her horse. That buggy wasn’t going anywhere, and the frightened creature would get hurt if it wasn’t released.

Buck approached the nervous mare with a soft shush. He laid his hands on its quivering withers. After a moment, the horse stilled and let him release it from the buggy. Sleet peppered the brim of his hat, an icy wind about took it away. They were in danger of freezing if he didn’t find them shelter soon.

He walked the bay mare over to where the woman waited. She’d inched closer to the buggy and had started to rummage around again.

“Unless you’ve got an axle nut in there, we can’t fix that wheel. Can you ride?”

She spun with a tiny pistol clutched in her hands. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”

Buck’s pulse kicked up a notch. Her hands shook so badly she might actually fire the damn thing before he could talk some sense into her. He kept his tone calm and reasonable. “You intend to stay out here?”

Her chin came up. “I intend to take *my* horse.”

Did she think he’d steal the nag? This damn foolishness had gone on for too long.

Buck offered her the reins. When she reached out to take them, he clamped down on her wrist and nabbed the gun. Then he hauled the reluctant damsel over to where he'd left Goliath.

The stallion had remained, as trained, right where the reins had been dropped.

Buck didn't trust the nutty woman to ride by herself. Frightened as she was, she'd race off and end up breaking her neck. He looped her mare's long reins around his saddle horn.

"Wait!" she burst out. "I have money. I can pay you."

"What are you clattering about? I don't want your money." Buck didn't add that if he'd planned to rob her, he would have done it by now and been gone. "We've got to find shelter before we freeze to death. You live nearby?"

The woman stared at him with rounded eyes. Was she so addled she couldn't understand what he was asking? Maybe the cold had gotten to her.

"Fine. We'll head down that road you were on." He lifted her up onto Goliath and mounted behind her, then managed to get her situated sideways in front of him. Thank the saints she didn't go into convulsions.

The ends of her cloak snapped in the wind. She shuddered so hard it made *his* teeth rattle. He opened his greatcoat to share his warmth. She burrowed into his chest like a baby rabbit. Her vulnerability tugged at his heart. Wouldn't kill him to offer her a little comfort.

He took the reins in one hand and curled his other hand around her shoulder. "Warmer now?"

She nodded.

"Where do you live?"

"I, we have a farm. I'll see to it you're well compensated, if you take me there."

So, she was married. No surprise. With so few women out here, even a crazy one would be snatched up fast. Especially one who smelled this

sweet, with soft curves in all the right places.

“How far is it?”

“Up the road.”

“How far? A long way or a short distance?”

“I...I’m not sure exactly.”

Buck snorted with disbelief. “You don’t know where you live? Lady, we can’t wander around. It’s getting dark, and it’s freezing out here.”

“We can make it into Girard. It may be closer.”

*May be?* That was about as helpful as *up the road*.

He peered in the direction she’d indicated and gave a grumbled assent. He had to go into Girard anyway. Although he wasn’t sure they’d make it before night set in and the temperatures dropped even lower. “Anything else nearby?”

“Our farm—”

“The one you can’t find?” Buck heaved a sigh and nudged Goliath onto the road. “We’ll go along. See if it pops up.”

According to his cousin’s letter, thousands of settlers had poured into the former Indian lands. If so, where were they? Did they all live in town?

This desolate strip of land might be reserved for the railroad. The exorbitant price they’d put on godforsaken wilderness was ludicrous. Why anyone would want to farm it was also a mystery. But it didn’t matter what he thought about digging in the dirt. Sean had settled here. He’d worked the land, and now the railroad’s owner—rich bastard—wanted to cheat him out of it. That was reason enough to stop the thieving varmint.

Buck kept his head down so the wind wouldn’t snatch his hat. The woman turned her face into his vest, as if she might need to warm her nose. He cradled her closer. The warmth spreading through him wasn’t only from the heat of their bodies. It came from someplace deep inside, a part of him he’d thought was long dead.

Concern for another living creature, that's all it was. Nothing more. He didn't give a tinker's damn about this woman or anybody else, except his family. What was left of it.

Visibility got worse by the minute as dusk set in. When a structure appeared in the distance, he put the stallion on a path in that direction.

"Over there. That looks like a barn."

She peeked out from beneath her hood. "Yes. It's abandoned. The house was burned down some time ago. We can't stop there."

The hell they couldn't.

"As long as there's a roof and four walls, we're stopping."



After the big man dismounted, Amy took the chance to escape. While he wrestled the barn door open, she swung her leg over the saddle and put her heels to the stallion's sides.

The horse didn't budge.

"Come on, you." She kicked harder.

"He's trained not to respond to anyone but me. Though if you annoy him too much, he might bite," the man said calmly. Then he hauled her off the horse, none too gently.

He shifted her into his arms with the impersonal attention he'd give a sack of flour, toted her into the barn and dumped her unceremoniously onto a pile of musty straw. Then he vanished into the darkness, taking his warmth with him.

The wind shrieked in a wild tantrum. Boards creaked and moaned. The stranger's rustling movements indicated he was still close by, perhaps getting the horses settled into stalls.

Amy stared blindly into the darkness and hugged the blanket while she shivered from cold and bone-deep fear. Maybe the towering stranger wasn't

her mysterious assailant. He'd held her close to warm her. He hadn't killed her when she'd pulled a gun on him. Instead, he'd tricked her and disarmed her. Humiliating, but it could've gone so much worse.

Then again, he might be trying to gain her cooperation so she wouldn't run. Now that he had her tucked away in a deserted barn, he'd abuse her before he killed her.

Her heart hammered in her chest.

If the Land League hadn't sent this frighteningly large fellow after her, where had he come from? He didn't look like any farmer she'd met. Not with that repeater rifle holstered on his saddle and those big revolvers strapped to his hips, not to mention the sheathed knife. Men who meant no harm weren't armed like border ruffians.

On the other hand, the settlers in these parts regularly carried weapons because of increased violence.

Was that why Fletcher hadn't made it back to town to escort her to their friend's house? He might've been waylaid by thugs working for the Land League or gotten caught unawares at the change in the weather. The storm had moved in so quickly.

Her nerves jumped at the scrape of a match. A light flared. Amy blinked as the stranger approached with a flickering taper. He wasn't only well armed, he was also well prepared. She hadn't thought to bring along candles.

Her gaze traveled from scuffed, square-toed boots up long legs encased in checkered gray trousers of the California style favored by cowboys. A heavy greatcoat hung past his knees. Around his neck, he wore a faded bandana. His hat looked older than his shoes, and its brim shadowed his expression. He might be one of the countless drifters who routinely passed through the area, hoping to find work.

"At least we'll have some light." His low, raspy drawl had the distinct quality of a regional accent she hadn't heard in a while. Most of the men

who had moved to Kansas recently were from places like Indiana, Ohio and Illinois.

He secured the candle to the underside of a bucket and set it nearby. “Careful not to knock this over. I’d build a fire, but with all this dry straw this place would go up like a torch.”

Why did he feel the need to explain as one would to a child or a very old person?

“My mental faculties aren’t so deficient that I’d set the barn on fire.” She tried to adjust the blanket more securely, but her numb fingers wouldn’t obey and it kept slipping off.

The stranger knelt and removed his hat. Flaxen hair fell in tangled waves past his collar. The candlelight revealed a ruggedly handsome face in sore need of a shave. Brown whiskers bristled on his lean cheeks, and a tawny mustache all but concealed his mouth. But it was his eyes that captured her. A color somewhere between blue and gray, and pale as a washed-out sky.

“Give me your hands.” He stripped off his gloves as he issued the command. Rather than wait to see whether she’d obey, he took her cold fingers and chafed them between his calloused palms. “How come you’re not wearing gloves?”

Amy bristled at his tone. He’d treated her like a simpleton.

“I had need of my fingernails.” She didn’t explain the problem with the frozen harness strap, which had necessitated the removal of her gloves to pick away the ice. No doubt she’d dropped them during their struggle, and had been too flustered to retrieve her muff. Not that he would’ve let her go back to the buggy after she pulled a gun on him.

His wintery eyes narrowed. Along his cheekbone, a crusted line of dried blood marked a scratch she’d put there. Regret tightened her throat. She shouldn’t have made it sound as if she’d intended to hurt him. She didn’t

even remember doing it. All she recalled was the sheer terror that had overcome her when he grabbed her.

He released her hands. A moment later, he began to unbutton his vest and shirt.

Her heart fluttered with renewed fear. “What...what are you doing?”

“Ravishing your frozen fingers.” With no more explanation, he captured her hands, threaded them through the opening in his shirt and sandwiched her palms against his chest.

His body radiated heat like a furnace. Soon, her fingers began to burn.

With a moan, she tried to pull away.

He held fast. “It’s good if you feel pain. That means you won’t lose your fingers.”

Lose her fingers? Frantic, she burrowed her numb fingertips through the crisp hair on his chest to the warm skin beneath.

His eyes widened a split second before his features turned to stone. She stilled her hands and the heat she’d borrowed went straight to her face. Hard muscles beneath her fingers flexed. Her body tingled in response.

With a horrified gasp, she yanked her hands away and tucked them under her arms. He hadn’t molested her yet, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t.

“I-I’m...warm enough,” she lied. After a moment, her teeth started chattering.

He reached over and snatched away the blanket.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked in protest.

“We need to get you warmed up.”

“If you t-take my blanket, how do you suggest I get warm?”

He grasped a handful of her damp cloak. “You won’t. Not if you stay in those wet clothes.”

Amy cursed her lapse in reason. Fear had rendered her senseless. “Yes, you’re right. I should’ve retrieved my valise. There is a dry outfit in there

—”

“Fair to say it ain’t dry any longer.” He snagged his saddlebag, thrust his hand inside to withdraw several items of clothing. “Here, put these on.”

She wrinkled her nose. He didn’t really believe she’d don his undergarments, did he?

He frowned at her and shook them.

*Yes, he did.* And she’d be a fool to refuse dry clothes. Perhaps his shirt over her underclothes, just until her other things dried out.

Before she could act, he plopped down, yanked her foot into his lap and began to undo the laces on her boot. His touch set off another bout of shivers that had nothing to do with the temperature of the air.

She jerked her foot out of his hands. “What are you doing?”

“Removing your wet boots since you seem too addled.”

“I am *not* addled.” She scooted back. “I can tend to myself, if you would be so kind as to give me some privacy.”

He stood, seemingly as tall as a mountain. “Get changed out of those damp clothes. Unless you’d rather have me take care of it for you.”



Buck strode over to where he’d stalled Goliath, anxious to get away from the all-too-appealing woman he’d rescued. He’d held her close enough to appreciate her sweet curves. Come to find out, her face was just as nice. Still, he hadn’t been prepared for the surge of lust when she’d splayed her fingers over his chest.

She’d felt something, too. He’d seen it in her eyes.

*And* she had pulled a gun on him, tried to steal his horse. She couldn’t be trusted. He would keep her safe, but he’d be damned if he let her turn him into a fool.



Inside the stall, he scooped up a handful of straw and began to dry the remaining dampness from the stallion's smoky coat. Goliath snorted and preened for the mare in the adjacent stall. Smitten from the first scent.

"You better behave," Buck whispered. "If she's like her owner, she'll kick you into next Sunday for messing with her."

The stallion whinnied.

"You're right. Might be worth it. Still, better not take the chance." Buck dropped the straw and wiped his dirty hand on his trousers. "Besides, she's none of my business."

*Untrue.* He had made that woman his business when he'd brought her in out of the cold.

He sighed and shook his head. They were stuck here for the night. But once he got her safely to wherever she was going, he would go find his cousin and focus on the only business he cared about—getting justice for his family.

From the other side of the stall came rustling noises. Had she changed or crawled away? She might try to escape. If she got lost out there, she'd freeze to death before morning.

He peeked over the wall.

She had her back to him. He couldn't see a thing below her neck because she'd stacked up bales of hay and hid behind it.

*Smart gal*—and not as crazy as he first thought.

Her green dress went over the rail of a stall, along with countless petticoats, each fancier than its neighbor. Lastly, she set aside a bedraggled headpiece too small to call a hat with plumes he was sure were peacock feathers.

He released a surprised breath, more intrigued than ever. With those fancy clothes, she could've walked right off a fashion plate in one of those ladies' magazines he'd seen in his stepfather's mercantile.

Who was she and what was she doing out here, smack dab in the middle of former Indian land? This place was still wild. Based on what Sean had reported, it would be getting a lot wilder. The settlers' dispute with the railroad had exploded into violence. If this woman's husband was involved, that might explain why she'd reacted with fear.

Buck's heart raced as she lifted her arms to shake out a glorious length of chestnut hair. The candle's light reflected the golden strands. He swallowed, hard. God, what he wouldn't give to run his fingers through those tresses. His mind conjured an image of the voluptuous beauty, stark naked, beckoning him to join her on his blanket.

He turned away and rested his arms on Goliath's withers. "Just my luck. I had to rescue a *Venus*," he muttered. "Why couldn't she be ugly and buck-toothed?"

"Sir?" Her voice drifted over, breathy and uncertain. "If you want to come back, I'm decent."

*Decent?* Sure she was, but those curves weren't, and no shirt of his was going to help.

He touched the scratch across his cheekbone. She'd claw his eyes out before he could see anything.

Maybe he should've announced his intentions before he'd grabbed her, but he'd been so shocked to see a woman out alone in this weather. Then, when that buggy had started to rock, well, he'd just leapt off his horse and raced to the rescue.

A wry smile twisted his lips. That little gal sure hadn't seen a white knight. Not that he was interested in being one.

Against his better judgment, he ventured back to where he'd left her in the straw, next to the bucket that held the candle. She had her legs tucked up beneath her with that scratchy blanket wrapped clear to her neck, clutched tight like she was afraid he might take it away.

His conscience tweaked him. He'd all but threatened to strip her if she didn't undress. It'd been too long since he'd been in the company of decent women. This would be an uncomfortable night for both of them if he didn't at least try to ease her fears.

He could think of one way that might work.

Buck unbuckled his gun belt, wrapped it around the guns and went down on one knee to carefully place the revolvers within her reach.

Her eyes followed his every move.

The Bowie knife went beside the holsters.

At last, her shoulders lowered and the tense expression softened. More than that, he could actually *feel* her distress drain.

Buck rocked back on his heels. It was the strangest thing, how he picked up on the ebb and flow of her emotions, which tugged at his own like the current in a river.

She offered a slight smile. "Thank you for saving me, Mr.—?"

"O'Connor," he blurted, absurdly pleased by the gratitude in her eyes. On second thought, he should've given her an alias. Still, it was unlikely she'd ever heard of him. He wasn't as well known as his friend Cole Younger.

"Couldn't let you turn into an icicle." His breath clouded the air. Come to think of it, this ramshackle barn was damn frigid. It offered shelter from the sleet, but did little to keep the cold out. "Here, let me pile up some of this hay. It'll block the drafts and keep you warm."

"What about you?" She hugged the blanket.

"Want my coat?" His hands went to the buttons, should've thought to offer it earlier.

Her eyes widened. "No, I wasn't implying that. I just thought *you* might be cold. We can share the hay."

For a moment, he was speechless. It'd been so long since anyone cared about his comfort, he hadn't expected it and didn't know how to respond.

He shrugged to hide how much her concern touched him. “Ah, don’t worry about me. You hungry?” He dug through his saddlebag for the last piece of jerky. “It’s not much, but it’ll take the edge off.”

“Thank you.” She gifted him with a smile that put a lump in his throat.

He sat back on one arm and tried his damndest not to look like an infatuated schoolboy. Instead of mooning over her, he ought to find out what he could about the local situation. Whatever she knew might come in handy when he finally met that troublemaking railroad promoter.

She bit off a small piece of jerky with perfect white teeth, chewed slowly and swallowed.

“So, you live out here, Mrs., uh...”

“Langford,” she finished.

He tried the name in his head. *Mrs. Langford*. Nope, he preferred *Venus*.

“Yes, I live...” Her voice trailed off and she lowered her lashes.

He leaned forward, worried. “Something wrong?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. O’Connor,” she said softly. “I wasn’t honest before. I don’t live around here. I was headed for a friend’s house before starting back to Fort Scott.”

That she’d fibbed about where she lived didn’t surprise him. She’d done it so he’d think her husband was nearby. But where she was going astonished him. “Fort Scott? That’s another two days’ ride.”

“By rail it’s only a couple of hours. But the line hasn’t reached Girard yet, so we have to go a few miles north to meet the workers’ train.”

“We?”

“My escort attended a meeting earlier today in Baxter Springs and didn’t make it back. We’d arranged to stay overnight at a friend’s farm, so I thought I’d meet him there.”

“Your husband *abandoned* you?”

Irritation flickered across her face. “He’s not my husband and he didn’t abandon me.”

“Why were you in Girard? From what I hear, it’s not exactly a safe place for a lady.”

She chewed the last bite before she responded. “I had business in town.”

“Business?”

Her lips sealed. Apparently, she didn’t wish to elaborate.

Just what kind of business would a wealthy lady have with a bunch of rowdy settlers? When he’d come up on her, she’d been terrified, even after he told her he was trying to help. Had even offered him money...

Buck smoothed his mustache with his thumb and forefinger as he mulled over her hesitation. His scalp began to tingle, a sure sign something wasn’t right. He draped an arm over his knee to appear casual. “You weren’t expecting a friend when I rode up. Are you in some kind of trouble?”

“Trouble is one way to put it.” She toyed with a curl at her cheek and didn’t meet his eyes. “I thought you were going to kill me.”

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## CHAPTER 2



“*K*ill you?” Buck released a weak laugh and scooted back to give her more room. Or maybe he was the one who needed the extra space. She couldn’t possibly know why he was here. And even if she did, she couldn’t think he was after *her*. “How’d I give you that idea?”

“The axle nut...” Her fingers, white as bone, clutched the edges of the blanket. “I believe it was tampered with, and that’s why the wheel came off. I assumed whoever had sabotaged my buggy followed me.”

“You sure it wasn’t just an accident?”

“I’ve had two other mishaps within the last two weeks, both under suspicious circumstances. The authorities attributed it to bad luck. But right after the second incident, I saw a man run away. Then when the wheel fell off...” Her expression grew pinched. “That’s one mishap too many to be considered ill fortune.”

The wind whistled through cracks in the boards, a sound that made Buck’s skin crawl. Or maybe it was her story. Or the thought he kept trying to dismiss. Could *she* have something to do with the reason he was here?

Why would the men who’d hired him want to hurt Venus? She looked about as dangerous as a six-week-old kitten.

Maybe it wasn't her they were after, but someone close to her. He picked up a piece of straw, twirled it between his fingers. "What about your husband? Does he have any enemies?"

"My husband?" Her eyes slid off to one side. "Ah, well, that's something else I failed to mention. I'm a widow."

Buck's gaze swept over the blanketed beauty in front of him. *A widow.* He pinched out a flare of interest. It didn't mean she was available, only that she wasn't married to the railroad promoter he was after, which was a relief.

"Because of my work, I presume." She rubbed her fingers together. After a moment, she pulled them inside the blanket.

"Your work?" he prodded.

"Among other things, I organize support for the immigration of young ladies out west to marry—"

"Somebody wants to kill you for *importing wives*?" Buck struggled to keep a straight face.

"No, Mr. O'Connor. They want to kill me because I dare to *dream*." She spoke with complete sincerity. "They fear I'll make a difference. Our program offers men the things they long for. Homes and families."

Buck relaxed. This had *nothing* to do with why he was here. Delivering brides, for Pete's sake. Who'd want to kill her for that? "Pardon me for saying, but that's an odd dream."

She drew back, appearing a tad wounded by his observation. "What's odd about wanting to make peoples' lives better? Lonely men need wives. Young women with no other prospects need hope, and the chance to have a family."

He held up his hand to stop her. "Fine, it's a nice idea." As far as dreams went. What did he know? He'd given up his dreams years ago. "I don't see how it could get you killed."

"Are you not from around here?" she asked.

He shook his head. It was the best way to answer her question without offering more information.

“Some men who’ve moved into the area aren’t interested in settling down. They’re greedy. Out for their own gain. They want to speculate on land. Grow rich from the railroad.”

“The railroad?” Buck frowned. How had she gone from murder to wives to the railroad? She jumped around more than a grasshopper.

“Let me get this straight. You want to bring in wives for the settlers who want them, but those who don’t want you to do it intend to stop you.”

“That’s right.”

*Thank the saints.* He liked simple explanations.

It all made sense now. She was a do-gooder. Like those temperance crusaders who went from town to town to pray in front of the saloons. They’d been attacked, drenched, some of them even assaulted. He admired stalwart women who put their beliefs on the line, and he respected Venus for her desire to make life better for these farmers—even if a shipment of brides wouldn’t fix the problem.

“Look, it’s not my place to tell you what to do. But you might reconsider your involvement in political matters if these bas—,” he caught himself. “If these bad men are trying to hurt you.”

“They are not just trying to hurt me. They want to stop me. But I won’t let them. I’ve *vowed* not to let them win. They care nothing about this land or the future of our state.” Her voice wavered and she got a tear in her eye.

Softhearted and hardheaded. Most definitely a crusader.

Before the war, he’d been like that. Full of fine ideals, but too stubborn to admit his faults or acknowledge his mistakes. Too blind to see how it would end. Unfortunately, it’d done worse than kill him.

What might happen to Venus if she’d tangled with a pack of scoundrels and gotten in over her head?



A protective urge welled up. He quashed it. *Hell no*, he would not get wrapped up with pure trouble in a pretty package, no matter how tempting. He'd come here for one reason and one reason only. To help his cousin fight a railroad. Venus and her problems weren't his concern.

Buck tried once more to reason with her: "I didn't say you had to stop doing good. I just said you ought to reconsider getting involved with these rowdy settlers. Maybe you can find someone to help you with your, uh, program."

She released a sigh into the cold air. "That's why I'm here. One of the farmers volunteered to head up the Immigration Society. I was supposed to meet him. He didn't show."

Once more, she adjusted the blanket, tucking the ends beneath her legs. Her lips had turned blue and she'd started shivering again.

"You're cold." He stood and stripped out of his overcoat.

She gave an emphatic shake of her head. "No. I don't want your coat."

"This here is thick wool. It'll warm you." He draped the greatcoat over her shoulders. "And I can pile up more hay."

"All right. As long as *you* don't get cold." Her lips curved in a wan smile. "The coat is very warm. Thank you."

She rubbed her finger over a dark area near the shoulder seam where captain's bars had been stripped off. "This is an officer's coat. Someone has removed the markings. Is it yours?"

Venus was a tad too perceptive. This wasn't the first time he'd donned a Federal uniform to fool potential enemies. In this case, he wanted folks to think he might be one of the many Union veterans who'd moved to the area.

He leaned back on his arms to put on like he wasn't particularly concerned about her astute observation. "Didn't steal it, if that's what you're asking."

"I didn't accuse you of anything." She tipped her head to one side. So, not suspicious, just curious. "If you aren't from around here, where are you

from, Mr. O'Connor?"

"Texas."

It was true as far as being his previous residence, not where he was from.

"That doesn't sound like a Texas drawl."

Again, she surprised him with her perceptiveness.

"Didn't say I was born there. Just worked there. Herded cattle."

"You do seem like a man used to taking charge. I wouldn't have guessed cows."

Buck lifted his shoulder in a nonchalant gesture, even though he was anything but. "Oh, I've done all kinds of things to keep food in my stomach, like most men."

"I see." She nodded.

He wondered just how much she did see.

"If you need work, I can find you a position. Tell me what you know how to do."

"What I know how to do?" If he offered to give her a demonstration, she'd probably slap him. "That's an awful long list. Not sure where to start."

"You could always start with the truth."

How had he missed the sharpness in those honeyed eyes? She'd ambushed him by looking so delicious.

He scrambled for cover behind a suggestive smirk. "Don't fret, Venus. I won't exaggerate my skills."

She drew back with a frown. "You forget yourself, sir."

No, he'd only forgotten to be careful.

"You said to be honest."

She cocked her head and took to studying him. As her gaze moved from his face down his body, his skin quivered as if she'd stroked it.

He struggled to maintain the cocky smile. It'd been a long time since he'd been with a woman this beautiful, and he was far too susceptible. "So, what do you see?"

"I see a clever man who ought to know better than to try to fool an intelligent woman."

The heat on his face melted his arrogant smile. *Hell's bells*. He hadn't blushed since he was twelve. "You see more than I thought," he muttered.

"Just because you've told me very little about yourself doesn't mean I can't deduce something of your character."

"My character?" He shook his head. She'd thrown him again. "You sure I have one?"

"Every man has character, good or bad. I think you mean, what do I make of yours?" She drew his coat closer, and her expression softened. "You have been kind and generous, and you haven't taken advantage in a situation where you clearly have the upper hand. Therefore, I can safely assume under that rough exterior beats the heart of a gentleman."

Buck tried to laugh. If she knew half of what he imagined doing with her, it would shatter her delusions. Still, she'd picked up enough to know he wouldn't act on his fantasies. She had also put her finger on the very thing he'd taken pride in before war and privation had turned him into an animal.

"Am I right about your honor, Mr. O'Connor?" The openness on her face made her look so young and vulnerable he couldn't hold back the answer she sought.

"Close enough." His voice came out rougher than he intended.

Her lips trembled. Apparently, his answer hadn't relieved her.

He came to his feet before he could resist the urge to go to her. "You still cold? I can pile up more straw."

"It's not that." Her expression grew strained as she looked up at him. "Someone out there wants me dead. But the authorities don't believe me. *Nobody* believes me."

The anguish in her voice wrenched his heart.

He sank down onto one knee and held her. “Here, now. *I* believe you. But you can’t wait around until the scoundrel succeeds. Won’t your family help?”

“I don’t have any family left.”

Neither did he, except for a cousin he hadn’t laid eyes on in more than ten years.

An ache started at the center of his chest. He understood the pain of loneliness and isolation, but what hope could he offer her when he had none to give?

With her youth and beauty, she ought to have a flock of swains at her feet. A dozen who would champion her cause. “You got to know somebody who can help,” he insisted.

She drew back with her eyes wide. He saw the moment when she seized upon a solution—one that scared the hell out of him. “*You’re* looking for work, aren’t you? Would you consider a job as a bodyguard? *My* bodyguard?”



“*Your bodyguard?*” Alarm flashed in her rescuer’s crystalline eyes. His shock, and the fact he hadn’t offered to help, made her realize she’d overstepped.

Amy shrugged off his embrace to break free from the warm cocoon he’d created when he had wrapped her in his arms. He took the cue and moved back to sit down. His departure opened a space between them, and the cold air swirled in.

She clamped her teeth together to keep them from chattering. He might try to hold her again. Why had she let him in the first place? Because something about him made her feel secure, and she hadn’t felt that way in a

very long time. Still, she'd given him the wrong idea, so no more hugs. "I propose a *business* arrangement."

His sandy brows pulled into a frown.

Possibly considering it or he hadn't taken her seriously.

Yet, she *was* serious. Although she wanted to believe she could take care of herself, this spate of mishaps had shaken her confidence. Being a single woman out alone much of the time, she was vulnerable. Why, just today her escort had failed to show up and she'd faced a choice to leave alone or spend the night in a rough boomtown.

"Rest assured, Mr. O'Connor, I am in earnest. I need protection and you appear capable of providing that service." She glanced at the weapons he'd put within her reach. Actually, he seemed a good bit more than capable.

He leaned back on his arms with one knee drawn up. The frown disappeared, replaced by a speculative gaze that traveled from her face downward.

The air crackled like the split-second before a lightning strike.

Her fingers tightened on the lapels of the overcoat he'd tucked around her. Perhaps she should ask for references. It was doubtful he'd provide any. His reluctance to answer questions implied he had a checkered past.

On the other hand, he didn't wear the fearful look of a fugitive from justice, nor did he strike her as a criminal. She'd recognized his accent. Missourians from across the border had the same drawl. Many men from that divided state had left after the war to escape reprisal from unhappy neighbors. Perhaps he was one of them.

Did it really matter? He'd saved her life, fed her, and kept her warm, all without demanding anything in return. Beyond that, she sensed she could trust him. As her father had instructed, there were times one must rely on intuition to make a judgment. This would be one of those times.

"What do you say, Mr. O'Connor? Are you interested in the job?"

“First, tell me something. Why is this immigration program so important to you?”

She nodded, willing to supply the details. He would need to know what he was up against. “I believe it’s the last chance we have to resolve this land dispute before it explodes into a war.”

He straightened from his casual position, which indicated she’d said something that caught his interest. “Why do you think that?”

“The settlers in Crawford County have organized against the railroad. The last few weeks, they’ve crossed the line from protests to violence. The government sent troops, but more guns won’t solve anything. If we can offer the more reasonable men an incentive to settle the conflict peacefully, we can avert disaster.

“You think women will satisfy them?”

“Not just women, Mr. O’Connor. Decent young ladies who want a better life with more opportunity. We bring them out here to meet men who want the same things they do: homes, families, the kind of prosperity that only comes with peace.”

“I see your point, but I don’t get how that’s going to resolve a land dispute.”

“The Border Tier is offering incentives to men who participate in the program.”

“Border Tier?” he murmured.

“The Missouri River, Fort Scott and Gulf Railroad. That’s a mouthful, thus, the nickname.”

He nodded, but the way his brow furrowed indicated his mind had raced ahead. “You got the railroad to support your program to deliver wives? You must know the management pretty well.”

“Know them?” She breathed a laugh. “I’m on the board.”

Surprise flashed across his face. Most men thought it odd she was involved with railroad business, or any business for that matter. Unlike

other men, Mr. O'Connor didn't appear compelled to comment on it, which was another mark in his favor.

He picked up a piece of straw and twisted it around his finger. The man rarely stopped moving, even when he seemed at ease. Some might call it restlessness, but she sensed it was more along the lines of preparedness. His body remained taut, every muscle coiled, ready to spring into action. This was good, because a bodyguard would need sharp instincts and quick reflexes.

She pulled the coat and blanket tighter, but the layers didn't warm her like before. Pity nothing stayed the cold except his arms. She wasn't about to ask him to hold her again. "Will you accept my offer?"

"Give me some time to ponder it."

Her gaze roved his shaggy hair and weathered face, the mustache that needed a trim, the strong line of his jaw and chin.

He returned the study with equal intensity. The image of a pale-eyed wolf flashed through her mind. It would be no easy task to manage a man like this one, yet wasn't he exactly the kind of man she needed?

She released a sigh and a white puff of breath hung in the air. Her chills started up again, rattling her teeth like a set of dice.

He straightened. "You're cold."

"Perhaps I will try your suggestion to pile up more straw."

"That only works if you've got heat left. You're pale and shivering. You need to get warmed up." He stood and plucked his coat from around her, then the blanket. "Body heat's the only thing that works when you're bone cold."

He scooped out the hay and threw the oilcloth down like he was forming a bed. Awareness jolted through her. Did he expect her to join him there?

"No." She shook her head to emphasize the point. Given her body's undisciplined response to his nearness there was no way she would let him

hold her. “I’ll just wrap up and pull the straw on top of me.”

While she still protested, he dragged her down beside him, tucked his coat and the blanket around them. His heat seeped through their clothes, warming her more than the thickest wool. Despite her reservations, she huddled against him.

She’d always claimed she didn’t need a man. But right now, she needed this one.

With his arm, he cradled her head, the movement brought his face close to hers. For a heart-stopping moment she thought he might kiss her. Her lips tingled in anticipation.

Instead, he lifted his hand to her face to brush the hair out of her eyes.

The infernal tears welled up again. She turned her face into his shoulder, embarrassed by her weakness, even more disturbed by her response to his nearness. “We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Nobody has to know.” He wiped the dampness from her cheek with the edge of his thumb. “Besides, if you stay cold, you’ll get sick. Can’t let that happen. Not if I’m supposed to keep you safe.”



Buck knew the instant Venus fell asleep when her body relaxed in his arms. That she trusted him enough to be vulnerable made him more aware of his unworthiness.

Her revelation had surprised the hell out of him. Imagine, Venus on the board of the railroad. Must be an honorary position, but that didn’t make it any less advantageous. As her bodyguard, he could find out what she knew and get close to the promoter he had to remove. Along the way, he could flush out the rascal who was after her. How hard could it be? He’d taken on entire regiments with fewer than a hundred men. Surely, he could handle one woman, no matter how pretty.



*Pretty?*

He studied her face relaxed in sleep. Her dark lashes lay like fans against creamy skin without a single blemish. She wasn't just pretty. She was downright beautiful. Like those famous paintings of the legendary goddess he'd named her after. Even her hair was magnificent, all thick and wavy and just begging to be touched.

Careful not to wake her, he fondled a silken strand, inhaled a fragrance he'd smelled earlier. Sweet as a summer field filled with wildflowers. It took him back to a gentler time and another place when he'd been a different man.

Alarmed, he shook off the curl clinging to his finger.

What the hell? He shouldn't be thinking about how good she smelled or how right she felt in his arms. His purpose was to share his warmth. At least her lips weren't blue anymore. They'd turned an irresistible shade of pink and parted on a sigh.

His gaze fell to the open collar of the shirt he'd given her. He snapped his eyes shut.

*No peeking.* He wouldn't take advantage of a lady who'd put her faith in him.

Come to think of it, why on earth had she chosen *him*? Certainly, he'd saved her from the weather, but that alone wouldn't account for the level of trust it would take to bring a man—and a stranger at that—so intimately into her life. She must have no idea what a bodyguard did or how disruptive he'd be to her daily routine. She was about to find out.

Buck moved his arm to make her more comfortable.

Her lashes fluttered and she blinked up at him. Not with fear, but with the kind of sleepy look a woman might give a man she adored.

His heart kicked in his chest a second before his brain woke up. She'd offered him a job, not undying devotion. Besides, he wasn't some damn

Galahad. His intentions were far from pure. She shouldn't look at him like he was her hero.

"Go back to sleep, Venus."

The admiration in her eyes wavered. "My name is Amy."

"Amy." What a simple name for a woman who had gotten more complicated by the minute. "You can call me Buck."

Her brow creased. "You may call me Mrs. Langford."

Buck bristled at the command given by the tiny general in his arms. He didn't take orders from men, much less women. Still, he'd humor her—for now. "Sure thing, *Mrs. Langford.*"

Her frown smoothed into solemn regard. "So, you'll take the job?"

"I said I would, didn't I?"

Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. "No, you did not."

He took a deep breath and let it out on a slow count of ten. With the way she affected him, he'd need all the control he could muster. At least it was only for a few days. The time he anticipated it would take to get rid of that pesky promoter causing trouble for Sean and the settlers. "Yeah, I'll take the job."

The last of the candle sputtered and they were cast into darkness. Buck's senses heightened, and his body became painfully aware of her closeness.

"I'm warm. You can let me go." She wiggled.

*God help him.*

He clenched his teeth.

"Are you cold? Do you want the blanket?" Her hip bumped his erection.

His breath rushed out in a harsh pant and he jerked away. "Damn it, woman. Stop moving."

She froze. "I...I don't mean to be a bother, but...could you light another candle?"

"You're not a bother," he grumbled. She wasn't tempting him on purpose, but his body didn't know the difference.

He got up and complied with her request.

When he returned with a lit taper, she'd sat up and had his coat buttoned to her chin. Didn't look like she was still cold. Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes glowed like warm honey.

That body heat had worked wonders. Maybe they ought to try it again, this time without clothes between them.

Buck speared his fingers through his hair and put the fantasy out of his mind. He needed to focus on what she knew about the railroad. After he affixed the second candle to the upturned bucket, he sat in front of her and rested his arm on one knee. "So, you ship in wives for horn—I mean, lonely settlers."

His new employer politely ignored the faux pas. "Actually, the Young Ladies Immigration Society pays their way, with help from the railroad."

"And you work for this ladies' whatever-it-is organization?"

Her lips tipped up. "No, I get the organizations started, but I'm not employed by them." She drew the blanket over as if she were going to wrap it around her, and then seemed to change her mind and held it out to him. "Here, I'm sure you're cold. This coat is enough."

Oh, he was plenty warm, thank you.

"Wrap up so you don't get sick."

The smile she bestowed on him made him want to give her a dozen blankets. "You asked what I do. I have different interests, but right now I work for James Joy."

Buck's scalp tingled. His cousin's letter had mentioned some big bug with the railroad. Had a funny name... "Joy...he's your boss?"

"You could call him that. I sell the railroad to communities along the line."

"Sell the railroad?" The tingling sensation spread, racing across Buck's skin, prickling the hair on his arms. He shook his head in disbelief. No, she

*couldn't* be the one he was after. Not Venus. Not the woman he'd just sworn to protect.

“You mean like hosting parties?” he asked, hopefully.

Her gold-flecked eyes rebuked him. “No, Mr. O'Connor. I'm not a social secretary. My job is much bigger than that. I'm the Border Tier's chief promoter.”

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## CHAPTER 3



The sun had already started warming things up when Buck took Amy into Girard. That's where she wanted to go. He was eager to find his cousin along with that newspaper editor who'd hired him under false pretenses.

What kind of men sent hired guns after women? Only bullies and brutes. He hadn't sunk so low he'd work for people like that. *No sir*. His cousin would have to clear things up before they went one peg further.

A wagon piled high with building supplies rolled past, slinging filth onto the boards forming a rickety sidewalk. Despite the knee-deep muck, the town teemed with men. Those thousands of settlers Sean had written about, were they all here? Which ones wanted Amy dead?

She leaned over to take a gander at her mare as it traipsed along on a lead. Buck bit back a groan. She couldn't ride bareback, so he'd suffered through an hour of having her snuggled on his lap with her derriere pressing against him. If the air weren't so cold, the heat she generated would've incinerated him by now.

"There." She pointed to a freshly painted sign above a building that had been thrown together with wood scraps. "That's our temporary depot. The *Weekly Press* is next door. I hope to catch up with the editor before we leave."

Her meeting was at the *newspaper* office?

Alarmed, Buck hauled back on the reins. Hopefully, his cousin had smartened up and wouldn't give him away. Just in case, he'd distract Amy until he could get Sean alone.

He peered over her head, surveying the town square. Unpainted frame buildings dotted the perimeter, interspersed with white canvas tents standing in for permanent structures. "This place doesn't look like much."

She twisted on his lap, causing him to jerk. "Oh, it's not finished yet. Once the tracks reach town, we'll bring in brick and build a proper depot."

"I'm not talking about the depot."

Amy held his gaze for what seemed like a full minute. His temperature rose to an uncomfortable level before she seemed to realize they were staring at each other. Her cheeks colored and she swiveled her head. "Oh, you mean the town. It hasn't been here long, but they've already got a hotel and a mercantile—and two newspapers."

"Two?" Buck arched his eyebrows, more surprised than she knew. "This place doesn't look big enough for two dogs, much less two newspapers."

"Well, they wouldn't have two if Amos Sanford hadn't taken over the first newspaper and turned it into a recruiting tool for the Land League." Disdain dripped from her lips.

Ah, he'd found the *right* editor.

"My meeting is with Dr. Warner," she finished. "He publishes the *Weekly Press*."

Relieved, Buck headed for the depot. He tied Goliath to the rail and helped Amy down, taking care to set her on the boardwalk rather than the muddy ground. "I'll take your horse to the livery and find somebody to fetch that buggy. Don't go anywhere until I get back."

A frown flashed across her face, but she said nothing, only reached beneath her cloak and withdrew a pocket watch, snapping it open to take a look. "It shouldn't take you too long. I'll be ready to leave at half-past ten."

“Got it.” He watched as she went inside, still trying to get over the shock.

She was the railroad promoter he was supposed to get rid of—and he’d signed on to be her damn bodyguard. It had to be divine justice because he was certain God was laughing his ass off right about now.

Just as Amy predicted, it took him no time at all to do his errands. Afterwards, he strode off in the direction of the *other* newspaper, which he discovered was conveniently located across from a saloon.

He opened the door and a bell jingled as he stepped inside.

A grizzled codger sat behind a desk piled high with newspapers. Presumably, the editor. Another man twisted in a chair in front of the desk and then bolted to his feet. He speared away the black hair that fell over his forehead.

Buck met a pair pale eyes similar to his own, but untainted with the icy gray of the cold-hearted bastard who’d sired him. He took an uncertain step forward, waiting a heartbeat for the familiar grin. “Sean?”

Relief flickered across his cousin’s matured face. Sean didn’t grab him in an exuberant hug, as he would have in years past. Instead, he offered a handshake. “We wondered whether you’d show up.”

Buck gripped his cousin’s outstretched hand and squelched his disappointment. He hadn’t really expected to be greeted with open arms. After all, they hadn’t seen each other for ten years, and had served on opposite sides of a bitter war. Still, he’d hoped for a warmer welcome. “You asked me to come. Here I am.”

His gaze shifted over his cousin’s shoulder to the older man who’d stood, waiting to be introduced.

Sean did his duty. “Buck, this is Amos Sanford. He’s the editor of the *Workingman’s Journal*. I wrote to you about him. He heads up the Land League that’s helping us settlers organize against the railroad.”

Sanford inclined his head. He didn't come out from behind the desk to shake his visitor's hand, which only confirmed the perception that he thought he was too good for the likes of a hired gun. "Mr. O'Connor, good to see you could make it here to help us out."

"What kind of help would that be?" Buck asked innocently.

"What kind?" Sean sent a worried glance in the editor's direction. "You know. The kind I wrote to you about."

"We need your help to remove an obstacle." Sanford added.

"An *obstacle*?" Anger heated Buck's face. "Is that what you call her?"

When neither man answered, he strolled over to the desk and picked up a newspaper. The headline urged settlers to rise up and defend their rights. Where'd he heard that before? These Union boys were starting to sound like Rebs.

He rolled the paper like a club and tapped it against his palm, had a good mind to beat these two over the head with it. "You got the wrong man for the job. I don't kill women."

Sanford sat and leaned back in his chair. He stroked a gray beard that reached to the top button of his vest. Canyon deep lines in his face rearranged themselves into a paternalistic frown. "You must've misunderstood, Mr. O'Connor. We haven't asked you to kill anybody, much less a woman."

Buck tossed the newspaper aside and snatched Sean's letter out of his pocket. He slapped it on the desk. "States here you want me to get rid of a railroad promoter. That don't mean sending a body away on a pleasure excursion."

The chair creaked as Sanford reached for the letter. He peered through round spectacles perched at the end of his nose, perusing the lines like he'd never seen them. The old fox had probably helped Sean craft the damn missive.



After a minute, the editor folded the letter and crossed his arms over his chest. “There are many ways to remove obstacles, Mr. O’Connor. I suspect you’re bright enough to figure it out. Sean told me you led a company of irregulars during the war. The fact that you’re alive proves you’ve still got a few tricks up your sleeve.”

An alarm tripped in Buck’s head. So *that’s* why the Land League wanted to hire him. Sanford thought he was still in the ambushing business, knew about the price on his head. He’d risked his life to come to the aid of his kinsman. Now, it appeared he was a fool who’d walked into a trap.

His cousin stood at rigid attention, his tanned face drawn as tight as the hide on a drum.

An ache started in the center of Buck’s chest. Despite their differences, they were the only family each other had left. How could Sean have betrayed him like this?

“My wartime sentiments don’t have a damn thing to do with this,” he said evenly.

Sanford huffed. “We don’t care about your sentiments. It’s your skills we need.”

Buck drew back his coat, rested his hands on the twin Colts and pinned the editor with a cold stare. He hadn’t killed anyone since the war had ended, but this old coot didn’t know that. Ironically, his brutal reputation might be the only thing that kept these two from betraying him. “So, you admit it. You want to hire a big gun to take care of one little lady.”

Sanford’s face turned red. “Don’t be fooled by that pretty face. Mrs. Langford will do anything to advance that cursed railroad. With this Young Ladies Immigration Society, she’s using the age-old strategy for dividing men. Women.”

Buck had to laugh. “What’s so dangerous about importing wives for a bunch of horny settlers?”

The editor swelled up like a toad. “She dangles petticoats as an enticement to get us to pay those exorbitant prices her boss is charging for land. These boys were soldiers, and most of them are unmarried. I suppose you’ve noticed how few decent women there are out here. It’s a devilishly brilliant scheme concocted by a woman who’d sell her soul for thirty pieces of silver.”

It was a brilliant idea, and Sanford’s resentment might have more to do with her intelligence than her motives. Men like him were dangerous to women like Amy.

Buck curled his fingers around the handle on one of the revolvers. He narrowed his eyes in a way that put most men in a fearful sweat. “I met her already. She thinks somebody’s trying to kill her. *If* I decide to help, I need to know whether you’ve hired somebody else—and don’t even think about lying to me.”

“We don’t have enough money to hire anyone else,” Sean grumbled. “If somebody’s trying to kill her, it’s probably ’cause she robbed him blind.”

Sanford grunted an agreement. “She’s making it up so you’ll feel sorry for her. Where did you say you met her?”

Buck didn’t say, nor was he interested in providing the details. “I happened across her. She was waiting on some fellow who was supposed to help with that immigration society you mentioned.”

Sanford’s eyes sharpened with interest. “We had a talk with him. I don’t think he’s interested in volunteering anymore. Did she happen to mention her next move? We can’t afford to lose any more leverage against the devil who’s behind this fraud.”

*James Joy.* The force behind the Border Tier and Satan incarnate, if the settlers were to be believed. He was Amy’s boss. What did that make her? One of his minions? Last night, she’d looked downright angelic, even wringing wet.

If Sanford hadn't hired another gun, then her attacker was likely a renegade. Was he an irate settler? An unhappy farmer? One of the men who'd signed up for her program and gotten an ugly wife? The list could be endless.

"She didn't mention her plans." Buck lifted his hat and threaded his fingers through his hair, growing increasingly uneasy. Amy hadn't told him much. But she'd played him masterfully to gain his promise of protection. Something he'd offered to no woman since being betrayed by one, who had also happened to be smart and pretty.

Even so, he'd given Amy his word. He wouldn't go back on it.

He adjusted his coat to cover the guns at his sides. "Just so we're clear, I'm not using violence against a woman. What is it you want me to do?"

Sanford jerked to his feet. "Distract her. Deceive her. Discredit her. We don't care, so long as you prevent her from succeeding in her schemes."

The editor's frown dissolved as he came out from behind the desk and clapped a hand on Buck's shoulder. "Why don't you boys go over to the saloon and get reacquainted? Tell them I'll pay for your drinks. I'm sure after you hear Sean's side of things, it will clear up any misgivings you might have about ridding us of that troublesome woman."

Buck shrugged off the unwanted familiarity. He hadn't signed on for this kind of work. At the same time, he couldn't walk away without hearing what his cousin had to say.

Sanford rested his fingers on a dog-eared Bible at the corner of his desk. "You recall the story of Samson and Delilah? Makes a man think twice about falling for a pretty woman."



Ten in the morning and already the saloon was crowded or these men hadn't left from the night before. Buck stalked past Sean, who'd strolled up to the

bar to snag a bottle from the bartender. He bought it, along with two glasses, to an empty corner table.

Buck scraped his chair around and sat facing Sean...and the door. “What the hell’s going on? Why are you licking that Sanford fellow’s boots? I don’t trust him.”

He wasn’t sure he trusted Sean either, but he’d give his cousin the benefit of doubt—for now.

Sean tossed back the contents in his glass and blew out a satisfied breath. “Ah, that’s fine brew Mr. Sanford purchased for us.” He poured a second glass, pushed it across the table. “Have a drink, coz.”

Buck’s anger boiled. The last thing he needed right now was a drink. “Tell me why you brought me here to get rid of a woman.”

Before Sean could reach the bottle, Buck set it out of reach.

His cousin’s face darkened. He narrowed his gaze.

*Don’t touch me whiskey, Bucko.*

Buck’s skin went clammy. Had Sean said that or was he hearing things? An image flashed in his mind of another lean face, one flushed with liquor and malicious intent.

*Next time ye pour me whiskey into the fire, I’ll stick yer hand in the embers.*

Buck sucked in a sharp breath and banished the wretched memory. He flexed his fist, feeling the slight pull of old scars. His stomach tightened. The old bastard still managed to torment him, even from the grave.

Sean’s puzzled expression came into view. “You alright?”

“Slow down,” Buck ordered.

“Ah, now you’re sounding like me Ma. It’ll take more than a tippling to make me drunk.” Sean dragged the bottle over and poured another glass. “Here, let’s toast to old times.”

Buck leaned back and crossed his arms. There was nothing in his past warranting celebration. “Tell me straight. What have you got yourself into?”

Uncertainty flickered in Sean's eyes. "You don't seem too interested in helping me out."

Buck smoothed his features, sensing his cousin's doubts. He had a few of his own, but he'd set them aside for the moment. "You're family. Far as I'm concerned, that's all that matters."

The hardness in Sean's jaw relaxed. With a heavy sigh, he rested his arms on the table. "Like I told you in that letter, I'm broke. All I have is the land I staked out. If that lady promoter convinces more men to give up the fight, I'll lose that, too." He raised his eyes, pleading. "I'm not asking you to hurt her. Just get her out of our way."

Buck kept his face fixed. He wasn't committing to anything until he knew the full story. "Start at the beginning. The letter you sent didn't give much detail."

Sean retrieved the bottle and gripped it like a lifeline. "Me and some boys from my company moved out here 'bout three years ago. We staked claims on land the Indians gave up after the war. We figured the government would sell it for a dollar and a quarter an acre, like they did that other Indian land."

He paused to refill his glass. "But them politicians in Washington hornswoggled us. They told us to go settle the land. Then they let that railroad bigwig buy it for next to nothing. Now he wants six dollars an acre for land we've lived on and improved." Sean drained the glass, and slammed it on the table. "T'ain't right."

The tension in Buck's shoulders eased a bit. Crooked congressmen and rich tycoons were enemies he could understand. "Since when did politicians care about doing what's right? You told me there were troops sent in against you."

His cousin nodded. "We started with peaceable demonstrations. That got us nowhere. So we burned ties and tore up track to show 'em we meant business. Then they sent in the army to help King Joy guard his railroad."

These troops, they're men we fought alongside. We don't aim to kill them for something they got no control over. But we won't sit still and let this bastard steal us blind." Anger flashed in Sean's eyes. "A man gets respect only if he's got land—or a gun."

Buck didn't nod in agreement. His guns had certainly earned him respect, but not the kind that ensured a long life. He rested his arm on the table and turned the glass of whiskey with his thumb and forefinger as he worked the problem in his mind.

Getting justice for these settlers would be no easy task. Amy represented his only ace at this point. How should he play that card? He'd felt a powerful attraction between them and knew she did, too. His stomach turned at the thought of using her that way. But if the widow was as black-hearted as her reputation, he could justify the means to achieve his goal. After all, he'd only known her a few hours. Sean was his kinsman. "If I get this promoter out of the way, what makes you think Mr. Joy will deal with you?"

Sean leaned closer and his expression became intense. "He's in a race, Buck—a race to the border. There's a second railroad, the MKT, they call it the Katy. They're building a central line through Kansas. Only one railroad gets to lay track through Indian Territory into Texas—"

"So only one of them gets to all that cattle business." Buck pushed his glass aside.

His cousin smiled. "You get my meaning. If we can slow down construction, I'm sure it'll put Mr. Joy in a more negotiating state of mind."

"Sounds reasonable. But there's too many contingencies. Loose ends get men killed. That railroad promoter, she knows somebody's after her. She's hired me to be her bodyguard."

His cousin's eyes grew wide as silver dollars. His low chuckle erupted into a chortle. "Ah, Buck, but that's brilliant! How ever did you manage it?"

“Wasn’t difficult.” Buck stopped without sharing details. The fact he was sitting here plotting against her was bad enough. “If I can keep her busy, what are your plans for slowing down the railroad?”

Sean’s voice lowered to an excited whisper. “There’s a new load of ties, thousands of them, laid out alongside the graded bed south of Girard. We’ll have us a bonfire if we can get close enough.”

“You won’t with those troops guarding the tracks.”

“We’ll figure out a way to get rid of them.”

“Not good enough.” Buck straightened, squelching his unease. Four years as a partisan captain had taught him how to wage guerrilla warfare, and that’s exactly what this was shaping up to be. He’d rather burn ties than deceive women, but he’d landed in a perfect position to benefit Sean’s cause. Wasn’t that why he was here, to gain justice for at least one member of his family?

“You’ll need a distraction. I’ll think of something and send instructions.” He shoved the chair back and stood up. “You’ll keep your land, cousin. I’ll see to it.”



Amy shifted to a more comfortable position on the bench where she’d kept vigil while she waited for her friend, Dr. Warner. The new building housing the *Girard Weekly Press* had been deserted when she’d arrived, although the smell of newsprint and ink still hung in the air. She’d hoped the editor would be here so she could check on the article he was supposed to have written in support of the immigration program.

She dug into the pocket on her jacket and consulted her watch again. Gracious, she’d been here nearly two hours. With an impatient huff, she crossed to the large window facing the street. No sign of her bodyguard, either.

*Buck.* Was that his given name or a nickname? It didn't matter. They weren't on a first name basis. Perhaps Mr. O'Connor had changed his mind about accepting her offer. Drifters weren't the most reliable of men. Still, she'd been so sure he was different and her instincts had never failed her.

A man wearing a beaver hat and fur-collared greatcoat strode past the window.

Amy gasped in surprise. "Fletcher!"

She raced to the door and jerked it open, calling his name.

He whipped around. "Amy! Great Jupiter, where have you been?"

"I was going to ask you the same question."

As soon as the door closed behind him, he dragged her into a tight embrace. "Thank God you're all right."

Her nostrils flared at his heavy cologne, which warred with the scent of wool and leather that still clung to her from being wrapped in another man's arms. Feeling guilty, she pulled away. "I'm fine, Fletcher. Quite well, thank you."

His brown eyes warmed with concern. "Are you sure? You look tired." He turned to hang his hat on a brass rack then smoothed his short dark hair back from a broad, intelligent forehead. "I hope you'll forgive my tardiness. Our meeting didn't conclude on time and I couldn't leave Baxter Springs much before dark."

"I did worry."

He smiled apologetically. "Did you go out to Dr. Warner's place? I couldn't get there after that freak storm blew in. That was an unwelcome surprise." With a frown, he plucked something out of her hair. "What's this? Straw?"

Her cheeks heated with embarrassment. Heavens, she must look like she'd slept in a barn—and she had. She took a step back. "I was on my way to the farm when it started to sleet, and then a rear wheel fell off the buggy."



“Good God.” Fletcher’s usually composed features twisted in a look of horror. “You might’ve frozen to death out there.”

“I was fortunate. A Good Samaritan on his way into town came to my rescue.” Her hand drifted to her jacket collar. She’d leave out the part about undressing and letting Buck hold her. No need to go into that detail. “We found shelter in a nearby barn.”

“That is fortunate.”

“I knew you’d think so.” Amy smiled, relieved. Fletcher wasn’t the type to hold something like this against her. He was much more progressive than most men, which was why they got along so well.

He stroked his fingers over a neatly trimmed beard, looking thoughtful. “I wonder if that wheel was loose when the livery rented it out? I should’ve checked before I left.”

Did he think she held him responsible for the accident?

Amy shook her head in dismay. “Oh no. I didn’t mean to imply this was your fault. In fact...” She should’ve told him right away. “There’s something you need to be aware of because you might be in danger too. I believe someone tampered with the axle nut.”

“On your buggy?” His throat worked as if the news had shaken him. Then he walked away from her to look out the window. “Those wretched settlers,” he said in a low tone tight with anger. “They horsewhipped one of our agents just last week, but I never dreamed they’d be so low as to go after you.”

He returned to her and gathered her bare hands in his gloved ones. “Forgive me, Amy. I never should have allowed you to remain here unescorted.”

She withdrew her hands slowly. “Fletcher, stop torturing yourself. You didn’t *allow* me to do anything. As a member of the railroad board, I *chose* to come down here. If anyone bears the blame, it is I.”

“But I am your escort.”

“Yes, but even if you’d been here, I believe it would’ve happened anyway. I’m certain these accidents aren’t coincidences. Whoever sent that cart of bricks my way, and let that horse charge me, must’ve followed me down here.”

Fletcher looked down to where her hands were clutched in front of her and frowned. “Where are your gloves?”

She smiled ruefully. “I lost them.”

“Good grief. Your hands must be freezing.” He stripped off his gloves and tucked them underneath his arm, then took her hands and held them between his. It was a gesture reminiscent of what Buck had done. Only, Fletcher’s palms were smooth and cool, not calloused and warm, and she doubted his chest felt as solid as a tree trunk.

She blushed at the inappropriate thought.

“Darling...” Fletcher’s voice dropped to a deep baritone.

Amy closed her eyes, refusing to compare it with her bodyguard’s gravely drawl.

“If we were married you wouldn’t be such an easy target. Bullies are far less inclined to bother a woman who’s under the protection of a man, especially one with money and powerful connections.”

A rock-sized lump formed in her throat. Everyone thought she’d marry Fletcher. Even she had thought so, except... What did she make of her reaction to Buck? If she could so easily be tempted by other men, perhaps she wasn’t ready for marriage, and she wouldn’t wed Fletcher simply to gain protection. Besides, she had hired a bodyguard, something she wasn’t sure how to explain. She wouldn’t have to explain anything if Buck didn’t show up.

She retrieved her hands from his light grasp to lift them and shrug. “Oh, you know how resourceful I can be. Should help not have arrived, I would’ve unhitched the horse and ridden to safety.”

After a moment of awkward silence, he spoke in a tight voice. “I must keep reminding myself how independent you are.”

She kept her tone light. “You’ve always said independence is a quality you admire.”

“I do, but I hope you don’t wish to remain *entirely* independent.” He cleared his throat. “Amy, you know I long to make you my wife.”

Her cheeks grew hot under his intense regard.

The handsome banker was a perfect choice for a lifetime partner—intelligent, educated, enterprising and ambitious. Precisely the type her father would have approved of, and exactly the kind of man she’d imagined by her side. If only she was certain she was in love with him.

“I know, and I *am* giving your offer serious consideration.” She escaped his scrutiny by walking over to the window where he’d gone moments earlier. “I just need a little more time.”

She saw no sign of her bodyguard or his big gray roan. Perhaps it was for the better. Being attracted to someone so obviously wrong for her wasn’t going to help her make up her mind.

Amy turned, putting Buck out of her mind. “So, tell me, how did you fare at your meeting in Baxter Springs?”

Fletcher smoothed the hurt from his features. “We had a fruitful discussion.”

“I’m sure it was, with you leading it.” She bestowed a proud smile. He’d worked tirelessly on behalf of the railroad ever since being named to the board, at her recommendation. “Did you find more investors? If so, that’s a miracle, considering we’re bypassing their city.”

“Actually, they increased the incentive for us to adjust our route.” He drew on his gloves, not noticing her stunned surprise.

“We *can’t* change the route. Baxter Springs is miles away from the approved crossing point into Indian Territory. If we don’t comply with the

treaty, we risk losing the race—and those land grants.” Her heart thudded in apprehension. “You didn’t agree, of course.”

Fletcher arched an eyebrow. “I did, with Mr. Joy’s blessing. He expressed an interest in this arrangement and personally requested that I pursue it. I thought you knew.”

Amy swallowed her shock. Why hadn’t the railroad’s chairman seen fit to fill her in on his plans? If her board position didn’t warrant respect, then her large investment in his railroad certainly did.

She twined the silken cord of her reticule around her fingers. “We don’t have permission to pass through the lands of other tribes. It will take months to gain the necessary approvals through Congress, not to mention the courts. Surely, you agree this is a mistake.”

Fletcher approached her with a stiff expression. “I don’t agree. Mr. Joy can handle the politicians and the lawyers. He expects us to seize opportunities when they come along. There are good reasons to shift the route. Water, for one.”

“This isn’t about water. It’s about money.”

“Yes, it is, and you, of all people, should appreciate how much we’ve lost to vandalism.”

She stiffened at his rebuke. “The vandalism would cease if the board would get behind my immigration plan.”

“Your plan?” He held her gaze for an uncomfortable moment and then shook his head. “Is that why you’re so angry, because the board doesn’t like your plan?”

Amy flushed to the roots of her hair. “You make it sound like I’m being childish. I am appropriately upset because the risks we take by changing the route far outweigh the potential rewards. Mr. Joy is letting his greed get the better of his common sense.”

Fletcher took her elbow. “I understand how this news might upset you. You’ve had a fright after rushing out into that storm.”

“Don’t patronize me.” She twisted her arm out of his grip. “I did *not* rush out into a storm. It wasn’t even raining when I left.”

Behind her, a door creaked.

Amy whirled, attempting to mask her disappointment as the white-haired editor stepped inside. She forced her lips into a smile. “Dr. Warner. How good it is to see you...”

The editor hesitated, as if he realized he’d caught them in a private discussion, and then sketched an antiquated bow. “Mrs. Langford, Mr. Bain. What a surprise.”

“Dr. Warner,” Fletcher smiled pleasantly, not looking at all like a man who’d just had his head bitten off.

Amy winced at a twinge of guilt. His refusal to consider her concerns and his placating tone had annoyed her, but she should have held her temper. She extended her hand as the editor approached. “I hope you will pardon me for not making it to your home last night. Please give my regards to Mrs. Warner.”

The elderly doctor took her fingers and bent over them. His fitted coat and standing collar were a decade out of fashion, but he still managed an air of sophistication. “She is in town today. Perhaps we could arrange to meet for luncheon?”

“Thank you, sir, but we must decline.” Fletcher captured her released hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. “Mrs. Langford has been through a trying ordeal. I’m taking her home.”

Amy frowned at him. If she wished to be taken seriously as a woman of business, she could not let Fletcher dictate her comings and goings.

She withdrew from his grasp and turned her most glowing smile on the editor. “No need to rush off. Do you have a moment to show me that article on the immigration program?”

The newspaper editor darted an uncertain look at the rigid figure standing next to her. “Why, yes. Of course.” He crossed the room to a roll-

top desk and shuffled through a pile of papers. “I’ve long espoused the immigration of young women into Kansas. Their calming influence will tame this frontier faster than troops or guns.”

“I’m so glad you agree with me.” She perused the draft, then turned to Fletcher, holding out an olive branch. “You should take a look at this article. It makes a compelling case for the men to take wives instead of picking up guns.”

Fletcher kept his hands at his sides. “I’ll take your word for it.”

She withdrew the paper, restraining the urge to smack it against his chest. He was simply behaving like a man—giving orders and expecting all of creation to follow. They would have their differences, like every couple, but in every way that mattered, the darkly handsome financier was the exact type of husband she needed at her side.

Unbidden, another image rose in her mind, one with flaxen hair falling in careless waves and a shaggy mustache quirked in a sardonic smile.

The door flew open and papers blew off the desk, as the man who’d captured her thoughts stepped inside.

Their eyes met and a shameful thrill fanned out. “Mr. O’Connor. We’ve been expecting you.” Actually, she’d been the only one on the lookout for him, as she’d not gotten around to telling Fletcher about her decision to hire a bodyguard. “Allow me to present Dr. Warner, editor of the *Girard Weekly Press*.”

The doctor inclined his head politely but didn’t step forward. Instead, he eyed the big man as if he were a dangerous species.

Indeed, Buck did appear dangerous. It wasn’t just the twin revolvers visible beneath his coat, nor was it as tangible as the sheathed blade strapped to his belt. Danger shimmered in the air around him. It glinted in his silvery blue eyes and radiated from a deceptively relaxed body taut with animalistic readiness.

Her gaze dropped to his gloved hands and the memory of his calloused fingers stroking her face set loose the butterflies trapped in her stomach. She swallowed to keep them inside. Why couldn't she have this fluttery reaction to the man who wanted to marry her?

She snapped her gaze upward and gestured to her left. "This is Mr. Bain. He owns a bank in Fort Scott and serves with me on the railroad board."

"Pleased to meet you." Buck gripped Fletcher's hand, but his eyes were on Amy. "Sorry I'm late. Got derailed by a fellow who needed my help. I did get that buggy taken care of."

"Ah," Fletcher declared, as if he'd suddenly become enlightened. "You must be the kind gentleman who aided Mrs. Langford." He pulled a roll of greenbacks from his pocket. "Allow me to give you something for your trouble before we leave."

Amy's patience unraveled. Fletcher might be well intended, but she was not about to let him, or any man, direct her life. It would erode what little ground she had gained by holding firm in her insistence she be treated as an equal. "I've hired Mr. O'Connor as a bodyguard. I'll be giving him an advance, so you can put your money away."

Fletcher's mouth dropped in a slack expression, as though he couldn't quite wrap his mind around what she'd just announced. Dr. Warner's forehead wrinkled with a worried frown. Buck's gaze shifted to hers and one tawny eyebrow notched up in a silent salute.

"There's no need for you to hire a bodyguard." Fletcher stared at her as if she'd suddenly transformed into a drooling idiot.

"I didn't ask your permission," she said under her breath, holding her temper in check.

His brows slashed down in a thunderous frown. When he grabbed her arm, she winced. "Amy, I understand you're frightened, but you've got no reason to hire some thug—"

Buck's fingers clamped around Fletcher's wrist. Amy watched in horrified fascination as he twisted, which forced the banker to release his grip. "Appears to me she's got a good reason. You'd do well to back off. If you want to keep your hand, that is."

Fletcher flushed brick red. "You misunderstood, sir. Mrs. Langford is under my protection. She is my intended."

Buck threw Amy a questioning look. Her relationship with Fletcher hadn't been formalized, but she probably should've described him as something more than an *escort*.

Fletcher glared down at her, daring her to contradict him.

If she caused a scene, it would put her in a bad light. However, she refused to renege on her decision to hire Buck. That would make her appear feeble-minded.

She clutched her reticule in both hands to keep them from trembling. "As we discussed, there have been threats on my life. Mr. O'Connor has experience that leads me to believe he will be able to discover the source of the danger, whilst ensuring my safety."

Actually, she knew very little about Buck's experience. Only intuition told her she could trust him, but she wasn't about to admit as much to a man who relied on numbers and hard facts.

An inexpressive mask fell over Fletcher's features. He would challenge her no more at this time, only she would hear about it later. Hopefully, much later.

She should have told Buck about Fletcher and alerted Fletcher to her decision to hire a bodyguard, except she hadn't been sure Buck would show up.

Her bodyguard cleared his throat, breaking the tense silence. "The livery will collect the buggy." He handed her a wad of bills. "They refunded your money after I told them about the wheel popping loose and suggested they ought to be more careful."



“Thank you.” She stuffed the money into her reticule.

Fletcher snatched her hand and tucked it into his elbow. “Don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll alert the sheriff and have Major Roy assign a special detail.”

It was one thing to offer gentlemanly assistance, it was quite another to treat her like she was incapable of making decisions.

She retrieved her hand. “I’ve handled it, Fletcher. Certainly, we can talk to the authorities, but they’ve already told us they have their hands full.”

He stiffened at her rebuke. “Very well. But I don’t want you out alone anymore. It’s not safe.”

“That’s why she hired me,” Buck interjected from behind them. His eyes gleamed with what looked astonishingly like amusement. “And I plan to stick closer than a tick on a hound. Starting right now.”

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## CHAPTER 4



The skeletal outlines of trees sped by the open window of the worker's train, as it chugged northward toward Fort Scott. Amy slid a furtive gaze at Fletcher, who sat next to her staring out the window. Thankfully, he'd stopped harassing her about the decision to hire Buck. Doubtless, she hadn't heard the end of it.

The self-proclaimed *tick* had taken the seat directly across from them. He also seemed preoccupied with observing the scenery, which was fine with her. The last thing she needed was another tense scene like the one in the newspaper office. She had other things to worry about.

She shifted restlessly on the wooden seat, calculating the remaining days required for their workers to lay track from Girard to the state's southern border. If the weather cooperated for the remainder of the spring, they could make up for lost time and win the race against their only serious competitor. That is, unless this blasted detour ruined everything.

*Almighty.* This couldn't be happening. Years of work wasted, all because of an unnecessary change in direction. If the Border Tier didn't win this race, the fortune she'd invested would be lost. Worse, her father's vision would go no further than that map mounted on the wall of her study. She couldn't let that happen. His life's work must be completed. She'd sworn to him, as he lay dying, that his dreams wouldn't die with him.

Her head throbbed and she pressed her fingers to her temples. She had to do *something*. Challenging Mr. Joy directly wasn't an option. Once he made a decision, he didn't change his mind. Unless...

Amy trained her attention on the man sitting in front of the walnut-trimmed rail car. What if Mr. Joy's most trusted associate advised against it? The brilliant French-born engineer had been brought in to design and build the railroad, and Mr. Joy was so confident in the man he'd made him his primary business contact. If James Joy could be swayed, Octave Chanute would be just the man to do it.

Encouraged by the idea, she stepped into the aisle and started forward, the train's wheels rumbling beneath her feet. As the car swayed, she steadied herself and her bustled skirts brushed the sides of the benches. Thankfully, she didn't have on the hoops she'd worn until recently.

The railroad's chief engineer bent over a book balanced on his lap, jotting notes on a scrap of blue paper. He carried those bits of paper around in his pockets to record the progress of construction in meticulous detail, which he would then report to his boss. He took his job with the utmost seriousness and she felt certain he would agree with her about the risks of this detour.

"I beg your pardon, sir. May I trouble you for a moment?"

Mr. Chanute set the book aside and stood. "Yes, Mrs. Langford?"

She smiled congenially. "I hope you don't mind that we caught a ride back on the workers' train. I know you had this car reserved for your personal use."

"You are employed by Mr. Joy and a board member therefore you have a right to ride this train without my express permission."

His unsentimental remark pleased her. At least he acknowledged the truth of her relationship with James Joy. Others refused to accept her role as his chief promoter and took pleasure in spreading ugly rumors—as if she could carry on an affair with a man a thousand miles away.

Mr. Chanute removed his reading spectacles and peered at her with a slight frown. “Is there something you wish to discuss?”

“Yes, I...”

“Please, have a seat.” He moved over, making room for her on the bench.

Amy folded her hands in her lap and straightened her shoulders. Maintaining proper posture and deep, regular breathing would keep her mind sharp. “I understand an agreement has been made with Baxter Springs to route the line through that town instead of Chetopa.”

He regarded her with characteristic solemnity. “It is what Mr. Joy wants.”

The message couldn’t have been clearer. What Mr. Joy wanted Mr. Joy got.

Amy took another deep breath. Her success depended on her ability to influence the opinions of powerful men, something she’d learned under the tutelage of a powerful man—her father. “Yes, but do you agree we should change the route?”

“There are advantages. We don’t have to cross the Neosho River—an expensive proposition—and there are natural springs close by, which will provide an easy and affordable source of water.”

“But Baxter Springs is miles east of the legal crossing point.”

“Seventeen miles, to be precise.”

Amy tapped her fingers on the bench. It sounded as if Mr. Chanute favored the detour. Perhaps she needed to remind him of the risks. “If we don’t adhere to the treaty, we won’t get certified by the state.”

Annoyance flickered across his face. “Governor Harvey will certify this as a first-class railroad because it is.”

“Of course,” she replied quickly. Heavens, she hadn’t been questioning the quality of construction. “I only meant the existing treaties don’t allow us

to cross into Quapaw land. If we pass through Baxter Springs, that's where we'll end up."

"Mr. Joy is certain we'll be accommodated. I believe he has assurances from the Secretary of the Interior." Chanute gathered his notes and hooked his spectacles over his ears. "If that's all..."

Amy stayed seated. He might desire to end their conversation, but she wasn't going to let this railroad plunge off a cliff without trying to stop it. "Mr. Cox can't push through a new treaty without congressional approval, and who knows how long that might take. While we wait around, the Katy will have time to catch up and they will win the land grants."

"Only if they're certified as a first-class railroad and if they cross before we do—neither of which will happen if we continue at our current pace without interruption. That depends, of course, on you. How are you faring at winning the settlers' support for your program?"

She twisted the cords on her reticule. Thus far, her plan for *importing wives*—as Buck had so aptly put it—hadn't gained the groundswell of support she'd anticipated. Worse, local leadership had dissolved like mist on a spring morning. "Some have responded to our offer, and Dr. Warner has agreed to run a front-page article promoting it."

"What about these threats on your life? Mr. Bain tells me you've hired a bodyguard."

"There have been..." How did she put this without raising alarm? "Unfortunate incidents. I thought it prudent to hire additional security."

He regarded her over the top of his lenses. "Your position is highly visible. It may be the settlers perceive you as bait for bigger quarry. You should put your talents to work on a less hazardous venture, like that seed work you're doing with the schools. Mr. Joy wouldn't want you risking your life, much as he appreciates your support."

*Drat.* He'd put her into checkmate. As much as he might want, she wasn't giving in or giving up. She'd made a hardscrabble climb up an

impossible mountain and her dreams were hitched to this railroad and everything it represented.

“Mr. Chanute, with due respect, I am at no greater risk than if I were running the woolen mill or involved in my mining interests. There will always be men who oppose my participation in business, and if I let them stop me—”

A male throat cleared loudly behind them. “This train sure does move fast.”

Her surprise turned quickly to aggravation. What on earth was her bodyguard doing up here? She’d made introductions earlier, but not so he could attach himself to her and join her private conversations.

She twisted in her seat. “Mr. O’Connor. I’m sure you’ll excuse us.”

The chief engineer turned to the interloper. “You’ve never ridden a train before?”

“Oh, maybe one or two,” the tick replied. “Don’t recollect them moving this fast or this smooth. You must’ve greased the rails.”

“Mr. O’Connor,” Amy said between clenched teeth. “We are having a business discussion.”

“Don’t mind me.” He removed his hat and took the seat behind them.

She stared, incredulous, as the insubordinate interloper continued to sit there, grinning at her.

Mr. Chanute draped his arm over the back of the bench. “The difference isn’t what we put on the track, it’s how we’re building it—with fifty-eight-pound rails, and twenty-seven hundred ties per mile. Ties made from white oak, not pine.”

Amy twisted back around, curling her hands into fists in her lap. Lord help her, she wanted to hit something. Or someone.

The chief engineer jumped on the distraction. “We’ve graded properly, and built stone culverts over creeks instead of filling them in like Mr. Parsons’ crews are so fond of doing. He’ll be washed out come spring.”

The derisive remark revealed Chanute's disdain for their rival. She didn't hold the same view. In fact, the wealthy entrepreneur who owned the competing line had hired a slick general manager to speed construction.

"The Katy may not be laying track that will last, but what will it matter if they make it to the border before we do?" she pointed out. "I hear their line is near Iola."

"Iola?" Now she had Chanute's attention. "That's not so close as to cause concern. We'll be in Baxter Springs no later than May, and we'll cross the border less than a week after that. Well ahead of the Katy."

"But sir, they're building faster than we are, and the investors have thrown everything they have into winning this race."

The chief engineer's dark eyes flashed a warning, and her stomach clenched. She'd stretched his patience, but she couldn't afford to retreat.

"I noticed your men are moving fast," Buck interjected. "One of them told me they'd put down a mile of track every day."

Amy shot him a dark look. The last thing she needed was another voice to argue against her, even if he didn't intend it that way. "Mr. O'Connor, you need to find another seat."

"This one suits me fine." He leaned back and stretched his long arms across the back of the oak bench. His mouth lifted in a lazy smile as he fixed his attention on the man in front of him. "Even if the Katy matches your pace, sounds like they're still more than a hundred miles behind. You got nothing to worry about."

That did it. She leapt to her feet, begging pardon as she stepped back to where her bodyguard sat. He gazed up at her with wide-eyed innocence.

"A word with you, please." Amy started down the aisle without looking to see if he'd followed. She'd fire him on the spot if he ignored her again.

The train lurched. Her hip struck a seat and the draped overskirt snagged the back of a bench, throwing her off balance. She flailed her arms

to break her fall, and at that moment, a large pair of hands slipped around her waist.

“Careful,” Buck murmured, steadying her against his solid form.

The intimate contact released a battalion of butterflies in her stomach. Horrified, she jerked away and hurried to the middle of the near-empty car. She pointed a shaking finger at a mahogany seat. “Sit.”

“Woof.” Buck plopped down with a grin.

She ignored his feeble attempt at humor and positioned herself sideways on the seat in front of him, close enough that she could talk without being overhead but not so close she’d be distracted by his nearness. She pitched her voice low, but firm. “Mr. O’Connor—”

“Buck.”

Oh no, she would not be on familiar terms with her employee. “*Mr. O’Connor*, let me make one thing perfectly clear. You are employed to keep a madman from killing me. You are not a business associate, personal secretary or a friend. Therefore, I would appreciate it if you would keep your uninformed opinions to yourself.”

His amused smile faded. Leaning forward, he froze her with an icy stare. “Let me make something clear, *Mrs. Langford*. I’ll succeed in protecting you only if I figure out who’s out to kill you. And the best way I can do that is by inserting my ignorant self into every closeted corner of your orderly little life.”

Amy drew back. Her face burned from the verbal slap. “Mr. Chanute isn’t a suspect.”

“*Everyone* is a suspect, until we know for certain who’s behind these attacks.”

Her fingers tightened on the back of the bench. In her heart she knew he was right, though it galled her to admit it. “Understood. But you don’t need to add your sentiments to the mix in order to ascertain whether I’m in danger.”



“I tried to help you.”

“*Help* me? By interrupting an important conversation?”

“By smoothing his ruffled feathers.” The chill left Buck’s eyes and his mouth quirked in a wry smile. “I figured you wouldn’t get what you wanted if he stayed annoyed with you.”

Amy’s throat tightened with dismay. How had this uneducated cowboy so easily read the situation, and how had she lost control of it?

She’d let her emotions get the best of her.

Hadn’t she learned anything? Emotions, particularly the strong, uncontrollable kind, were her enemy. Just as they’d been her mother’s downfall. She had to be on her guard against them.

“Is there a problem?” Fletcher’s voice cut through the tense silence. He rested a hand on her shoulder, protectively. He was only looking out for her, but she had no desire to see him end up in another confrontation. She had no doubt as to who would win.

“We were just discussing the terms of Mr. O’Connor’s employment,” she said in a calm tone.

Her bodyguard resumed his sprawled position. “You got a problem with that, Mr. Bain?”

Fletcher’s demeanor turned frigid. “As a matter of fact, I do. You don’t seem to take these threats on Mrs. Langford’s life very seriously.”

Buck’s eyes narrowed. “From what I saw, your interest in her well-being didn’t start until she hired a bodyguard. Makes me wonder what’s really got you all worked up.”

Fletcher fisted his hands at his sides. “You want to know what’s got me *all worked up*? A leech that attaches itself to a wealthy widow—”

Amy jerked to her feet. “Stop it, both of you.”

Fletcher reached her arm. “Are you finished with this conversation?”

“Yes.” Amy allowed him to escort her back to her seat to avoid another argument.

Thankfully, Buck kept his mouth shut.

Mr. Chanute hadn't turned around, but he couldn't have missed the heated exchange. He bowed his head and her stomach turned over. He might be writing one of those little notes, reporting on her lack of progress, and telling her boss she couldn't even manage two difficult men, much less a town full of irate settlers.



Buck nudged Goliath into a trot to keep up with the landau, which had arrived for Amy shortly after the train pulled into the station at Fort Scott. The stallion seemed in good spirits despite the two-hour ride in a cramped stall. Amy, however, wasn't nearly as agreeable.

She hadn't spared him a glance since that unfortunate scene on the train with her *intended*. He'd wanted to do her a favor and throw that arrogant ass out the window, but she would've fired him for sure.

At least the trip hadn't been a total waste. That detour she was so worked up about might actually work to his advantage, if he could prevent her from getting things back on track. Saints, she was a tenacious little thing, going nose-to-nose with that railroad man, who looked like he'd rather be put in a den of lions than face off with Mrs. Langford.

Buck released a low laugh. Venus sure as hell fired his anger—or something equally strong. Even when she'd insulted both his intelligence and his conduct, all he could think about was dragging her over that bench and into his arms. Seducing her as a form of distraction held more appeal with each passing hour.

“And it'd serve that uppity banker right,” he grumbled under his breath. Amy's snooty betrothed was no better than a toothless watchdog. He'd left her to fend for herself, and then had the nerve to tell her she didn't need protection.

The carriage turned down a crowded thoroughfare. Buck hauled back on the reins to avoid colliding with a cart filled with bricks.

The smell of paint and sawdust mingled with mud and manure. Hammers echoed from the inside of an unfinished hotel that soared several stories above the brick buildings on either side. Fort Scott had boomed, thanks to the railroad.

Was Amy's home along this busy street or in a quieter neighborhood?

Buck kept the carriage in sight as they left the noise behind and the street began to narrow. Soon, there were fewer houses in between fields of Indian grass.

A moment later, a three-story mansion rose out of the prairie like a mirage. As with the other homes, it was mostly brick, but that was where the similarity ended. The wide front porch featured colossal white columns supporting a flat roof. Above that, more columns soared to a pitched gable. Light-colored stone formed decorative arches above the windows, and the eaves were painted with bright geometric designs. At the top, a square cupola with close-set windows gave the impression of eyes looking eastward, like a watchman on alert.

Buck's mouth dropped open when the landau pulled through the gate and headed toward a carriage porch on the side of the grand manor. He'd guessed Amy had money, but he hadn't reckoned she was *that* rich. He patted the stallion's neck and huffed a laugh to ease the tightness in his chest. "What do you know, Goliath? We got ourselves hired by royalty."

*Hired* was right, and he'd best not forget it. Amy wouldn't have given him the time of day had he not rescued her from that storm. At his best, all he'd ever been was a merchant's apprentice with no opportunity to inherit the business from his stepfather, who already had two sons. Now, he was nothing more than a drifter with pocket change.

The driver, a nattily dressed black man, helped Amy down. He eyed Buck with suspicion as she paused to give instructions. She gestured with a

queenly wave. “Mr. O’Connor, this is Jacob. He’ll show you to your room above the stables. I’ll see you at dinner. Seven sharp.”

Buck snapped a mock salute. What did it matter if she was rich or beautiful? He wasn’t here to win the hand of a prairie princess. He had to stop her from expanding her kingdom.

An hour later, he fingered damp hair into place as he strode out of the building that served as both carriage house and stables. Why the hell was he so jittery? Dinner with Amy was an unexpected boon, a perfect opportunity to discover what she was up to, and map out a strategy for helping his cousin Sean.

Her manservant led him through the back entrance into the house. The servant’s entrance.

Buck frowned. Apparently, Amy intended to rub his nose in his own insignificance. He’d thought she had more class than that.

He followed his guide through a roomy kitchen. His mouth watered at the savory smells.

A black woman in a white apron stood at a cast-iron stove fancier than any Buck’s stepfather had carried in their store.

“Sophie, this is Miz Amy’s new...bodyguard.” The manservant stumbled over the word like he found it unfamiliar...or maybe undesirable. The strapping groomsman seemed to have taken an instant dislike to his lady’s new hire.

The cook also eyed him with disapproval. “I’ll see if she’s wantin’ company.”

*Enough.*

“Never mind. I’ll find my own way.” Buck stormed through the pantry and banged out a door—then stopped abruptly. He’d entered what appeared to be a large dining room. From the middle of the ceiling hung a huge chandelier, which cast a luminous circle of light that didn’t quite reach the dark corners.

Amy sat at the end of a table big enough to seat an army.

“Mr. O’Connor.” She rose from her chair and glided towards him, her skirts swishing with a sound only silk could make. Her gown, which matched the golden lights in her eyes, showed off every luscious curve. “Why were you in the kitchen?”

He couldn’t tear his gaze away from the creamy flesh above her fitted bodice. “I, uh, came in through the back.”

“The back? But I sent Jacob after you.”

“That’s who showed me in.”

Confusion showed on her face. “I suppose he considered that the most direct route.”

*Sure he did—the most direct route for the hired hand.*

Buck frowned to hide his embarrassment. He’d scrubbed himself near raw with a cake of soap he’d found by the pump and put on a fresh shirt. But in his buckskin coat and patched trousers he looked like a tramp next to this glittering beauty. “You really ought to see about gettin’ yourself a bigger house. It’s awful cramped in here.”

“Yes, it is a lot of space.” She didn’t appear to pick up on the joke, nor did she elaborate on why a single lady would live in such a grand house. If Bain had his way, she wouldn’t be single for long.

Buck followed her to the end of the table. He hadn’t felt this awkward around a woman since the age of fifteen. He yanked out her chair, but resisted the urge to drop a kiss on the back of her neck. She’d have Jacob throw him out on his ear.

He took the adjacent seat where the only other place had been set. “Where’s your watchdog?”

“Do you mean Fletcher? He had a business meeting tonight.” She lifted a tented napkin from a china plate. “On the way back, you mentioned the need to gather more information. We both have to eat, so I thought we could share a meal while we discuss your plans.”

He couldn't drag his attention away from her bare shoulders long enough to formulate his next step, much less a plan.

A plate clattered in front of him.

He nearly bolted from his chair before he realized it was the servant from the kitchen. He hadn't even heard the door open because he was too focused on the treat in front of him. Hell, he'd better be more careful. He hadn't lived this long by letting himself get distracted.

"You'll like the pork shank." Amy indicated with her fork. "It's one of Sophie's best dishes."

Sophie glared at Buck before she turned to leave.

*Another watchdog.* Amy seemed to have a few, though none had been able to make her feel safe. She'd turned to him for that, which pleased him more than it should have.

He picked up a fork and knife. "You must have quite a few servants with such a big house."

She frowned at him as if he'd insulted her. "Sophie and Jacob live here. They help me with whatever needs to be done. But I wouldn't call them servants."

What else would she call people who worked for her?

Amy took a dainty bite of meat. A spot of gravy glistened on her lip. Would she slap a man for licking it off? No question about it.

Buck picked up the fork and knife and focused his attention on separating a piece of pork from the bone. It'd been too long since he'd dined with a gently reared lady. If she noticed him leering at her, she'd have him thrown out before he got any useful information. "Have you lived here all your life?"

"No." She dabbed her mouth with the napkin. "When I took this job, Mr. Joy asked if I would move to where the railroad has a primary office."

Buck surveyed the opulent room with its flocked walls and carved moldings. "Your boss told you to build a palace?"

The smile curving her lips somehow managed to look both seductive and shy. “This home was built right after the war by a banker from New York. He hoped it would convince his wife to join him, but she never came out here. He died before it was completed.”

“From a broken heart or boredom?”

This time she laughed. Just a little. “How could anyone be bored here? Our city is growing. We already have one railroad. Soon we’ll have more.” Her face lit with excitement as she leaned forward, affording him a better view of her ample bosom. “We’ll entertain all manner of people passing through, including important dignitaries.”

“So, you plan on being the city’s *grand dame*.” He drew the word out like a Frenchman, amused by her grandiose vision for the frontier cow town.

She drew back like he’d offended her. Again.

“Meant no offense.”

“None taken.” She took a sip of wine from the stemmed goblet beside her plate. “Perhaps I sounded ridiculous.”

“Not at all. An important lady ought to have a big, impressive house.”

She kept her polite smile in place and gestured to his full glass. “You haven’t touched your wine. It’s from Missouri. I think you’ll be surprised by how good it is.”

Amy couldn’t possibly realize she’d insulted him, in a backhanded way. He curled his fingers around the stem. “Surprised that something good could come out of Missouri?”

“I imagine you already know whether anything good can come from that state,” she said, before she took a sip from her glass.

The warmth in his face didn’t come from the wine. He hadn’t taken a single drink. She’d flushed him out like a covey of quail. He lifted his glass and pretended interest in the wine. Admitting he hailed from across the

border would open the door to topics he didn't want to discuss. He'd just have to continue this flirtatious game and hope for the best.

He took a drink, holding her gaze. "It is good. Like most things from Missouri."

Her cheeks reddened. She took another hasty sip of wine, catching a ruby drop as it spilled down her chin.

Buck gave his attention to the food on his plate and fought a smile. That'd done the trick. Now she wouldn't be so eager to ask questions. He stabbed a piece of meat and chewed slowly to allow her time to regain her composure.

"What kind of information do you need?" Her tone had returned to brisk and unemotional. She might want to regain control of the conversation, but he wasn't going to let her.

"Tell me a little more about your life," he said. "Your background."

"I'm not sure my personal history is pertinent."

"Course it is. Your past can turn up all kinds of interesting things."

"Such as?"

"Oh, you know, mistakes, old grudges..."

Her eyes narrowed. "Is that why you were in Texas? Someone had a grudge against you?"

A piece of potato lodged in his throat. He cleared the remaining obstruction with a covered cough. "We're talking about your past, right? You're the one with enemies."

She studied him with a keen look. "Am I the only one?"

His scalp tingled—a sure sign he was in trouble. The clever minx had turned the tables on him, and not for the first time. If he intended to stop Amy Langford and her railroad, he'd better cease flirtation and pay attention.

He schooled his expression into neutrality. "When you fight a war, you can't help but make enemies."



“Were those enemies trying to kill you? I know of men who lost their lives to vigilantes after the war.” Her concerned tone didn’t mean a thing. She was just trying to get information.

He leaned back and crossed his arms. “I thought we’d talk about your problems, not dig up bones out of my graveyard.”

She set her napkin on the table. “What do you want to know?”

Finally, they could move on to a more comfortable topic. So, what did he want to know? *Everything*. Every damn thing about this woman fascinated him.

“Why don’t you start with your family?”

Amy folded her fingers around the stem of her glass, tapping lightly in a way that conveyed her restlessness. “My father was a successful lawyer... and a visionary. He wanted to see this country grow into a place where anyone could succeed based on hard work, not the color of their skin or the circumstances of their birth. That’s why he moved from Boston out to Kansas when I was a baby. My mother...” She paused and a look of pain flashed across her face. “My mother passed away when I was ten.”

So, her father had been an abolitionist. But why would his enemies target Amy, and why now, after a war had settled the issue once and for all? It didn’t make sense.

Buck waited for her to continue, but she seemed hesitant. Perhaps if he offered up a tidbit, something they shared in common, she would open up.

“I was ten when my father died.” The words slipped out with numb indifference. That was the only feeling he’d ever been able to dredge up for his Da’s violent end. It had been his mother’s death seven years later that left him grief-stricken and without the only anchor in his life. Even now, the loss would hit him at the oddest times.

Amy’s sympathetic smile tweaked something in his chest. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

Oh, she was a sly one, to try to turn the conversation around again. If he listed all his stepfather's relatives, they would never get back to her. "I was an only child. How about you?"

"The same. My father took it upon himself to educate me and bring me up like a son."

"He couldn't have been confused. You don't look anything like a son." His wry remark elicited a flicker of amusement.

"What I mean is, he gave me a great deal of freedom. When I was older, he allowed me to work alongside him on some of his ventures. He was a great leader and a wonderful mentor." Amy used her hands while she talked to punctuate her points. "Everyone loved my father, all the people who worked for him, his business associates, everyone who knew him..."

All hesitancy vanished and her face glowed as she spoke of a father figure Buck couldn't begin to imagine. Suddenly, he didn't want to hear any more about her illustrious sire. "How did you get involved with the railroad?"

"Again, through my father. He believed the railroad would bring prosperity for all. He called it the great equalizer. When the opportunity presented itself, he got behind the LL&G, along with Senator Lane."

*Senator Lane?* Her father's business partner had been the leader of those marauding Jayhawkers who'd burned down Osceola.

Bitterness burned up the back of Buck's throat. He swirled the wine in the glass and kept his gaze on the liquid to avoid giving away his reaction. Despite his vow to extract revenge for what Lane had done to his stepfather and their family, he'd never gotten any kind of justice. By helping Sean, he had a chance to regain a smidgeon of honor.

"How did your father get tangled up with—" *No.* It didn't matter, and if he wasn't careful, he might tip her off to his past. "How did you meet Mr. Joy?"

“He bought out the LL&G after Senator Lane’s death. I’d been instrumental in raising funds and gaining community support, so he asked if I would promote another line that had a better chance for success.”

Buck leaned back in his chair, impressed. Despite her father’s bad taste in business associates, Amy had flourished. “You got yourself hired by one of the most powerful men in the country. That’s no small feat, Mrs. Langford.”

“Mr. Joy is a progressive thinker. Like my father.” Her smile came out like the beauty of unexpected sunset.

Buck fought against a current threatening to pull him under. He couldn’t afford to let himself get drawn in by a woman, no matter how beautiful. He lifted his glass. “Here’s to Mr. Joy’s good judgment.”

She raised her goblet and finished the last of her wine. Then her expression slid into sadness. “He may not think so highly of me once he gets Mr. Chanute’s latest report. We’re no closer to an agreement with the settlers than we were a year ago. In fact, things have gotten worse.”

Her failure could result in Sean’s success. That was good news, wasn’t it?

Buck felt anything but celebratory. He stared at his still-full glass, mulling over how to return to more comfortable territory—the seduction of a pretty widow. He’d read the signs correctly. His ability to understand *that* kind of interest didn’t trip him up. No, his worst defeats stemmed from his attempts to decipher more complex relationships, particularly ones involving his heart.

He released a long breath to relieve pent-up tension. He didn’t intend to get emotionally tangled up with a woman. If they had a pleasant sexual interlude, well, he’d make sure he left her satisfied. “You were telling me about yourself.”

She sighed and scooted back her chair. “There’s nothing more to say. If you’re finished eating, we can go to the study. I’ve drawn up a list of

suspects.”

*The study?* Why it couldn't be more perfect. They'd be alone, out of sight of the servants. Maybe it was what she'd intended all along.

Elated, he got to his feet and then took her hand to help her stand.

Amy swayed the tiniest bit, and he caught her up against him before she stumbled. The press of her soft flesh triggering a fierce hunger.

He reined it in. This genteel lady wasn't trail chow. She was a fine meal to be savored. He needed to reach back—way back—to find the finesse he'd need to woo her.

Her eyes flickered with uncertainty that belied her earlier bravado. “You mentioned people with grudges. My father was murdered before he could realize his dreams. Now, I'm afraid someone wants me dead...”

Concern rushed in, along with something else Buck refused to name. He cupped her cheek in his palm and stroked her petal-soft skin with the side of his thumb. “Nobody's going to hurt you, Amy. Not on my watch.”

Her eyes became dark pools of anguish. “I can't fail.”

Buck wrestled with guilt as big as a motherlode. He couldn't promise she wouldn't fail. In fact, he had to make sure she would. Before he left, however, he'd find the filthy bastard who was trying to hurt her and eliminate him. “You said someone killed your father. Was it because they opposed the railroad?”

She blinked and a tear slid down her cheek, wetting his hand. “No, it happened during the war. We lived in Lawrence. My father was murdered by William Quantrill and those hell-spawned fiends who followed him.”

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## CHAPTER 5



The ground beneath Buck's feet shook, or so it seemed, as Amy's earth-shattering revelation resurrected memories that had haunted him for the past seven years.

*Captain O'Connor, we sure as hell gained justice, didn't we? Paid back the grief those Jayhawkin' abolitionists visited on our families.*

The whispered words came from the specter of a cold-eyed raider. Dead, but not forgotten. William C. Quantrill had made damn certain he'd never be forgotten. No justice had come from the slaughter he'd led. It hadn't brought anyone back or righted any wrongs. Their savagery accomplished nothing—except to turn them all into wretched outcasts, cursed for eternity.

Buck drew his hand away from Amy's cheek. She wouldn't want him touching her. On the contrary, she'd plunge a knife into his heart if she ever found out he had ridden into Lawrence with the Devil.

She took a step back, clearly shaken, but not appearing to notice his distress. Perhaps she was too focused on her own. The vulnerable woman disappeared behind a businesslike mask. "Let's go upstairs. I'll give you my list of suspects."

Her skirts swayed as she exited through an arched doorway that led out of the dining room into a dim hall. They passed a set of tall mirrors that

caught the light from gasoliers mounted on the wall. Shadows reflecting in the glass writhed like dark apparitions.

Buck locked his eyes on her back as she mounted the stairs. Never had he imagined his past would come back to haunt him in the form of an irresistible woman. One he'd sworn to protect from fiends like him.

Amy led him down a hall to a dark room. She turned a knob on the wall and gas hissed as it fueled a domed lamp on the ceiling. Light bathed the paneled walls and warmed them to a golden brown.

Buck hesitated at the doorway with a bad case of goosebumps. It seemed as if someone had grabbed his arms with cold fingers. He brushed the sleeves of his coat to get rid of the strange sensation. He didn't believe in ghosts. Those were tales told by old grannies to keep children in line. Besides, her father had never lived here.

He entered the room and took a careful look around. Her study was done up as fancy as the other parts of the house. The fireplace had pink quartz inlaid around the hearth. The paneled walls looked like real red oak, not pine. On one wall, books and neatly dated business journals lined floor-to-ceiling shelves. Behind a large desk, suspended from a picture rail, hung a large map that showed a broad swath of the nation's midsection.

While she dug through a drawer, Buck went to take a closer look at the map, eager to focus on something other than Amy's gut-wrenching revelation. He couldn't even think about that without his palms getting sweaty.

The map showed states and territories. From a circle near the middle labeled *Fort Scott*, a dozen black lines stretched out like the legs of a spider. The map's legend indicated those thick, dotted lines represented railroads. "I didn't think this town had so many connections."

Amy turned around. "Only the Border Tier is in operation. Those are proposed railroads, the ones Fort Scott plans to have in operation over the next five years."

Awful big ambitions for a town that was little more than an army outpost a few years back. But with Amy at the helm, Buck didn't doubt it could happen. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "A railroad kingdom. Who's gonna rule it?"

"It's not a monarchy," she retorted, but with a smile that revealed she'd appreciate his humor. "There's opportunity for everyone."

"Even the settlers?"

"Everyone." Her mirth vanished as she closed the drawer. "We're not here to debate the validity of each side's claims. I hired you to stop whoever is trying to kill me."

She closed the drawer and lightly trailed her fingers along the edge of the desk, at the same time releasing a soft sigh.

A sizzle shot down Buck's spine as he imagined her fingers stroking his skin. "That's a fine piece of furniture."

"It was my father's."

Her words had the effect of a bucket of cold water being poured on his head. Seducing the daughter of a man killed in a raid he'd taken part in seemed vile, even for a former bushwhacker.

He hadn't killed her father.

Didn't matter. He'd shed plenty of blood during the war, enough to damn his soul to hell, so what was one more sin added to the multitude?

"Here's the list I drew up." She extended a sheet of paper.

As he took it, their fingers brushed. She sucked in a sharp breath and jerked her hand to her chest, spreading her fingers over her exposed cleavage.

"Well?" She gazed at him with an expectant look.

*Well, what? Oh yeah, the suspects.*

Buck jerked his attention to the list. "Who are these people you've named?"

“The first dozen are men I’ve had disagreements with, mostly business related. I listed only the ones I believe to have an unscrupulous nature. The rest are from letters sent to the newspaper protesting my involvement in the railroad. I only considered ones with a threatening tone. If I wrote down the name of everyone who disapproved of me, the list would be too long to investigate.”

The hurt in her eyes tugged at his heart. He masked his weakness with a wry smile. “Not too popular with the men folk around here, are you?”

Her vulnerability vanished, replaced with a professional veneer. “Let’s just say I haven’t been well accepted. However, wealth and connections do open a few doors. I’m part owner of a flour mill and a coal mine, and I’ve invested in other ventures besides the railroad. However, I don’t suspect my partners, if that’s where you’re going. They need my continued support too much to do away with me.”

He froze his expression to contain his astonishment. Beautiful, smart, rich *and* successful—the list kept growing. He’d better tread carefully so he didn’t end up being the one deceived. “Could it be somebody inside? Do any of your railroad pals want your job?”

She sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know of anyone who wants my job, especially now. The only insiders who’d care have always been supportive, if for no other reason than their boss hired me. They’re loyal to Mr. Joy.”

Buck ticked through a list in his mind. “What about those two downstairs?”

She barked a laugh. “Sophie and Jacob? Never.”

It wasn’t so far-fetched. “Do you plan to leave them money?”

“I do, but—”

“I knew of a slave once who was going to be granted freedom after his master’s death. He just hurried it along.”



“Let me finish,” she said sharply. “Sophie was freed during one of Mr. Lane’s raids into Missouri. My father took her in, gave her a job, taught her how to read and write. She raised me after my mother’s death. Sophie wouldn’t hurt me for all the money in the world. And Jacob was shot trying to defend me during Quantrill’s raid.”

A knot centered in Buck’s chest. Had those two recognized him? No. If they had, they wouldn’t have let him come within ten feet of their mistress.

“They don’t just work for me,” Amy insisted. “They’re the only family I have left, and I won’t stand here and let you insult them—”

“Whoa. Slow down.” Buck cupped her shoulders in his hands. “I’m not insulting anybody, but you got to look everywhere, not just in the obvious places.”

She shrugged off his touch, but not before he’d felt a shiver. “What you said might make sense in some cases, but I refuse to believe that two of the dearest people in the world would ever wish me harm, much less cause it. Especially after the atrocities we suffered.”

Buck’s jaw tightened. She wasn’t the only one who’d suffered *atrocities*. “Your friend Senator Lane did more than just free slaves when he rode into Missouri.”

Amy frowned up at him as if his abrupt remark had confused her. Then, understanding dawned in her eyes. “Was your family one of those who...?” She didn’t finish the thought, but rested her fingers lightly on his arm.

Her touch drained his anger like she’d opened a festering sore. He blinked down at her, thrown off balance. Why the hell had he opened that closet? He couldn’t manage any more skeletons—his or hers. “Never mind. We’re here to talk about your list.”

“Did you lose someone dear to you in those raids?” The sadness in her eyes drew him in.

Buck resisted the temptation to spill his guts. If she knew the truth, sympathy would be the last thing she’d feel. He held up the paper she’d

given him. "Have you shown this to anyone?"

She searched his face. God help him if she could read anything in his expression. "Other than you, no. I started it after I spoke with the sheriff. He treated me like an overwrought child seeing a bogeyman around every corner."

How could anyone spend five minutes with Amy and think she was given to imagining things?

"What about Fletch?"

"Fletch? Oh, you mean Mr. Bain? We haven't discussed the list. He has suggested we get married. The way he sees it, if we're properly wed and I'm under his protection, it will silence a great many of my critics."

Buck burned with anger. "He ought to be out there making sure you're safe, whether or not you've said your vows."

Gratitude shone in Amy's eyes. He almost dropped to one knee to pledge his undying devotion before warnings clanged in his head. He'd tried that hero thing before. Bad idea.

"Fletcher isn't ignoring the threats. Until today, I think he truly believed the incidents were just accidents, or if not, they were pranks meant to scare me away from supporting the railroad."

Why was she defending that arrogant asshole?

Buck crossed his arms over his chest. "Someone tampering with your buggy isn't frightening. It's deadly."

"As I said, he's revised his theory." She gave a long sigh and shifted her gaze downward, putting her hand lightly on the desk. "He is correct, though. Marriage will make me more...acceptable."

*More acceptable?* Amy was far superior to that pompous airbag. Any man fortunate enough to win her hand would be respected and admired. Bain had to know that. He was using Amy's uncertainty to press her into marriage.

Buck stuffed the list into an inside pocket. "Mind if I keep this?"

“Not at all. I can always retrieve it if I decide to bring in the cavalry.”

“They’re not billeted in the stables?”

The beginning of an amused smile faltered. “Honestly, I haven’t raised the alarm because I was worried Mr. Joy might decide he wasn’t willing to put up with bad publicity. There’s too much ill will already.”

Did none of these so-called gentlemen care what happened to her?

“No, I reckon you wouldn’t want to bother the great Mr. Joy with some little problem like threats on your life,” Buck said scornfully.

Her fretful expression relaxed in a smile. “But now I’ve got you to take care of it.”

“That’s right. You got me now.” Buck’s blood heated at her insinuation. She’d sure enough gotten his attention. He couldn’t stop thinking about kissing her.

Was it so wrong to ignite this passion between them? Amy was a widow, not some untried virgin. She had enough experience to know where this was leading, and there was no need for her to ever find out about his past. He’d be long gone soon enough anyway.

Buck stuffed his guilt back into the lockbox that held his conscience and stepped closer.



Amy’s pulse raced as her bodyguard loomed over her. Lord, he was tall, though that didn’t begin to describe him. It wasn’t just his height that made him seem larger than life, like one of those heroes in Beadle’s dime novels. His presence filled a room when he entered it. He commanded attention, and he certainly had hers now.

She’d hoped a cozy dinner would loosen his tongue and she could get more information about his background, thus satisfying Fletcher’s concerns and some of her own misgivings. Instead, her wily bodyguard had deflected

the conversation away from himself and back to her. He was a puzzle, and she'd always loved puzzles. Perhaps that's why he fascinated her.

"What more do you need?" she asked, recovering her voice.

A predatory gleam lit in his eyes along with smoldering sensuality that stole what little air remained in her lungs. "Since I'm your bodyguard, I'll need to stick close."

Her heart rapped a distress signal. What had possessed her to invite this hunter into her lair?

She squared her shoulders and held his heated gaze to show she was not affected and still very much in charge. "You may go with me tomorrow, as long as you remain in the background. After breakfast I have a meeting. Then I'll need to stop by a dress shop...." Her words trailed off as Buck bent closer.

*Heavens.* Did leather and soap contain some sort of aphrodisiac?

He paused the space of a heartbeat before he cupped the back of her head. An instant later, he brushed his lips against hers in a titillating invitation.

A debate ricocheted through her head. This wasn't right. But it felt good. She was almost engaged. Not yet. Buck was the wrong man. But Fletcher couldn't hold a candle to the bonfire stoked by this rough Missourian.

His soft mustache tickled, which sent shivers across her skin. A moan slipped out of some needy place deep inside. He slanted his mouth to mold his lips to hers. At the lush pressure, her head grew light. If he hadn't been holding her, she would have sworn she'd stepped off a cliff. With his large hands, which had warmed her when she was frozen, he caught her up, lifting her until her toes barely touched the floor.

Admonitions echoed, a distant thunder. She ignored them and circled his neck with her arms, then combed her fingers through his thick hair.

Rumbles rolled up from his chest and he lifted her higher. One arm wrapped like a steel band around her middle, while his other hand gripped her hair. The overpowering hold would've frightened her if his kiss hadn't gentled.

He nibbled at her lips, tasting them, probing the seam. With a delicious shiver, she gave him entry. The sensuous slide of his tongue against hers made every nerve spring to life. Her body hummed with restless energy. She gripped his hair tighter. He seemed to sense her need and began to meet it with bold, confident strokes.

Other men, other kisses, faded into a bland memory. Nothing had prepared her for this...this *taking*. It should've terrified her. Instead, a thrill shot through her at his domination because she sensed it was her power that fed it.

"So sweet," he murmured, trailing kisses across her cheek. With the tip of his tongue, he traced the curve of her ear. Then he nipped the soft lobe, making her gasp with pleasure, before he burned a path down the column of her throat.

With both hands, he lifted her high enough to nuzzle the cleft between her breasts. Her nipples tightened into rigid knots that ached for his touch.

She trembled and an agonized whisper escaped. "Please."

He raised his head. Passion made his gaze as hot as blue flames. "Please what?"

No, she couldn't say it. Couldn't admit she wanted him because it would mean she was a woman of easy virtue, no better than her mother.

He went back to kissing her quivering flesh.

The passionate storm grew stronger, became frightening in its intensity. Savage winds tore at her moorings and threatened to rip away the last of her resistance. Her body ached and her need became the only thing that mattered.

From a dark corner of her mind, a memory taunted: her father's grief-stricken cries, her mother's face, twisted in agony and pale as a wraith. Both of them victims of the indiscriminate ravages of unfettered passion.

Amy stiffened with alarm. What was she doing?

"Let me go..." She shoved at his shoulders. It was like pushing at a boulder. Panic bubbled up, bursting out in senseless noises. Unable to break free, she struggled. Oh God, she had to escape. "No! Stop! Let me go...you...you're being a *beast*."

Buck froze in an instant. He blinked furiously, fighting to regain control.

*Beast?* Had he heard right? This mind-numbing lust she'd inspired made it impossible to think clearly.

He lowered her to the floor, carefully setting her on her feet.

Her panting made her chest heave. As she backed away, humiliation shone through the tears welling in her eyes. It doused his desire in an instant.

Confusion swamped him, along with a more uncomfortable feeling. He hadn't misread the looks she'd given him earlier. She wanted him. At least, for a time she had. Maybe he'd scared her when he lifted her off her feet so he could more easily reach her treasures. He hadn't realized she was struggling to get away, had thought those noises she was making were sounds of pleasure. If he'd known she had doubts, he wouldn't have taken advantage.

His conscience mocked him. Who was he kidding? If she hadn't cried out, he would have taken her. Probably right there on that desk. Would've tossed up her skirts and buried himself to the hilt. The crude thought teased his weakened mind a second before guilt ballooned in his chest. Stricken, he reached out. "I'm sor—"

What could he say? That he was sorry? True enough, he was a sorry son-of-a-bitch, having had plenty of practice over the years. But he hadn't meant to...hadn't thought...would never.... "I'd never hurt you," he promised.

"Go away." She hunched over like she was trying to curl into a ball. "Just go away."

Her agonized plea sliced open what was left of his shriveled heart.

He left the house in a hurry to return to his room above the stables. If he had half a brain, he'd saddle his horse and ride like hell.



Amy stumbled into her bedroom and slammed the door on the firestorm of passion she'd ignited through her own foolishness.

Still trembling, she listened for the sounds of Buck's footsteps, which had fallen heavy on the stairs moments after she'd sent him away. Now, only silence. He must have let himself out.

She pressed a hand to her heaving chest. Thank the Lord he hadn't pressed his advantage. For a moment, she'd thought he might.

An inner voice chided her. Nothing in his actions had indicated he would've forced himself on her. It was *her* fault this had happened in the first place. She could've stopped him when he'd hesitated in that brief moment before he kissed her. But she hadn't. Instead, she'd fallen prey to passion's lure and had nearly thrown away her future to taste forbidden fruit.

With a groan of self-loathing, she threw herself across the bed and let the tears flow. With any luck, they would douse the fire that still licked at her body.

*God help her.* She couldn't be like her mother—controlled by a wild, amorous nature that had wrecked a marriage and devastated her family.

Passion was like that. It devoured the body and destroyed the soul. She was better off without it, and most definitely better off without a rough character like Buck, no matter how competent he appeared.

Her conscience pricked at her assessment. Buck hadn't been rough. *Oh, no.* He'd treated her with tenderness, even as his touch set her ablaze. His evasiveness still bothered her, but like many men, he probably just wanted to put the war behind him. No doubt, he was exactly what he appeared to be—a drifter without a dime to his name who had braved a storm to rescue her. Unfortunately, he was also, very clearly, a libertine, and not at all the kind of man she needed in her life.

A sharp rap on the door brought her up on her arms.

“Miz Amy? You need help gettin’ undressed?”

*Sophie.*

Amy swiped at her face with the back of her hands. She swallowed to staunch tears that seemed to gush up from some endless spring. This wouldn't have happened if she hadn't hired Buck. She would release him first thing in the morning and be rid of a temptation that would lead her down the road to ruin.

“Just a minute,” she called, and wiped her nose with a handkerchief. She turned the gas tap to extinguish the lamp until the only light came from the fireplace behind an embroidered screen. Good. The darker the room, the less likely that Sophie would notice her reddened eyes and nose and begin to fret.

When she opened the door, the housekeeper swept in with a tray. She'd brought a mug of warm milk sweetened with honey, Sophie's secret for a restful sleep. Tonight, not even a bath in warm milk would help.

Sophie set the tray on the bedside table. “That bodyguard of your'n took out like a pack o' hounds was at his heels.”

“We'd concluded our business.” Amy turned to let Sophie undo the buttons down the back of her gown. “I'm sure he was ready to seek the



bed.”

Her remark was met with silence. Amy’s face warmed when she realized what she’d said. He’d been ready to seek a bed, all right. Hers.

Sophie unlaced the corset and Amy breathed deeply for the first time that day. She wouldn’t wear the tortuous device if it weren’t for the dictates of fashion. She’d already defied convention about as much she dared and didn’t want to risk alienating her colleagues.

After the remaining layers were peeled off, she slipped into her nightgown.

A gentle touch on her shoulder nearly undid her. “Did that man hurt you?”

She couldn’t bear to share her humiliation, but it would be wrong to allow Sophie to think Buck had molested her. She’d all but invited his attentions, starting with that ill-conceived notion of dining alone with him. What had she been thinking?

She turned with a forced smile. “I’m fine. No need to worry.”

Sophie moved decorative pillows off the bed and turned down the sheets. “Child, don’ you let him—or any man—take advantage of your sweet nature.”

*Sweet?* Amy breathed a soft laugh. That wasn’t a term she usually heard used to describe her. Hardheaded, driven, ambitious, but not sweet.

“You needn’t worry about Mr. O’Connor. I’ll send him on his way tomorrow.” She crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin.

The mattress sank as Sophie sat beside her. “Hmm. And that evil man what’s been following you, what you gonna do ’bout him?”

Amy’s stomach twisted. For a brief time, she’d felt safe under Buck’s protection. She scooted up against the headboard, adjusted her nightgown and hugged her knees. “I can’t go to Major Roy and ask for military protection. Even if he wanted to offer it, his troops are spread too thin. That

stupid sheriff won't be convinced I'm in danger unless someone pulls a gun on me in the middle of Main Street."

Sophie took her and gave it a squeeze.

Her throat tightened. Her options had been slim before she'd hired Buck. She did have one other choice, and maybe it was time she considered it. "Fletcher suggests we get married."

"That's gonna stop whoever's after you?" The incredulity in Sophie's voice made Amy wince. She didn't buy the argument, either.

It wasn't her marital status that had men up in arms. It was her insistence on being part of their world, and that wasn't going to change just because she married. "It should help, but that's not the only reason I'd choose to marry him."

Sophie arched her eyebrows. She apparently wanted a list.

"He's educated, erudite, a man of business, exactly the kind of husband I need."

Wasn't her friendship with Fletcher over the past three years evidence enough they would have a companionable marriage? It might not be a passionate love match, but that fiasco with Buck more than proved that passion was the last thing she needed.

"I hear what you say, but I's thinking your Mr. Bain ain't gonna know how to keep you safe. That other one, though..." Sophie shook her head. "He just plain scares me."

She wasn't the only one scared.

Amy sank beneath the covers. Tomorrow, her bodyguard had to go.

## CHAPTER 6



The next morning, Buck strode to the washstand in the corner of his room above the stables. He'd already washed up this morning, but he wasn't ready to face his new employer.

He bent his knees to bring his head level with a small mirror hanging on the wall then dipped his fingers into the basin to use water to tame his hair into some semblance of order. If she paid him that advance money she'd promised, he would be able to get a haircut and a shave. Maybe then he wouldn't look so scary.

What had gone wrong? He'd asked himself that question at least a dozen times before he'd fallen into a restless sleep, plagued by bad dreams.

Amy had wanted that kiss. All the signs were there. But then, she'd called him *a beast*.

His chest tightened. He turned away from his scowling reflection and began to pace. Ironic, and more than a little disturbing, that Georgia had used the same epitaph—right before she'd walked out of his life for good.

Damn it, he wasn't a brute like his father. He'd tried to make up for the wrongs he'd done. He had released Georgia from her vow, helped her free the man she loved, sent himself into exile and even laid down his guns.

Until his cousin called for help.

Buck went to the window and stared out at the empty yard. He had to remember why he was here, to distract Amy and slow down her railroad. Only, he couldn't carry through with his first plan—a distracting affair. Not after what she'd told him about her past. Not even if he knew for certain he wasn't the man who killed her father. He refused to dishonor her. He'd find some other way to give Sean a shot at justice.

*Justice, not revenge.* Not like Lawrence. Stopping a railroad wasn't murdering innocents. Even if he had to deceive Amy, he could still protect her from whoever wanted to kill her.

He grabbed his coat from the peg by the door and dug out the list she'd given him, scanned the names and locked them in his mind. With a deep breath, he released the last of his misgivings. Keeping her safe might not erase his sins, but it had to count for something.

She'd be leaving soon for that meeting. He had to tag along so he could keep an eye on her. Not only that, he needed information to come up with a plan to aid Sean and the settlers.

A few minutes later, he stood in the yard with Goliath's reins in one hand and his hat in the other. He waited patiently for his employer to tug on her gloves. A task that took her far too long in his estimation. Her ensemble this morning included a buttoned-to-the-chin dark blue jacket that covered up far too much of her creamy skin. Disappointing, but probably for the best.

"Good morning, Mr. O'Connor." She tilted her head, bobbing the feather attached to the side of a little hat that didn't appear to serve much purpose.

"Good morning, Mrs. Langford." He kept his tone respectful.

As she approached, he spied shadows under her eyes. Had she been so upset with him she couldn't sleep? That wasn't an encouraging thought.

He rubbed his thumb on the hat brim. A silver brooch pinned to the hatband had belonged to his mother. The reminder touched off memories of

her admonitions about gentlemanly behavior. He jerked his thumb away and replaced his hat to shield his eyes.

Amy had to lift her chin to look at him. “Mr. O’Connor, I am sorry to say I must release you from your duties. I shall pay you for your trouble, of course.”

Buck blinked in surprise. She was firing him over one little kiss? He clenched his teeth to keep from bellowing an objection. This was *his* fault, not hers.

She fumbled with her bag and drew out a roll of bills.

*Unbelievable.* She wanted to pay him off so she could rid herself of the embarrassment of having to deal with her attraction to him. Not in a million years would he take that money.

His pride demanded he call her bluff. A sensible voice urged a calmer approach.

He arranged his features in an appropriately apologetic expression. “Mrs. Langford, I understand why you’d want to fire me. But I haven’t upheld my end of the bargain. I don’t break my vows.”

“Yes, well, I appreciate your desire to keep your word. However, you must realize this arrangement won’t work.” As her eyes dropped level with his chest, her distress telegraphed itself over some invisible wire stretched between them.

He refused to analyze the strange connection. He had to keep this job. Otherwise, he’d have to start over and there wasn’t time. If that railroad reached the border before the settlers made a deal, Sean could kiss his land goodbye.

“Amy...” No, not so familiar or she’d harden in her resolve. “Mrs. Langford. I won’t take advantage again. Let me stay. Just until I’m sure you’re safe.”

She lifted her gaze. Uncertainty flickered in the amber depths. Buck could see she wanted to believe him, wanted to trust him.

His heart hammered against the breastworks he'd erected around it. What she thought about him after all this was over didn't matter. Right now, he had to coerce her, hold what little ground he'd captured to remain in her inner circle. That's what mattered. Not gaining her forgiveness.

"Please, give me a chance to find this man who's threatening you." Did it sound like he was begging? He wasn't. He never begged. Not since the day his hand had been thrust into a fire.

Tears glistened in her eyes.

Something tore at him. *Regret?* No, it was the right thing. Keep her safe while he secured justice for Sean. He didn't have to choose. He could do both.

She ventured closer and stuffed the roll of greenbacks into his coat pocket.

He gripped her wrist. "I don't want to fail any more than you do."

Her eyes grew wide. It struck him it wasn't fear he was seeing, so much as cautious yearning.

A barrage of emotions exploded in his chest. He released her like a hot coal.

"Why?" she whispered. "Why do you care?"

He dared not mine his heart too deeply for that answer. "I owe a debt. This is the only way I know how to repay it."



The sun burned off a chill in the air. Amy peered up at a cloudless sky. It seemed as if she'd dreamt the ice storm. But no, Buck stood beside her carriage, as solid and real as the bustling city coming to life around them. He'd driven her to town after she had given in and kept him on.

She held out her hand for him to assist her down. He ignored it and instead gripped her waist, lifting her up and over the foul-smelling mud to

set her on the walkway in front of the railroad offices. Her body tingled even after he'd let go.

Was she a fool to give him a second chance? She rarely backed down from a decision, but her resolve had crumbled the moment she'd looked into his eyes and seen some desperate need.

What debt did he owe, and how did helping her relieve him of it? She didn't understand, but what was done was done. She'd gained his agreement to keep an appropriate distance. If he broke his word, she would fire him without a second thought.

"I'll pull the carriage around and then meet you inside." Buck swung up onto the seat.

With an absent wave, she hurried toward the double doors, focused on the problem at hand. The railroad directors were scheduled to vote on whether to continue their support for the Young Ladies' Immigration Society. She had to ensure they would fund it to give the program a chance to succeed.

Not nearly enough settlers had signed up. A picnic would take care of that. The idea had come to her just this morning. What better way to welcome the new arrivals? The young women could prepare picnic baskets that the men could bid on, which would generate interest and excitement. Churches did this all the time and it worked like magic. There would be weddings in no time and the settlers' riots would be a thing of the past.

Her nerves jumped when her bodyguard strode up beside her. My, he moved fast.

As they walked up the stairs in silence, he removed his hat and combed his fingers through his hair, which he wore unfashionably long. It was always mussed, yet it had felt clean and silky soft. However, the texture of his hair was not relevant to her concerns.

From the look of it, he'd put on last night's shirt. That buckskin coat, with its ragged fringes and numerous repairs, had seen better days. From a

gun belt slung low on his hips, twin revolvers hung in holsters shiny with wear. His knife wasn't in plain view, but she suspected it wasn't far from reach.

Great days, he looked like an outlaw. She couldn't let him accompany her into the boardroom.

"Why don't you wait here in the hallway?" She gestured to a bench shoved up against the wall. "It might make the directors nervous to know I've hired a bodyguard."

He gave a dry laugh. "You think they don't know? That news tends to get around fast."

Amy pressed her lips tight with irritation. This would be a short reprieve if he thought to gain an explanation for every directive. "I don't want them to feel threatened. I need their support."

"Then show them you won't be intimidated." Buck eyed the door. "Any of those fellows on your list?"

"One, but I only included him because he so adamantly objected to my appointment by Mr. Joy. I don't really believe he'd resort to violence in a public meeting."

"Better to be safe."

She used her most authoritative glare. "This is a very important meeting. I cannot afford to alienate these men. Now, wait out here. We'll be done in an hour."

As she reached for the decorative brass knob, Buck grabbed it first. He threw open the heavy door. She drew a deep breath to calm an anxious flutter in her chest and stepped inside.

The railroad directors, including several of Fort Scott's most influential businessmen, were seated strategically around an oval table. The president anchored one end and the chief engineer was positioned at the other. The directors all rose as she entered the room.



She nodded to acknowledge their greeting and held her head high. Any sign of weakness and her latest program would fall victim to the axe they wielded with frustrating regularity. Her smile faltered as every eye fixed on something behind her.

Ice water pooled in her stomach. She knew what she'd see even before she cast a glance over her shoulder.

Her bodyguard. He'd planted himself in front of the closed door, feet braced, with his hands folded behind him.

She twisted the cords of her bag around her fingers. By heaven, she wanted to wrap them around Buck's neck. Why couldn't this gun-toting rowdy do as he was told?

He met her eyes with an impassive expression. If she ordered him out now, it would draw more attention. He could stay—she narrowed her eyes in warning—but he'd better keep his mouth shut. At least he had the good sense to pull his coat over those Colts.

She whipped her head around, forcing a pleasant expression. "Good morning."

One man moved to pull out a chair. As she adjusted her skirts to sit, a horrid gurgling sounded. Her face fired up like a furnace. Why did her stomach have to announce her jitters?

"Morning, Mrs. Langford." Charlie Goodlander accompanied his greeting with a friendly nod. His lips were barely visible beneath the walrus mustache, but his blue eyes twinkled with undisguised mirth. "Would you like to introduce us to your, uh, escort?"

No, she would not *like*.

"This is Mr. O'Connor. I brought him along for additional security."

"Are you feeling threatened by someone in this room?" The president's bushy brows gathered and her insides quivered in response. The last thing she needed was to offend Kersey Coates. The man was far too influential.

She paused to compose a proper response. "Of course not, I..."

“Mrs. Langford wants to put your minds at ease after those attempts on her life.”

Her head swiveled around.

Buck, who had the audacity to answer for her, continued without meeting her infuriated gaze. “She asked me along so you gentlemen won’t feel obliged to withhold your support because you fear she might come to harm.”

He crossed his arms, his flinty gaze moving from man to man, as if daring them to object.

Dread trickled down her spine. He was going to get her booted from the meeting. Worse, ejected from the board as soon as word of this reached Mr. Joy’s ears.

She smoothed her features, pretending to be in complete control, and addressed the president. “This is only a precaution on my part. A statement, if you will, that I’ll not be intimidated by bullies.”

“Well, I, for one, am glad you’ve taken steps to ensure your safety.” Charlie leaned back in his chair and rubbed his fingers over his mouth.

Was it to wipe off a smile? Only the jocular lumber yard owner would find something like this funny.

The other men nodded, all except for Mr. Chanute. His face remained an inscrutable mask. Had the chief engineer written to Mr. Joy about her *troubles*? She hadn’t alerted her boss because she hoped to have the issue resolved before his planned visit in May.

Mr. Coates cleared his throat, breaking the awkward silence, and braced his arms on the table. “All right, then. Let’s get down to business.”

An hour later, Amy longed for a cold rag to put on her aching head. The board had argued nonstop about the best way to compel settlers to pay the price set by the railroad for land they were squatting on. Land rightfully owned by James Joy, but claimed by the settlers under the old pre-emption rights. Some of the board members wanted to ask the government for more

soldiers to protect the railroad against further vandalism and disruption. The presence of troops had already caused numerous clashes and bloodshed. Couldn't they see that strong-arm tactics didn't work?

She tapped her fingers on the table to gain their attention. "More troops won't compel these former soldiers to cooperate. The lure of home and family will convert them faster than guns. We need to bring more eligible young ladies out west."

Around the table, heads nodded. Most of the directors appeared to be in agreement or at least willing to give her idea a chance. She'd invested significant time and resources gaining the support of these local businessmen. Might as well strike while the iron was hot.

"Why don't we vote on the motion to increase funds for the immigration society?"

"Proper protocol should be observed. Does the president wish to ask for a motion?" Mr. Chanute had finally spoken up—to call her down. "Personally, I don't believe another trainload of women will buy us an ounce of cooperation. Didn't you tell me just the other day that only a handful of settlers have shown any interest? More troops are needed."

"I disagree. This immigration effort *will* work. We just need to draw more attention to the program." She drew herself up, projecting as much authority as possible for a woman in a room filled with men. "I've personally sponsored twelve young ladies who will arrive next week. What better way to generate excitement than a picnic? We'll hold a rally beforehand and the men can bid on the baskets of the women they want to get to know better. Marriages will follow and agreements can be made. The settlers pay the asking price for the land they want and the railroad covers the cost of bringing them wives. It's good for all concerned."

"Pardon me, Mrs. Langford, but that sounds like pure balderdash." Mr. Coates leaned back in his chair with an air of disdain. "These settlers are up

in arms, and you think a *picnic* is going to appease them? I think we've given this little diversion of yours all the attention it deserves."

Amy seethed. The board president never expressed an opinion until he was certain of where Mr. Chanute was headed.

"You fellows just spent the better part of an hour backing and filling, and you still can't agree on how to dot your i's. Might as well give Mrs. Langford's idea a chance."

Her eyes widened at the familiar voice from behind, and all heads turned—including hers. Buck met the incredulous stares with a challenge in his gaze.

Did the man never back down?

Deep inside, respect flickered and gratitude lit like sparks on dry kindling. She should be furious with him for interrupting again. But instead, his defense warmed her to her toes.

Charlie Goodlander was the first to recover. "I agree. There's no reason we shouldn't have that picnic rally."

The other men turned to Mr. Chanute. They all knew Kersey Coates was little more than a figurehead. It would be Mr. Joy's trusted advisor who made the final call.

Octave Chanute gave a dignified nod. "Mr. Joy would have no objection to a picnic, unless it dissolves into a brawl, which is how most gatherings in the Neutral Lands have gone. Should that happen—" He looked directly at her. "I can assure you he will look most unkindly on the person responsible."

## CHAPTER 7



Amy's tirade was drowned out by the rumble of covered wagons thundering down Market Street. Buck slowed to match the pace of her shorter strides. It was probably a good thing he couldn't make out what she was saying. His ears would be burning for sure.

He'd known full well she would be choleric when he followed her into that meeting. Even so, he had to make up his own mind about whether any of those men represented a threat. He'd also hoped to learn how to slow down the relentless advance of her railroad. Her picnic basket plan had given him an idea. First, however, she had to be convinced she was taking those women into a lion's den.

The noise of traffic faded for a moment and her voice cut through. "While I appreciate your desire to help, I cannot afford to be seen as weak. Not if I am to hold my own against these men in business dealings."

He was tempted to kiss her again, if for no other reason than to shut her up. Amy's anger might be directed at him, but its source stemmed from what had happened in that room. She'd won over every man except the one that mattered most. The chief engineer she'd called Mr. Joy's right hand. Was it possible Octave Chunute had hired someone to scare her away?

Buck's gaze swept across open windows, up to an uneven line of flat and pitched roofs then down to the busy street and crowded walkway. Too

many people to keep an eye on all of them. He'd have to be on guard every moment for potential threats.

A bearded man in paisley trousers stopped and lifted his hat as Amy walked by. The fellow leered at her backside, until he looked up and met Buck's warning glare. Then he wisely hurried away.

She lifted her skirt hems to step off the boardwalk.

Buck leapt into the street and scooped her up before her feet could sink into the mud. The wide, gooey ruts, created by a combination of last night's rain and heavy wagon wheels, would swallow this petite morsel in one gulp.

Amy shoved at his chest. "Stop toting me like a package!"

Rather than put her down, he tightened his hold on her. She hadn't figured out yet that ordering him to do something would result in the opposite reaction.

"No extra charge to protect your dress." He dodged a flatbed piled with hay, sidestepped pungent piles of manure, and finally set her on the opposite sidewalk.

She smoothed her skirts with a huff. "I am fed up with you thinking you know better in every situation. You are not my advisor or my keeper. You're my bodyguard. If I allow you to continue in that role. That meeting could have gone disastrously because of your interference."

*Interference?* Hell, he'd rescued her twice when those men would've sent her packing. He planted his fists on his hips. "I know you think I don't have half a brain but—"

"I'll concede three-quarters."

His anger dissolved. Damn, if she didn't provoke and amuse the hell out of him, all at the same time. "Stop chewing on me for a minute and let me explain. I followed you in there because I needed to get a feel for whether any of those men mean you harm. I can't do that by looking at a list. I got to rely on my instincts. You'll have to trust me."

Her brow smoothed, but he could see aggravation simmer beneath the surface. “All right. However, you can’t insert your opinion into every discussion.”

“No matter the merit?”

With a roll of her eyes, she turned sharply and started up the sidewalk. Her heels tapped a rapid beat. He trailed a half step behind beneath signboards with announcements about drugs, shoes, and every conceivable service one might need.

He gave her a minute to cool down before casting his lure. “Have you thought about how to protect those women you’re taking down to Girard?”

Her steps slowed. “What do you mean?”

“Men lose their good sense when they haven’t been around women for a long time.” Buck came up alongside her and tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. “Having twelve pretty ladies up there while those fellows bid for their baskets... Well, things could get out of hand.”

Her expression transformed from thoughtful to worried. “What would you suggest, as a protective measure?”

Buck pursed his lips like he hadn’t fully considered the problem even though he’d worked out the answer long before he posed the question. “Maybe you should ask that major if his troops would keep the peace. Can’t imagine he wouldn’t oblige.”

“I’m not sure it’s a good idea to take the soldiers away from their duties so they can stand guard at a picnic. They’re here to protect the railroad.”

Buck tossed out the bait. “Mr. Chanute seemed concerned those settlers might get rowdy. That’s not going to make you look good to Mr. Joy.”

Amy bit her lower lip and he could almost see her mind whirring. “Let me think about it.”

He smiled with satisfaction. The hook was set. Now he’d bring her in, nice and slow, so she wouldn’t slip away. This picnic rally presented a perfect distraction for the soldiers, which would allow Sean’s men to get to

those ties. Once they burned them up, construction would halt, and the railroad would be pressured to sweeten the deal. How simple could it be?

A cold wind whirled down the street. Amy drew a fringed shawl tighter around her shoulders. Why hadn't she worn a heavy cape instead of that fancy little napkin?

Buck shrugged out of his coat and wrapped it around her.

"Thank you," she murmured.

They walked along in companionable silence. Her head bobbed next to his shoulder. She was just a little thing, but her personality made up for what she lacked in size. Amy wasn't fragile like some petite women. She had a curvy fullness that a man could explore without being afraid he might break her.

Buck studied her face, now scrunched in thought. "Is something wrong?"

"Do you think this rally is a good idea? Most of the directors seemed convinced, but not Mr. Chanute."

"I reckon it's fine."

Fine enough to be a distraction. He had no idea whether any of the settlers would be desperate enough to pay her price, no matter that a woman might be attached.

She sighed. "Perhaps my argument wasn't effective. What might I have said differently?"

For a woman who claimed not to need his opinion, this was the second time she'd asked it. Best not to point this out. Besides, it felt good to give advice that wasn't intended to trip her up.

"It wasn't what you said as much as how you acted. You challenged them. Men don't like that in a woman. You need to use your advantage."

She regarded him doubtfully. "Flirting doesn't work. Men won't take you seriously."



“That’s not what I meant.” He pulled her aside to let the traffic pass, then put his hands on her shoulders and looked pointedly at her uninspiring outfit. “Take that jacket, for instance. It’s nice and obviously expensive, but it’s boring. If you’d worn something a little bolder and sashayed into that room like you owned it, you would’ve had every one of those men eating out of your hands.”

After taking a glance around, she lowered her voice. “I think I understand what you’re saying, but that kind of dress is inappropriate for day wear.”

“No. I’m not talking about a dress like that one you wore last night.”

“What are you insinuating?”

*Oops.*

“Not a thing. It’s a fine dress. Nothing wrong with it. A real pretty dress.” But she’d better not wear it to a business meeting. He’d have to kill somebody. “What I’m saying is, don’t work so hard to fit in with the men. Don’t fight on their terms. Exploit their weaknesses. If all they can think about is how pretty you look, they won’t pay attention to how smart you are.”

Amy glanced at his hand on her shoulder and he quickly moved it, belatedly recalling his promise not to touch her. “I don’t know. I’ve never been comfortable with...I mean, I don’t like using those sorts of tricks.”

She hadn’t caught his meaning or didn’t fully realize the kind of power she possessed.

Buck considered his words carefully. “I didn’t suggest you do anything unladylike. But as a woman, you’re at a disadvantage in a man’s world. Use the weapons you’ve got.”

“You make it sound like war.” She looked up at him through her lashes.

Who was it that said something about beauty launching ships? Amy’s lovely face and voluptuous form could sink a fleet. If she learned to use her potency, she would be unstoppable.

And he was the fool who'd armed her.

He shrugged as if it didn't matter. "Those are the only terms I can think of for how to explain it. But what do I know about business?"

Buck held his breath as she regarded him a moment longer. Finally, she nodded, then allowed him to tuck her hand over his arm as they set off. God help him if she figured out how to use his own advice against him.

She stopped in front of a large window embellished with a flourishing script that declared it to be the best store for ladies' fashions—probably not a dangerous place.

"I need to pick up a dress I ordered." Her gaze drifted over him speculatively. "There's a barber next door. Why don't you go visit him? I don't want my business associates to think I've hired a border ruffian."



Amy turned the page of a well-used copy of *Godey's Ladies Handbook* and feasted her eyes on the latest designs by Charles Worth. With her fingertip, she traced a picture of the lemon and cream gown she'd ordered. The scooping neckline and fitted bodice would be something Buck would appreciate. Not that she cared. Fletcher's likes and dislikes were more important. She would focus her thoughts on him and tame this unruly passion for the wrong man.

Maggie swept out of the back room and set a box on the counter. "Your dress, all wrapped up and ready to go. I have no doubts you'll send the ladies rushing out to order one just like it when you wear this to the Wilson's dinner party."

*Perhaps.* However, if Maggie wore it, she would no doubt start a stampede. Her lavender day dress perfectly complemented a wealth of raven hair and her lithesome figure. She had the form for fashion setting, just not the fortune. She also didn't have an envious bone in her body.

Amy quashed the spurt of jealousy. Her friend was as beautiful inside as out, which was more than she could say about herself at the moment. “It’s Mr. Worth who should get the credit. I’m simply bearing witness to his talents.”

“I think you do more than that, and I’m certain Fletcher would agree.” Maggie spoke in a low tone as if the relationship between the banker and the wealthy widow was a well-kept secret rather than the talk of the town. “Are you decided on him, then?”

Amy toyed with the strings on the box rather than hold her friend’s teasing gaze. “I always planned on accepting his proposal, at the right time. He’s exactly the kind of a husband I need, and I select very carefully, as you know.”

Maggie breathed a soft laugh. “You make it sound like you’re picking out upholstery.”

Amy forced a smile. Her friend knew Fletcher was an excellent choice. So what if his kisses—the few she’d let him steal—failed to make her heart pound and her knees go weak. Pulse-racing passion wasn’t what she wanted anyway. That led down a road to ruin. “It’s past time I married, and it will stop whoever is harassing me.”

Maggie’s teasing smile fell into a look of concern. “Tell me about this bodyguard you mentioned. Do you think he’ll be able to find the attacker? I’ve been so worried.”

Amy glanced back at the magazine while she considered what to say. She shared nearly everything with her friend, yet she didn’t want to mention her troublesome attraction to Buck. It was too embarrassing. “Mr. O’Connor seems capable, but he insists on accompanying me everywhere. He’s rather rough around the edges, so I’m hesitant to bring him along to meetings and important social gatherings.”

“Sounds dreadful.” Maggie cocked her head. “Where did you find him?”

That wasn't something Amy wanted to go into either. "Near Girard. Fletcher isn't too pleased with my choice, but he understands the need to ensure my safety."

She sighed as she flipped through the pages of the magazine and let her gaze wander over drawings of well-dressed men. *Gentlemen*. The kind she needed to marry if she wanted to assure her position in a town that was becoming increasingly sophisticated.

In some ways, she was like a circus performer walking a tightrope, balancing her desire for more independence with her need to be accepted as an influential member of society. The right man could help her keep that balance. Fletcher was the right man.

The bell tinkled. She did a double take when she saw who had entered.

Buck stopped a few steps inside the store. He held his hat fisted in his hand, the only indication he might be nervous. His flaxen hair had been cut above his collar and smoothed, although willful strands still curled behind his ears. A neatly trimmed mustache, which framed his mouth, drew her eyes to the firm lips that had melded with hers in a hot kiss.

"Mr. O'Connor." Oh no, not breathless, she needed to sound firm, in charge. "Come in, and meet my good friend, Mrs. Timmons, the owner of this shop."

Buck tipped his head, not quite getting to a bow. "Mrs. Timmons. My pleasure."

Maggie's lips were parted and she stared like she'd been struck dumb. Amy nudged her and she dipped a quick curtsy and offered a shy smile. "The pleasure is mine. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

*Looking forward to... What?*

Amy turned away from her besotted friend. Why should she care if Maggie found this exasperating man attractive? He wasn't her personal property.

Buck ventured inside, appearing hesitant. His gaze flickered over dresses draped on steel frames shaped to look like women's figures. He acknowledged Amy with a nod, and then proceeded to engage Maggie in small talk, smiling in that mockingly flirty way of his.

Her friend didn't look so odd standing next to him. In fact, Buck and Maggie made a perfect pair, with her classic dark beauty next to his fair, rugged handsomeness.

Amy bit back an agonized groan. She felt like a plump brown hen compared to her beautiful, willowy friend. She couldn't care, wouldn't care. But she sure hadn't come here to play matchmaker. She stepped away from the counter, anxious to be gone. "If Mr. O'Connor plans to accompany me all over town, we need to go to Baumbergers to purchase proper clothes for him."

Maggie, who hadn't taken her eyes off Buck, smiled more broadly. "That means you'll be at the Wilson's dinner party. I've been invited as well. Mr. Bain will be escorting Mrs. Langford..."

Amy wanted to strangle her friend. She'd all but asked Buck to escort her. "There's no need for Mr. O'Connor to attend. I'll be with Mr. Bain and he can see to my safety."

Buck shed the pleasant expression he'd worn for Maggie. "Maybe your Mr. Bain can keep you safe, maybe not. But it's important that I meet everyone you know. We talked about this."

Amy clamped down on an urgent desire to set into him. She reached for the package on the counter. "We can discuss this later. Now that I think about it, I doubt Mr. Baumberger has anything readymade that's large enough to fit you. I'm afraid you can't go."

"Wait! I think I may have a solution," Maggie offered.

Was she that oblivious? They didn't need a solution. Buck could stay home.

“My best client lost her husband recently, and I’ve been holding on to some things she ordered for him. He was a big man, like you. Let me fetch them and you can try them on.” She breezed into a back room.

Amy swung around to glare at Buck. “You cannot continue to countermand my orders, especially not in public.”

His tawny brows shot up. “Your *orders*? Is that what’s got you so heated up, that I don’t follow orders? I thought maybe my *ruffian* appearance was rubbing you the wrong way.”

“Rubbing me—?” Her breath rushed out in a short burst. “I could care less what you look like, except for when you trail after me. It’s important I maintain a certain image.”

He moved closer, but instead of looming over her, he propped his arm on the counter and leaned down, bringing them eye-to-eye. “You’re right about one thing, darlin’. You didn’t give a damn about my appearance last night, when you kissed me like there was no tomorrow.”

Shock riveted her to the spot a full second before fury rushed in. “Why you....”

She drew back her hand to slap him.

He caught her wrist in an iron grip. It didn’t hurt, but still brought tears to her eyes.

“You are no gentleman,” she said under her breath.

“And you’re not behaving much like a lady,” he countered in a low voice.

At the sound of footsteps, he released her abruptly.

“Here you are.” Maggie handed Buck an armful of clothes. “Why don’t you go to the back and try these on?”

Amy’s face burned with shame. Had her friend witnessed that dreadful scene?

Buck’s footsteps receded and the room fell silent—crushingly silent.

After a moment, Maggie gently rested her hand on Amy's shoulder. "What was that about?"

She shut her eyes to hold back hot tears. What kind of explanation could be made for her abominable behavior? Buck had acted in his normal manner, with complete disregard for convention. But she knew better. She hadn't acted at all like a lady. What was it about him that sent her emotions spinning like a top? He could seduce her one minute and infuriate her the next. "Nothing. It's been a trying day."

Maggie's concerned expression swam into view. "You can talk to me, you know."

Amy longed to throw herself into her friend's arms and weep. Instead, she drew in a steady breath and straightened her shoulders. "I'm glad no one else was in the store to witness that unpardonable display. I promise I won't embarrass you again."

Her friend gave a gentle laugh and embraced her with a quick hug. "You? Embarrass me? I can't imagine you ever would, but it wouldn't matter if you did. You stood by me when I first moved here and everyone treated me like a pariah. I never could have bought this shop or gained acceptance without your friendship and support. Everyone respects you, Amy. Not because of what you wear or the man you choose to marry. They respect you because of who you are."

She sighed with uncertainty. "Respect is a tenuous thing. All it takes is one misstep. And I have to maintain my standing in this community if I'm to have enough influence to complete my father's work."

"How much more do you have to do before you're satisfied?" Maggie asked softly.

Amy's throat tightened. She couldn't answer the question because she wasn't the one who needed to be satisfied. It was her father and he was no longer here. If she could secure a legacy to honor him, she would be

content. “When my investment in this railroad pays off, then I will be in a better position to use my wealth as a tool to influence progress.”

Buck’s slow steps sounded behind her before he came around in front of her and halted. He clutched the lapels of an evening coat, cut away to reveal a crimson vest that accentuated the snowy shirt and black satin tie. Light gray trousers hung perfectly over his long legs, breaking at the tops of his boots.

Had she thought him handsome before? Dressed like a gentleman, he was devastating.

“Will this be appropriate?” His polite tone belied a glint in his eyes that was anything but deferential.

Her hand drifted up over the rebellious organ in her chest, and she nodded, not trusting speech.

“Mr. O’Connor, that looks like it was made for you,” Maggie enthused. She walked around him with her fingers to her chin and a speculative gleam in her eyes. “All you need now is a hat and gloves.” She snatched one of the remaining items from the counter. “Here’s the hat. Those gloves were ordered with the suit, but I’m not certain they’ll fit.”

Amy eyed Buck’s large hands—the same hands that had held her suspended off the ground while he’d ravished the tops of her breasts with his lips. Her flesh quivered at the memory. She raised her eyes and blushed as she met a heated stare.

He settled the black hat on his head. One side of his mouth curled in a dangerous smile. He’d shown he knew enough of manners, when he chose to use them. She had focused on his rough edges because she didn’t dare consider the possibilities.

Mr. O’Connor might be salvageable, made presentable, but he wasn’t the gentleman he pretended to be. He was too unpredictable. Uncontrollable. He personified passion, and that devilish look in his eyes assured he would use this advantage for his own benefit.



She would unmask the impostor for Maggie's sake.

Her fingers shook as she lifted the gloves. These would never fit Buck's powerful hands. She wasn't sure there were fine gloves made to fit hands like his. "You can always tell a gentleman by how he draws on his gloves. Does he pull them on with an air of sophistication? Or does he jerk and tug like an uncouth workman?"

Without a word, he snatched the gloves from her hands and plunged his fingers into the soft leather. Her heart constricted the moment she saw him realize his mistake. Disbelief flickered in his eyes, then embarrassment, and something else that sank hooks into her heart.

He frowned and flexed his fingers, trying to loosen the skin-tight gloves enough to peel them off. She winced as the leather ripped across his knuckles.

His breath whooshed out in a sound somewhere between aggravation and disgust. "Let me get changed. I'll pay for these clothes."

He strode off without sparing her a glance.

She whirled away from Maggie's wide-eyed astonishment. Guilt gnawed at her insides along with the miserable jealousy that had spurred her to taunt him. "Put the clothes on my tab," she choked out. "The gloves, as well."

Maggie wrapped the items in sticky silence.

When Buck returned, he cradled their package in one arm. Without a word, he flung open the door and waited while she exited.

She glanced up at a gaze as cold as a frozen pond and trembled. With face burning, she directed her feet forward. How could she explain? She couldn't. All she could do at this point would be to apologize, and even that wouldn't be enough.

"I'm sor—" She gasped as she was pitched forward, driven by the force of Buck's hands.

A splintering crash sounded from behind, then a shower of icy water drenched her.

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## CHAPTER 8



**B**uck's shoulder burned like it was on fire. He was soaked to the skin, and his face was pressed into a damp, frilly bustle.

He dragged himself to his knees, grunting when a sharp pain radiated down his arm. "Amy?"

She twisted around to stare at him with wide eyes. Her hair clung to her neck in damp clumps. The little hat leaned drunkenly to one side. She looked like a drowned cat balled up in pile of wet silk.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I think so."

Buck jerked to his feet. He gritted his teeth to hold in a groan. Whatever had struck his shoulder might've dislocated it again. He'd heard something scrape above them a second before he pushed her.

Behind him, jagged pieces of wood and twisted metal rims were all that was left from a large rain barrel that had accidentally fallen off the roof.

He looked up.

A bearded man peeked over the edge, then disappeared.

"Son of a....!" Buck didn't finish the curse as he trotted backwards into the street. That was no accident. He whipped his revolver out of its holster.

The attacker leapt onto the roof of a neighboring building.

"Get inside," Buck ordered Amy.

By God, he was going to get that sneaky bastard.

He kept his eyes trained on the fleeing man while he jogged down the street. The mud sucked at his boots, which slowed him down. He tried to hold his dangling left arm against his chest. Damn thing wouldn't follow his command.

The wiry man hurled himself at the next rooftop.

Buck halted and blinked to clear his vision, then fired. Nearby, a woman screamed. He kept his gaze fixed on the top of the building where the man had vanished.

A crowd formed, buzzing like confused bees in a hive. He broke through the press of bodies to keep his prey in sight.

Atop a brick façade, the fleeing man appeared. He hurled himself onto the next building. Like a monkey.

Buck shook his head to clear it and forced his feet to keep running. His target could be hiding behind that railing on the second story or could've slipped into a door on top of the hardware store. No one in his right mind would come out the front with a gunman watching, which meant he'd likely go out the back.

With a curse, Buck scrambled over a picket fence and stumbled into the narrow space between two buildings. He jerked to a stop at the rear of the hardware store. There was no way out. It bumped up against a building that faced the next street.

He clenched his teeth against the agony in his shoulder as he circled around to the other side and went down an ally that emptied into an open square.

The agile bastard had probably jumped on top of the adjacent general store.

Buck ran inside with his gun shielded inside his coat to prevent panic among the customers. An old man and a boy chatted with a clerk behind the

counter. “You see a skinny fellow with a beard and a dark coat come through here?” he asked.

The trio looked perplexed.

Buck huffed with frustration. The description fit more than half the men in town. “Are there stairs leading to the roof?” He ran toward the back, not waiting for an answer.

As soon as he passed through the doorway, he raised his gun, flattened himself against the wall of the storeroom and forced his breathing to slow. He couldn’t see anything except piles of boxes and stocked shelves.

Familiar smells—wool, flour and tobacco—called to mind an image of his stepfather’s store. Another ghost from his past. He still wore the key around his neck to serve as a reminder of the man who’d trusted him. A man he had failed. He wouldn’t fail this time. He would save his cousin’s land and keep Amy safe while he was at it.

With the back of his sleeve, he wiped sweat out of his eyes then peered down a dark hallway. Nothing moved. He didn’t hear any sounds. Not even the scurry of rats. His perusal stopped at a closed door halfway down the corridor.

He pulled the hammer with his thumb as he crept over and tried the knob.

It was locked.

“Dammit!” His anger soared as he rushed back outside to the town square. Amy’s attacker could have gone into another building. Any building. Or vanished into the crowd.

Buck turned in a slow circle with his gun raised. The people around him scattered. At a buckboard parked next to the city scales, a bearded man in a sack coat hopped onto the seat of the loaded wagon. Was that the attacker?

Despite the numbness in his arm and throbbing pain in his side, he stumbled toward the wagon with his revolver raised. “Hey you, at the wagon, put your hands where I can see them,” he yelled.

A white horse blocked his vision. Buck tilted his head to look up at a soldier on horseback, who appeared as a dark shadow with the sun behind him.

“Put away the gun, mister.”

Where the hell were these Federals when that bastard nearly dashed Amy’s brains out? They always did have lousy timing.

Buck released the hammer and motioned with the revolver. He had to wet his lips so he could speak. “That man,” he gasped, “tried to—”

Something struck the back of his skull. He dropped like a stone.



Buck groaned as he sat up on the edge of the narrow cot. He couldn’t lie on that moldy blanket another minute. Stunk like it’d been used to carpet a stable.

With careful motions, he rotated his injured shoulder, which was better now that a doctor had come along and jerked it back into place. That was more than he could say for his aching head. He touched an egg-sized knot and winced.

Those damned soldiers had knocked him out, tossed him in a cart and hauled him to jail like *he* was the criminal. On top of that, he’d been eluded by a suit-wearing monkey, and duped into ruining a perfectly good pair of gloves. How much more humiliation could one day bring?

He surveyed his temporary quarters with disgust. He’d been locked in one of the limestone-block cells that’d served the fort and the city for the better part of the last two decades.

During the war, this jail had been where the Federals kept prisoners stacked twenty-deep in lockups designed for one man. He knew this only from second-hand accounts, having never been captured. He wouldn’t have seen the inside of a cell, at any rate. He would’ve been hung from a

convenient tree, or shot and his body rolled into a gully to be picked clean by scavengers. The Union army had given no quarter to partisan soldiers, and thus hadn't received any.

Buck lurched to his feet and paced in a small circle. How the hell could he get out of here before somebody got suspicious and started checking around? He wasn't well known like William Quantrill, who'd masterminded the attack on Lawrence, or Bloody Bill Anderson, who'd carried out the kill order with merciless glee. But even after seven years, the lust for revenge still burned in the hearts and minds of people who would never forget. People like Amy.

Buck dropped down onto the cot and slipped his throbbing arm into the makeshift sling. The source of his pain wasn't purely physical. His regrets could fill an ocean, but they wouldn't turn back the clock or change a decision made in hot-blooded rage. This time, things would be different. He could gain justice for his cousin without harming innocents.

Footsteps sounded in the narrow hallway. Buck lifted his head as Amy's voice drifted in. "I still don't understand why you had to arrest my bodyguard."

"He was running through the streets shooting off a gun. We thought it best to detain him until we figured out what was going on." A diplomatic answer from the officer who'd brought in the doctor. He'd introduced himself as Major Roy.

"Don't you think your time would be better spent tracking down a *real* criminal?"

Buck's lips twitched at Amy's chilly response. His boss had come after him and she was tearing into that major like a terrier. Not an ideal strategy for getting on the man's good side. Had she decided against asking the commanding officer to assign troops for her rally? This was something that would need to be corrected. Having soldiers there would serve Sean's

purpose, but just as importantly, they would provide her with added protection.

A key rattled in the lock. The door swung open and the contingent swarmed in: Amy, still damp but restored to order, Fletcher, looking every inch the rich banker, the sandy-haired major and a baggy-eyed man with a star pinned to his vest.

Buck tamed his nervousness. That would be like a scent to a hound for the lawman and a seasoned army officer.

Amy halted in the middle of the cell with her gloved hands clasped together. Her nostrils flared and a look of consternation crossed her face. If the rancid odors offended him, he could only imagine what they were doing to her sensibilities. Her gaze locked on the sling holding his arm and a crease appeared between her brows. "You're hurt."

The soft concern wrapped around those two words melted away the last of his annoyance with her for that clever little trick with the gloves. "The barrel hit me. Must've thrown my shoulder out." He shrugged. "Old injury. Acts up sometimes."

As she started to move closer, Fletcher snagged her arm and pulled her back. "Can you give us a description of Mrs. Langford's attacker?"

Buck reined in his irritation at the possessive gesture. "Didn't get a real good look. Wiry, dark hair, bushy beard...like a monkey."

The banker scowled. "This is no time for jests."

"I'm not jesting." *Asshole*. "That fellow was jumping from building to building like it was nothing. I lost him somewhere around that mercantile out on the square."

Fletcher's eyes narrowed like he was working out the next move in a game of chess. He slid a glance at the sheriff, who seemed to take it as his cue to comment.

The lawman gripped his gun belt. "That's not much to go on."

"Well, it's more than we had before," Amy shot back.



The sheriff gestured toward Buck with his chin. “This fellow here, he’s your bodyguard?”

“That’s right.” She looked confused at the abrupt turn in the conversation.

Buck held the lawman’s calculated stare. Did the sheriff know something or just have a hunch?

“Where’d you find him?”

Amy lifted her chin defiantly. “He came recommended. From Texas.”

Buck could have kissed her. Instead, he kept a straight face. Amy knew he wasn’t from Texas, but for some reason she stayed true to his story.

The sheriff furrowed his brow. “Why did you hire a man out of Texas?”

Amy drew up straight as a ramrod and leveled a look that would freeze hot iron. “I have been attacked and nearly killed, yet you are interrogating me as if *I* am the criminal.”

Buck wanted to applaud. He flicked a disgusted glance at Fletcher, who suddenly seemed to wake up to the fact that he hadn’t come to his lady’s defense.

“Sheriff Lawson, I believe you owe Mrs. Langford an apology.”

*Nice recovery, Fletch, but too late.*

Lawson’s face darkened. “Pardon if I offended, ma’am. I want to get to the bottom of this much as anyone. That’s why I ask so many questions. Got to turn over every rock. You never know where you might find a scorpion.”

Amy’s cheeks glowed pink. “Mr. O’Connor saved my life today. I hardly think that constitutes the actions of a scorpion, as you so colorfully put it.”

Buck couldn’t restrain a proud smile. By the saints, Amy was beautiful when she got riled up. If he had a woman like her by his side, he’d—

*Hold on there, Bucko.*

He released the dangerous desire with a slow breath. That kind of thinking would earn him nothing but pain. He was here to help his cousin. Sure, he could protect Amy while he was at it, but he wasn't risking his heart again. She'd just rip it out anyway, once she learned the truth.

The major, who'd been quietly observing the proceedings, turned to him. "That man you were holding a gun on, was he the one you saw on the roof?"

Buck rubbed his forehead, trying to recall. "I'm not sure."

Amy's shoulders slumped. The disappointment on her face made him long to take her in his arms and haul her off somewhere safe—somewhere far away from here. "I'm sorry he got away, Mrs. Langford. I'll be ready for him next time."

"Let's hope there isn't a next time." The officer's remark opened the opportunity Buck had been looking for.

He fought a twinge of conscience. It was for Amy's good, even if she wouldn't see it that way. "We need to make sure you and those other women have adequate protection for that rally."

Her eyes widened.

Buck anticipated the checkmate.

Major Roy shot her a puzzled look. "Rally? What rally?"

## CHAPTER 9



*March 15, 1870*

*Girard, Kansas*

“Come to the front, ladies.” Amy turned her back on a stiff wind to address a group of women standing behind her on the railroad platform.

The girls stayed huddled like a gaggle of geese, albeit well-dressed fowl. Amy had seen to that before she’d left Fort Scott. In fact, she had planned everything down to the last detail to ensure this rally would be successful.

Soon, these hopeful young women, most of whom had fled poverty and deprivation, would have husbands and homes. Giving them this opportunity to find better lives wasn’t just beneficial for the railroad. It was good for everyone.

She gestured to a table set up to the side of the podium and gripped her notes tighter as they fluttered in her hand. “Stand there in front of your picnic basket. Hold onto it or this breeze will whisk it away.”

“Breeze?” The incredulous question was posed by one of the more outspoken girls.

Amy smiled. Even though she was only a few years older, she had a hard time thinking of these young women as anything other than girls, given their fresh-faced ignorance of the life they’d stepped into. The flyers sent east had proclaimed the plains to be a veritable Eden, but it wouldn’t hurt to enlighten them as to the reality of paradise.

“You’ve not yet experienced a true Kansas wind, but you’ll know it when you do. That’s why I had you sew lead shot into the hems of your skirts.”

Amy eagerly scanned the crowd. There had to be at least a hundred men. They’d appeared minutes after a bell-clanging, steam-puffing Manchester engine had announced the arrival of the train. The brand-new engine still hissed as it sat resting on the track behind her.

Six more engines would soon chug down these tracks when the Border Tier linked Kansas to the lucrative cattle country in Texas. With trade would come prosperity, and not just for the rich, but for all who took part in this new era of commerce. Her father’s dream was so close she could smell it in the oil and smoke.

Based on current projections, the construction crew would cross into Indian Territory within the month, handily beating their rival. It was up to her to prevent the Land League from getting in the way.

Amy stepped up to the podium with a smile. “Good afternoon, gentlemen.”

The crowd roared their welcome.

She pitched her voice to project over the clamor. “We’re delighted to see so many of you here. We’ll have a prayer, and then we’ll get started on bidding for these picnic baskets. What better way to welcome the newest members of our community?”

“Forget the prayin’ and get to them picnic baskets!” The shout came from a man who’d leapt onto the back of a wagon, presumably to get a better view.

Two soldiers at the perimeter of the crowd nudged their horses toward the buckboard. At the same time, Buck stepped up onto the platform, but not before Fletcher had reached her side.

Amy rested her hand across her stomach, willing her nerves to settle. Major Roy had been good to his word, bringing his troops into town to provide additional security. In fact, he’d insisted on it, after Buck had blurted out that comment about seeing to the safety of the women.

Why couldn’t her bodyguard keep his mouth shut? She hadn’t wanted troops present because it would be interpreted as more heavy-handed tactics. She had allowed it only because she would not risk the women’s lives in case of violence. The chance wasn’t worth taking.

“Let me remind you before we get started.” She raised her voice to draw attention away from the scuffling at the wagon. “The Young Ladies Immigration Society is sponsoring a dance this evening out at the Jansen place. Keep in mind, the Society will be bringing *more* young women to our fair state. If you don’t win the hand of one of these lovely ladies, you’ll have another opportunity in the near future.”

As applause erupted, Amy smiled. For the first time in weeks, she could breathe easy. This rally would be a turning point. She felt it clear to her bones. She gestured to the reverend standing beside her on the platform. The diminutive preacher secured his stovetop hat and stepped up to the podium, smoothing down what appeared to be several sheets of notes.

*Oh dear.* Hopefully, he wouldn’t go on too long. She had purposely forgone speeches to avoid losing the crowd.

“Let us pray...” His booming bass droned on for what seemed like hours. He blessed the generosity of Mr. Joy, then he gave thanks for the

railroad, making some convoluted comparison between the miracle of steam and the magical genie released from Aladdin's lamp.

Good grief, wasn't he overdoing it a bit?

Amy tilted her head and peeked up at the man on her right.

Buck spied at her through half-closed lids. He put his lips near her ear. "Next thing you know, he'll be turning wine into steam."

His warm breath sent a shiver racing across her skin. She nudged him and whispered. "That's disrespectful."

"I agree. A waste of good wine is downright sacrilegious."

Amy curled her lips around her teeth to keep from laughing. She darted a glance at Fletcher, who stood at her other side with his head dutifully bowed.

He frowned while he watched her through his lashes. Was he upset with her for whispering or was his antipathy for her bodyguard? Hopefully, the attacker would be caught soon and she could send Buck on his way and her life would get back to normal.

She tried to ignore the trickle of disappointment. Wasn't *normal* what she wanted?

"Amen." The reverend stepped back.

Scattered applause rippled through the crowd. They had to be clapping out of relief. Still, she couldn't fault the good man's intentions. He was the only preacher within fifty miles who supported the railroad.

Her jitters started up again. Which of these men were members of the secretive Land League? They'd no doubt infiltrated this crowd. No matter. She would preempt their troublemaking by focusing on why these men were here.

Amy regained the podium. "Let's get started."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Buck leave the platform. He'd told her he would be milling about, looking for anyone who resembled the man

who'd attacked her and fled. She was glad he was doing his job, so she could focus on hers.

She turned, gesturing to a golden-haired girl in spring-green calico. "Why don't we begin with your basket, Martha?"

"Hold on there!"

Amy's head whipped around at the angry shout.

A burly man in farmer's denims moved closer to platform. "If I marry one of these gals and sign your agreement, does it give me rights to any piece of land I staked out?" He waved a tattered piece of paper. "This letter King Joy posted all over creation puts a whole host of limits on our claims. Are you saying he's changed his mind?"

Amy moistened her lips. The angry settler was referring to town site claims, one of the most hotly contested issues. "The railroad reserves the right to hold back certain land so we can ensure a fair means of selling it to those who'll actually reside there. We don't want speculators to abuse good people by taking prime real estate and then selling it back to them at exorbitant prices."

"Well hell, little lady, ain't that exactly what King Joy is doin'?"

She gasped as the man leapt onto the platform. His feet had barely touched the wood when he flew backwards and landed flat in the dirt with a startled expression.

Buck glared down at the prone man. "No one is allowed on the platform with the ladies."

The red-haired farmer stood slowly. He picked up his hat and slapped it on his thigh, narrowing his eyes. All around him, vicious insults and profane encouragements peppered the air. The crowd spread out, opening a circle around the two men, giving them room.

"No! Don't—" she started.

"Stay back, Amy." Fletcher constrained her arm with a tight grip that communicated he wasn't letting her go to Buck's aid. She knew that would

be foolish. It would distract him.

Buck hadn't moved a hair. He didn't raise his fists or indicate he would fight, but she knew for a certainty he would not back down should the farmer choose to start it. His shoulder had only just healed, even though he'd brushed his injuries off as *nothing*.

"You men move back!" Major Roy's directive rang out. He motioned for his troops to move forward, and they urged their mounts into the tight mass of bodies with guns drawn.

God forbid, this would become a bloodbath.

"Put your guns away!" She jerked away from Fletcher's grip and went as far as the edge of the platform. "Mr. Joy wants nothing more than to see those who'd settle and improve this land be given the opportunity to do so." She yelled over the shouting men. "He's acting in good faith by offering incentives, like providing the means for eligible young ladies to come west, so you can marry and have families. Let's get back to the reason we're here, to bid on these baskets and meet some of these ladies."

Finally, the soldiers broke through the crowd. As they escorted the grumbling farmer away at gunpoint, the crowd shifted like a human sea and their discontented voices rose in waves.

Desperate to avoid a riot, Amy hauled the reticent young woman up beside her. "I'm pleased to introduce Martha Lennox."

The girl trembled, clutching her basket as if it were a lifeline.

"Martha is an excellent cook," Amy announced. "I can smell the fried chicken she's packed in this basket, and a delicious apple pie."

As the rumbling subsided, Amy anxiously searched the faces in the crowd. Some glowered, others appeared disgruntled, but many looked interested. For the most part, these were decent, God-fearing men who were looking for a better life, men who needed wives and wanted families. A few troublemakers were stirring things up.



Buck remained in front of the platform with his arms crossed and his feet planted in a wide stance. Her rational mind told her one man couldn't stop a mob, yet there he stood like a knight before his lady, willing to defy the dragons who would devour her. Crazy as it seemed, his mere presence created a sense of security she hadn't felt in such a long time.

"I'll take that basket!" A shout went up from the middle of the crowd. The pleasant-looking young fellow elbowed his way forward.

Suddenly, a broad-shouldered man cut him off near the platform. "Before we get started, I want to know for certain our titles will be secure. We won't sign off on cutthroat trust deeds and be at the mercy of some Boston capitalist."

Murmurs of discontent swept through the crowd.

Amy met the man's sky blue eyes. He looked vaguely familiar, but she was certain she didn't know him. "The investors have no interest in taking away your land."

"S'at so?" His lips curved in a mocking smile. Now she could see why she thought she'd recognized him. His cocky attitude reminded her of Buck. "As it stands now, the railroad can foreclose without us even knowing."

Amy moistened her dry lips. He'd touched on a prickly issue: the right of the railroad to revoke the settlers' titles by posting publication of foreclosure in eastern newspapers. It was a move designed to protect investors in case struggling farmers didn't make their payments, but it appeared to be an attempt to swindle these men out of their land. "No one is going to take away your land if you pay for it."

"*You* say. But why should we believe it? You work for King Joy."

The grumbles grew louder.

Fletcher touched her arm. With his eyes, he asked permission.

Amy stepped back and let him have the podium. They sure hadn't liked *her* answer.

Fletcher gripped his lapels and faced the crowd. “The reason you men are gathered here today is to pursue what we all want—homes and families. Those of you who truly desire this have nothing to fear. No one will take your land if you are honest and hardworking. The richest soil is yours to till, and this railroad will open the door to markets eager for the fruits of your labor. The possibilities are boundless.” Her banker’s rich baritone projected over the crowd. His voice rang with conviction.

“But there are those among you who would spoil your hope for happiness.” He paused to search the upturned faces. “Yes, that’s right. These men want you to suspect Mr. Joy and the railroad because it takes the attention off their misdeeds. They don’t want to till the land. They want to get *rich* at your expense. They want to twist the truth and disrupt the peace until you’ve missed the opportunity to benefit from the wealth that will come to you on this track.” He gestured behind him, his expression pleading. “*If* it can be completed. Don’t let these wolves fool you. They are your true enemies.”

The soft hiss of the engine put a period on the end of his fervent appeal.

Amy held her breath. The men had gone quiet and listened. Why wouldn’t they? Fletcher exuded confidence and empathy, and his brief speech had been downright poetic. He had the makings of a congressman or a senator. Working together, they could accomplish great things. Her father would be so proud...

Thundering hooves shattered her reverie.

“Fire!” The shout came from a soldier on horseback, tearing down the middle of the street. “They’re burning ties!”

Chaos erupted. Men shouted. Some ran away while others cheered. Even the wind kicked up its heels and flung dirt into the air. Amy blinked, her eyes and nose stinging.

In what seemed like mere minutes, Major Roy had rounded up his men and galloped out of town, leaving a dusty brown cloud in their wake. What

was left of the crowd dissipated until only a handful of men, who looked vaguely disappointed, wandered off.

Amy stared the deserted street in front of her, numb with shock.

“Come along, ladies.” Dr. Warner shooed the women towards his office. Behind them, the train stood silent.

Fletcher swore under his breath.

Amy sank to the edge of the platform before her knees gave way. She’d been so certain the answer to their problems was to bring wives to these men who longed for families. The loneliness and yearning she’d seen in their faces proved it was something they wanted, and something that would be good for everyone. Now the Land League had taken even this away.

She clenched her fists until her nails bit into her palms. By Heaven, she hadn’t come this far to be defeated. Her father hadn’t struggled and died in vain. He had started this state on a path to prosperity, and she would see his work completed even if she had to drag every man, woman and child kicking and screaming down that railroad track.

“Mrs. Langford?” Buck’s shadow blocked the bright sun.

He only used that deferential tone when he wanted something.

“Are you all right?” he asked in a tone that was surprisingly soft.

“Good God, man. Are you an *imbecile*?” Fletcher hovered over her. “Of course, she’s not *all right*. Can’t you see? This rally was a disaster.”

Buck gave a derisive snort. “Aw, you’re just sayin’ that to make her feel better.”

Amy shot to her feet, furious with herself, the situation and these two exasperating men. “If you want to fight like mongrel dogs, go do it somewhere else and stop wasting my time. I have to figure out how to get things back on track. This railroad *will* strike the border by May. Even if I have to spend my entire fortune to ensure it.”



Buck tied the reins of his horse to a scrubby bush in front of a sod cabin that blended in with the brown landscape. Nearby, a stable had been constructed from what looked like a mixture of clay and sticks. Fence posts awaited rails. Based on Sean's hurried directions, this had to be his place, but it sure didn't look like much.

As Buck approached the open door, he eased his revolver out of the holster. It was a habit he couldn't seem to break. He'd learned too well the lessons of war, where an ambush could wait at what seemed a welcoming home. He peered inside.

His cousin sat at a small table, hunched over, scribbling on a piece of paper.

Buck cleared his throat.

Sean looked up and smiled. "Buck! Come in and join me!"

His gun went into the holster, putting away the uneasy feeling was more difficult. As he crossed the dirt-packed floor, he took in the one room abode. Clothes and blankets had been piled on a narrow bed. A shovel, hoe, plow blades and other farm implements were leaned against the walls. None appeared to have been used much.

He sat down in the only other chair. "You said to rendezvous here. We need to talk about our next move."

"I think we can afford to celebrate a little first." Sean lifted a jug off the floor and poured clear liquid into a tin cup. "Made it myself. Call it Stone Fence, because you'll feel like you smacked into one if you drink too much." He chuckled and poured into a second cup. "Let's toast the bonfires burning between here and Baxter Springs."

Buck leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. The image of Amy's face and the stricken disbelief in her eyes had tormented him all the way out here. He wasn't used to crushing dreams and didn't much care for it.

Sean tossed back the liquor, scrunched his face, then released a harsh breath. “Ah, that’ll cure what ails you.” He leaned forward on his arms. “So, how’s the job going? Have you crawled into her bed yet? I bet she’s hotter than—”

Buck lunged out of the chair, grabbed Sean by his shirt and dragged him halfway across the table. “Shut your foul mouth! She’s a *lady*, not a strumpet.”

Regret struck the moment Buck met his cousin’s stunned expression. He released Sean and dropped back into the chair, sucking in a deep breath to calm the unexpected rush of rage.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” Sean scowled and straightened his shirt. “Are you falling for that Jezebel?”

“She’s not a Jezebel, and I won’t listen to that kind of talk about her.” Buck jerked to his feet. He paced inside the cabin, flexing his fists.

Sean eyed him warily. “She’s a pretty little colleen. I just thought—”

“I’m not here to talk about Mrs. Langford.” Buck sent Sean another warning glare. “I agreed to help you keep this land. This place you said you’ve improved. Doesn’t look to me like you’ve done much more than get by.”

Sean’s complexion darkened. “What’re you saying?”

Buck forced himself to sit down. The emotions bouncing around in his chest had unsettled him. He had to be on guard against caring too much for Amy or the conflicting loyalties would tear him in two.

He stared out the open door until his anger subsided. “Just tell me what you’re up to, besides farming. I don’t care what it is. But I need to know the truth. We got to have trust between us if we’re to do this thing together.”

Sean folded the piece of paper he’d been writing on and pushed it aside. “I’m not speculating on town sites like that farmer at the rally, if that’s what you’re asking. I staked me out a good piece of land, aim to sell some and

farm the rest. I stopped making improvements when I thought I might lose it.”

Buck leaned back and stretched his legs out. “Makes sense.”

Sean gestured to Buck’s untouched drink. “Have a nip. It won’t kill you,”

“Don’t need it.”

“Why are you so dead set against drinking my whiskey?” Sean shoved the cup over, splashing some of the contents on the table.

Buck leveled a hard look at his cousin. “You’ll recall my old man was stabbed to death in a brawl. A drunken brawl.”

Da’s death wasn’t the only reason he avoided strong drink. It was his own weakness for the foul brew. He wasn’t going to admit that.

Sean’s expression sobered. “I recall Uncle Seamus had a fierce temper.”

A familiar pall cast its shadow over the room.

Buck hunched over the table and set the full cup aside. An evil spirit of rage and violence had cursed his father. It wanted to destroy him too. During the war, the beast had ruled him until that fiasco in Lawrence had forced him to face what he’d become. Since then, he’d vowed to maintain control and not release that vicious creature ever again. Too much liquor would open the cage. “I was surprised to see you at the rally. Thought you’d be out burning ties.”

“There were plenty of boys willing to burn things,” Sean said with a dark smile. “I wanted to find out whether that railroad promoter would have any luck selling her picnic baskets. Did you notice how nervous she got when we started asking questions?”

“She didn’t look nervous to me.” Buck leaned back with folded arms, his mood growing increasingly foul. “She stood up to that crowd and showed more grit than those cowardly blowhards. Regardless of whether you agree with her position, she defended it well enough.”

And without deceit, which was more than he could say for himself.

His cousin's features grew stiff with resentment. Buck recognized the look, considering he'd seen it in the mirror for most of his life. He'd hoped this quest would give him a chance to regain something he'd lost. So far, all it had gotten him was more trouble.

Sean poured another splash into his own cup and took a swig. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "You've gone sweet on her, haven't you? She's fooled you just like Amos warned. If you listen to her, you haven't got the real story."

"What's the *real* story?"

"They're a pack of thieves, nothing more. Even if I took out a loan to pay King Joy's ridiculous price, he can foreclose without me even knowing. Not only that, if I want to sell, I can't. The title isn't assignable until full payment is made. Or unless the railroad pleases to grant me the privilege, which they won't." Despair flashed across Sean's face. "We can't trust them, but we have to do business with them if we want to stay here."

Buck stabbed his fingers through his hair. God, he wished he'd never heard about this damned railroad. "You still think a slowdown will give you the best bargaining chip?"

"What else have we got? The only way that bastard Joy will deal with us is if we're negotiating from a position of power. If we can't squeeze him, we can't get him to budge on price or terms."

Buck rubbed his temples. His head ached just thinking about this snarled-up mess. "Burning more ties isn't the answer. That's just going to bring the army down on your head in bigger numbers and with bigger guns. You can't win that war. Believe me, I know."

He'd vowed to get Sean a fair deal, but how the hell could he ensure that and protect Amy in the process? Some devil had provoked him, made him crazy enough to think he could do both. He couldn't walk away from either commitment. His honor, tattered as it was, wouldn't let him.

He took a deep breath. “We’ll figure this out together. But I need your help. I’ve got to find out who’s responsible for these attacks on Mrs. Langford and stop him.”

Sean opened his mouth like he was about to object.

Buck held up his hand. “Trust me on this. Making war on women will only hurt your cause. I’ll work from the inside. Help you slow things down. Find ways to influence whoever has the power to make changes to these terms.”

“That’s not enough. We got to strike now.” Sean slammed his fist against his palm. “While they’re reeling from this blow.”

His cousin had a point.

Buck rested his arms on his knees and stared at the floor while he sifted through what he knew. “The railroad is being routed through Baxter Springs. Amy—I mean, Mrs. Langford—thinks that’s a bad idea because the legal crossing point into Indian Territory is west of there, near Chetopa. Her boss doesn’t agree with her. But if he can’t bribe enough politicians and Indians to get the agreement changed then the railroad will have to lay an extra seventeen miles of track.”

He straightened to see if Sean had caught his drift.

His cousin jerked up straight in his chair. “I’ll be damned. That’ll slow ’em down. But we got to be sure the other line has a chance to catch up.” He rubbed a finger across his upper lip. “The railroads are fighting over qualified workers.”

Siphoning workers wouldn’t require hurting Amy or shaming her. She wouldn’t even have to be involved. Buck warmed to the idea. “Any idea how to do that?”

“We can put out word the Border Tier has to slow down because of vandalism. Men don’t get paid if they don’t work. Those track layers will go right to the Katy’s offices.”



That would put the focus back on the burned ties, which would make Amy's misstep look all the worse and disgrace her. *Damn.*

"It doesn't take much to correct a rumor like that. I'll come up with something else and let you know." Buck pushed back his chair. The ache in his head spread to his heart. Annoying, how it decided to start feeling again about the time he met Amy.

Sean reached across the table and grabbed his arm. "Be careful not to cozy up to that woman, coz. If Amos suspects you might turn on us, he knows enough to make trouble for you."

Buck jerked his arm away and stood. Sean's insulting remarks about Amy had enraged him more than this pathetic threat. Still, he wouldn't allow his cousin to think Sanford could lead him around with a ring in his nose. "You tell Amos the last man who crossed me didn't get the chance to do it again."

Something flickered in Sean's eyes that hadn't been there before. Fear.

Buck turned on his heel and left the cabin. *Great.* Now his own cousin was afraid of him.

He'd made sure of it, hadn't he? Well, hell, he hadn't stayed alive by appearing weak. But God, he was so tired of people looking at him like he was some kind of monster.

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## CHAPTER 10



Amy allowed Fletcher to take her arm before they started up the red-carpeted stairs to the second floor of the hotel. She gritted her teeth when he patted her hand for what seemed like the hundredth time. “No doubt, Mr. Joy will respond quickly to your telegram.”

“No doubt,” she echoed, her voice heavy with resignation.

She’d telegraphed the dreadful news to her boss so he wouldn’t hear it from someone else, but now she needed to come up with a plan to replace those burned ties without an outlay of additional money. An impossible task.

The railroad was already in financial distress, having far exceeded construction estimates, thanks to Mr. Chanute’s *first-class* materials. Not only that, but the disaster today would cost precious time. A commodity no one could replace.

“The Sedalia paper predicts the MK&T will make the border by mid-May.” Her voice wavered. “I don’t see how that’s possible if they’re as far behind as we think.”

Fletcher patted again. “Don’t worry. We’ll be in Baxter Springs long before the Katy comes anywhere close to striking the border. And once we’ve crossed out of Kansas into Indian Territory, all will be forgiven.”

*If only.* James Joy hadn't earned a reputation for mercy. How many board members and assistants had he gone through over the past few years? She'd lost count. Mostly because she'd never imagined she would be in their position.

She pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and wiped away the tears. "This hotel smells of paint and new carpet. The odors are bothersome."

"Yes, they are noxious."

Amy released an aggravated breath. Fletcher's agreement to everything had worn thin. Especially after he'd flared up at Buck, and then made that disparaging remark. He hadn't meant to hurt her and had only spoken the truth. The rally *had* been a disaster. Still, he needn't have pointed out the obvious. Belatedly, he seemed to have picked up on the hurt he'd caused and had spent the past six hours trying to make up for it. But she didn't need his head-nodding and handholding. She needed ideas for how to fix this mess.

"There is a possibility...no, a very high probability that Mr. Joy will release me from my duties with the railroad." Amy raised her chin, refusing to let it quiver.

Her father wouldn't have put up with tears and an attitude of defeat. His confidence in her abilities and his insistence on nothing less than her best effort had gotten her this far. He would be ashamed of her if she gave up now. She'd find some way to help this railroad win, even if she couldn't do it from the front lines.

They reached the door to her room and Fletcher took her arms. "Amy, look at me." His eyes were warm as morning chocolate. "*You* didn't burn those ties. Mr. Joy is astute enough to realize that, and also to know how foolish it would be to shut you out. You've gained tremendous support in Fort Scott for his railroad. This trouble with the settlers isn't your fault."

She wanted desperately to believe Mr. Joy would be as benevolent. "Nevertheless, he'll certainly withdraw support for my immigration

program. I should never have allowed Major Roy to divert his troops. That was bad judgment on my part, and I shall have to shoulder the blame.”

“The blame?” Fletcher tightened his grip on her arms. “I recall it was the major who insisted on assigning troops for that rally. He should’ve arranged to have enough men in both places. I hope you included that little fact in your report.”

Amy shook her head, emphatically. “The Army’s troops are already spread too thin trying to protect all the lines that are building west and south. I refuse to lay the blame on Major Roy. *I* should’ve found some other way to arrange security. Honestly, I wouldn’t have given a thought to using those troops if Mr. O’Connor hadn’t—”

“My God. You aren’t giving credence to anything that ignorant gorilla suggests, are you?” Fletcher’s appalled expression made the words unnecessary.

She gripped the doorknob. She could ignore his caustic remark and retire on peaceful terms and stew for the next two hours. “Mr. O’Connor is not ignorant, nor is he a gorilla. He prevented that man from accosting me today, and his quick actions saved me from having my brains dashed out by a rain barrel. He is doing his job. I will do mine. Please try to get along with him. For my sake.”

Fletcher’s face clouded over. She waited to see whether he would argue with her again. Instead, he put his hand on the door and pushed it open. Before she realized his intentions, he hauled her inside, shutting the door behind them.

“What are you doing?” she cried.

“I need to talk to you in private. Just for a few minutes.”

Being alone in her room with him for a *single* minute was a bad idea. “What if someone saw you come in here? This is not appropriate.”

He placed a finger on her lips. “Don’t scold, darling. I have something for you to consider that might help your standing with Mr. Joy.”

“What might that be?”

He ran his hands over her arms with an easy familiarity that made warnings clang in her head. “Because of my excellent work in Baxter Springs, Mr. Joy is giving me a special role with the railroad. I’ll be leading negotiations with the Indian tribes whose land we’ll pass through on the way to Texas. If I’m successful—and I know I shall be—I believe he will select me to replace Mr. Coates as President. He has said as much.”

Amy’s chest tightened. Fletcher’s good fortune should make her heart sing. So why was it playing a funeral dirge? She would never become president of a railroad. Investing as a silent partner and using her wealth to influence men’s decisions was all she could expect. It should be enough. “That’s wonderful. But I’m not certain how this pertains to my situation.”

Of course, she knew what was coming, but she hoped there was something else. Something he had thought of that would keep her from being relegated to the background.

“Marry me, Amy. Be my life partner. Work beside me. I need your support, your intelligence, your good business sense.” The words tumbled from his lips in a hurried stream. Slipping his arms around her waist, he drew her close and pressed his lips to hers.

Despite her misgivings, she allowed the kiss because she was curious about her reaction to the man she planned to marry. His lips felt smooth, but without the firm warmth that sent pleasure coursing like honey through her veins. His facial hair wasn’t as soft as...

*Good heavens.* Had she really analyzed his kiss and compared it to Buck’s? And what was she doing letting Fletcher kiss her in the first place?

Flustered, she pulled back. “I’m sorry. You need to leave.”

He continued to hold her. “My darling, I can’t help myself. You are so lovely.” His mouth moved across her cheek and down her neck, leaving a damp trail.

She closed her eyes, waiting a moment longer. Fletcher was the man she had chosen, so shouldn't she feel at least a twinge of interest? Perhaps it was better if she didn't. What she felt in Buck's arms threatened the tight control she maintained. If she allowed passion free rein, what would happen? Her mother's guilt-stricken face flashed in her mind. No, this wasn't passion. Sadly, she felt very little. Perhaps she was too numb with shock.

With a sigh, she put her hands on Fletcher's silk vest and gave a determined push. "It's time for you to go."

He dropped to one knee and captured her hands. "Marry me, Amy. Give me a day to look forward to, this week or next."

She released a nervous laugh. "We can't get married in a week. It will take at least six months, maybe more, to plan a proper wedding."

He stood, but still didn't release her hands. "It's best if we marry sooner. That way, we can draw attention away from this unfortunate incident. We can always have a reception later or a party to celebrate."

Heavens, he'd been begging her for her hand, and the more she resisted the more adamant he became. Was it because she represented a challenge? He was fiercely competitive. Once they were married, his ardor would cool. Hopefully. "I can't imagine a few months will make much difference. I want to invite our associates and friends, and they can't make plans on such short notice."

"But—"

"We can talk about this later." She pulled her hands from his and started for the door. "You need to leave. Now."

A knock sounded.

She whirled around in time to see Fletcher dart behind the door. He gestured for her to answer. She shook her head, dismayed. Anyone could see him standing there. It was best not to answer.

The knocking became insistent. It could be Dr. Warner or one of the girls, except they had retired to the boarding house. She cracked open the door, pasting on a smile.

Buck glowered down at her. “You didn’t ask who I was before you opened that door.”

“Why are you up here knocking in the first place?”

He held his hat fisted in his hand and his hair was pushed back as though he’d run his fingers through it repeatedly. The scents she’d come to associate with him—leather, wind, horse—teased her senses.

Her heart thumped harder. Could he smell the sweet odor of Fletcher’s pomatum? “I’m about to retire for the night. What do you want?”

The fine lines at the corners of his eyes crinkled with a speculative look. “Aren’t you interested in what I found out?”

For a moment her mind went blank. Had she sent him on some errand? She couldn’t recall what he’d said when he left after Fletcher escorted her away from the platform.

“Do you have a minute?” His gaze shifted over her head. “I need to talk to you.”

Good Lord, he couldn’t come in here. “Let me get my shawl and I’ll join you downstairs.” She slammed the door before he could reply.

“Why did you agree to meet him?” Fletcher grumbled.

“Because it gives you an opportunity to get out of my room.” Amy balled her hands, wanting to smack him. “If you hadn’t forced your way inside, we wouldn’t be in this predicament.”

“Will you at least give me your pledge you’ll marry me before the railroad strikes the border?”

She couldn’t make a decision like that without a clear head. “I have to go. We’ll discuss it later.”

He followed her to the door. “What about Mr. Joy? If you tell him we’re engaged, he may reconsider how he handles this situation. I’m sure he’ll

allow you to keep your position until after we wed. Then you can resign and say you're focusing on a broader agenda. That way, you preserve your reputation. You can always find a new project."

If he'd driven a stake through her heart, it couldn't have hurt worse. No project was as important as this one. But did that matter? Mr. Joy would certainly remove her from her duties after this fiasco.

If she married Fletcher and he was named to the coveted position of president, she could work alongside him and still see to her interests, albeit behind the scenes, and hadn't she already made the decision to accept his suit? She had to be practical, not emotional, when it came to marriage. Love was something that could grow between them, given time.

"All right. I'll marry you the week after the railroad strikes the border. I can't possibly arrange things in advance of that."

Fletcher's eyes opened wide and his smile showed all his many teeth. "Darling, you have made me the happiest man alive."



Amy hugged her shawl as she stepped out into the cool night. After she'd checked to be certain no one was lurking in the halls, Fletcher had slipped out of her room.

*No harm done.* Now, she could see what Buck wanted and have a talk with him about the necessity of getting along with her husband-to-be until his job was over.

"I didn't mean to disturb you." Buck stepped out of the shadows beside the door, and she nearly shed her skin.

"It's no bother. Where have you been?"

"I checked out the damage. Talked to some settlers. The Land League isn't claiming responsibility, but everybody knows they organized it." Buck gazed down at her. In the darkness she couldn't make out the subtleties



always present in his expression. “The foreman said it’s a total loss. He guessed about twenty thousand ties.”

“Twenty-four thousand, to be exact. The major already told me. He apologized profusely.” Amy dipped her head to hide the tears that sprang to her eyes. She could’ve refused the major’s help, insisted he keep the troops guarding the tracks, but she hadn’t.

She had no one but herself to blame.

Buck tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and they kept walking. His simple, almost casual, gesture eased her anxiety, something Fletcher hadn’t been able to accomplish with hours of nearly constant hand patting.

Her throat tightened. What had she done? Gotten herself engaged to a man who couldn’t even manage to comfort her. She bit down on her lip to feel something other than numbness.

Moonlight silvered the forms of men wandering across the square in the direction of the saloon. Sounds of celebration poured out into the street.

Grief and some emotion she couldn’t identify constricted her heart. “Why are these men being so shortsighted and ignorant? They’re only hurting themselves.”

The noise faded as Buck led her in the opposite direction. He stopped in front of the land agent’s office and nodded at a bench in front of the darkened window. “How about here?”

Here was better than in front of that saloon. She hitched her bustle so she could sit and then arranged her skirts.

Buck relaxed into his usual sprawl with his thigh resting against her leg. Her body tingled at the slight touch. Irritated, she pulled the shawl tighter.

*Why?* Why did it have to be Buck who elicited these responses?

“Are you cold?” He shifted forward, removed his coat and draped it over her shoulders.

Some perverse voice urged her to snuggle up next to him. Instead, she gripped the lapels and huddled in the substitute for his arms. Just sitting here wrapped in a coat that carried his scent made her feel safer, more secure. She'd truly lost her mind...or had lost her way.

She forced her attention to return to a problem that mattered. "Were you able to learn the names of those involved?"

Buck shook his head. "Everybody knows I work for you so they won't give me names. They just confirmed the involvement of the Land League."

So, he'd discovered nothing she didn't already know. Disappointing, but not surprising.

He stretched his arm over the back of the bench. Her heart pulsed like a steam engine.

She couldn't even feel ashamed for being eager for his embrace. What kind of woman longed for another man moments after becoming engaged? The kind her mother turned out to be.

"How much will this set you back?" Buck asked.

"We'll lose at least four weeks if we have to wait for new ties to be shipped."

"Any ideas how to make up for lost time?" His fingers brushed her shoulder.

She stiffened her spine and shifted her body forward, out of his reach. Whatever was inside her that responded to him, she had to restrain it. Bind it. Crush it. "I considered hiring more men, letting them cut down trees and make ties. But there's a shortage of workers, as it is."

"How's that?" He invaded her space, as if testing her reaction.

She stared at the lighted saloon and refused to look at him, "The Katy is starting work on a line running east through Fort Scott. I fear Mr. Parsons' railroad will increase wages when qualified workers become scarce. We can't afford to pay more. Our resources are fully tapped.

“You might suggest your boss has lost enough money and should negotiate with the settlers.” Buck’s rough voice caressed her like the fingers gently scratching her back.

If she asked him to stop, would he? Did she want him to?

Amy fisted her hands in her lap. She wasn’t weak. She could resist this unwelcome attraction. “If we give in to blackmail, the demands will never end.”

“But if your boss won’t bend, it’ll only escalate the conflict.”

“I know.” Her skin twitched when the scratching became slow, sensuous circles. “Both sides are so entrenched a compromise is all but impossible. I’d hoped to find something that would benefit everyone. That’s why I proposed bringing young women out here, so the men could marry, have families, and build communities that would attract more people and produce more opportunities. I thought they’d see the value and be willing to put down their arms.”

Buck cupped her shoulder. This touch felt too much like ownership.

She shrugged off his hand. Now was the time to tell him she was engaged and demand he act appropriately. Her mouth opened, but the words wouldn’t come out.

“Amy, the settlers see those women as a bribe. Just another trick. They don’t trust the railroad to deal honorably with them. They’ve put considerable energy into improving the land and they want something back for their efforts. Your ladies-for-sale program didn’t address their complaints, which are price and terms for ownership. You’re trying to *buy* goodwill. That’s something you won’t be able to do.”

She drew back, disbelieving. Where had this come from? “You sound like you’re quoting from an article in *The Workingman’s Journal*. Who have you been talking to? Amos Sanford?”

He hesitated before answering. “Some of the settlers. I’m just trying to help.”

Feeling returned in a painful rush. First, Fletcher's useless hand-patting, and now Buck's bumbling disloyalty, all while rubbing her back.

"You want to help?" She sat straight and met his gaze directly. "I think you've *helped* enough, Mr. O'Connor. Using troops for protection during the rally was a costly misjudgment. I blame myself entirely for allowing it, but I suggest you put your efforts toward discovering the identity of my assailant, rather than attempting to solve a problem you don't fully understand."

He leaned over and brought his face even with hers. Even in the dim light she could see his thunderous expression. "*Mrs. Langford*, I'm sick and tired of your insults. I may not have all the facts, but I'm not so ignorant I can't comprehend the complexity of this mess. And I sure don't see you, or anybody else, figuring it out. Stop packing your failures in my saddlebag."

Amy's face burned. More than that, her heart bled. Unlike Fletcher, her bodyguard didn't offer sympathy or try to smooth over her failure. Instead, he cut through her pretense and like a mirror reflected back the imperfections she didn't want to see.

She swallowed hard. "Let's return to the hotel. I don't think you have any additional information I need tonight."

"Wait." He grabbed her arm. "I didn't mean it like that."

She tensed when he took her shoulders in a firm but gentle grasp.

His eyes pleaded, although he hadn't asked for pardon. "Look, you're making progress. Those men, they were excited about the women being here. I could see it in their faces. You mentioned a dance. That's a good way to smooth things over. It'll give you a chance to make a new offer. Not tied to a purchase contract. Something that gives everybody a boon."

Amy shook her head, torn by doubt. She had been juggling misguided greed on both sides, and all the while, tripping over her own missteps. Only this time, her father wasn't here to rescue her. "I can't—" Her voice cracked.

Buck gathered her against his chest. Distraught, she clung to him and forced the words through a clogged throat. “I can’t please everyone.”

He brought his mouth close to her ear. “Why would you even try? Most folks don’t appreciate the effort and the rest misunderstand. Don’t do things to please other people. Do it because of what’s inside you.”

He rubbed circles on her back until she eventually relaxed. It shouldn’t be Buck. Her anchor should be Fletcher.

Reluctantly, she pulled away. “How do you know if what you’re doing is right?”

Buck frowned, looking surprisingly uncertain, before a sardonic mask fell over his face. “Who said anything about being right? I just follow my instincts.”

A disappointing answer, and it made her angry because he took the easy way out while challenging her to step up.

“Why would you let instincts guide you if you don’t have a noble cause? You might find you’re deluded, acting out of gross self-interest or self-protection.”

“What if one man’s noble cause destroys another man’s dreams?”

His question stopped her cold. What he said, that couldn’t be what she was doing. Her intentions were good ones and her path honorable. “My father told me people don’t always know what’s best for them. It takes someone with vision to lead them and take them to a better place.”

“I guess if he talked to burning bushes, he might have gotten the directions right. But even Moses couldn’t get folks to follow him into the Promised Land.”

A smile tugged her mouth. So now he was quoting the Bible. Her bodyguard continued to surprise her. He had more facets than a diamond. “Maybe Moses couldn’t, but Joshua did.”

Buck leaned back with an appreciative gleam in his eyes. He stretched his arms over the back of the bench and shrugged with his hands. “You got

me there, Josh.”

Pleasure curled inside her, more so for the fact that his concession wasn't easily given. Buck was like iron sharpening her steel. He forced her to rethink her actions and defend her stance, much like her father had done.

Buck? Like her father? The two men couldn't be more different. Buck was earthy, at times even coarse, eminently practical and scathingly direct. Her father had been polished, intellectual and tactful. Yet, both men had a sharp intelligence, along with an ability to bring people around to their way of thinking.

She winced at a twinge of guilt. “I apologize for my remark earlier. It was uncalled for. I... Well, I think you're very intelligent...though you like to keep it to yourself.”

His mustache lifted on one side. “Don't fill my balloon with too much hot air.”

A soft laugh slipped out before she could stop it. Then the light moment gave way to melancholy. Once she was married, she would not be able to enjoy this kind of intimacy with another man—particularly *this* man.

She clasped her hands together and focused on the gauzy fog hovering above the ground. Now. Tell him *now*. “I plan to marry Fletcher as soon as the railroad makes the border. I would appreciate it if you'd make an effort to get along.”

Buck's silence drew her attention to his face. Was that sadness in his silvery eyes or just a reflection of what she was feeling? He shifted forward. For a moment she thought he would take her hand to help her rise. Instead, he cupped her cheek in his palm and lightly brushed his thumb across her lower lip.

Her mind halted like a mechanism that had wound down. Passion sizzled beneath her skin, sparking a fire that licked at her body. He drew closer, his gaze fastened on her mouth.

*Oh, yes.* That was what she wanted, too.

She closed her eyes, waiting, anticipating the kiss.

His warm lips skimmed hers, barely touching. “It’s not your instincts deluding you, Venus. It’s your noble cause.”

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## CHAPTER 11



The music swelled as couples, flushed and smiling, spun and whirled around the floor of the barn. A trio of fiddlers sawed away at their instruments with enough steam to fuel a locomotive.

Amy stood beside a makeshift stage, tapping her toe in time to the lively tune. The young ladies in their pastel gowns appeared like a scattering of wildflowers among the men in suits and uniforms. At least a dozen for every woman, which boded well for her latest plan.

She jerked away as Buck swung past, guiding his partner in an exuberant polka. The golden-haired girl he was partnering had been flirting with him all evening, as had just about every other young lady in attendance. He flaunted his success at pairing up with the prettiest immigrants with wicked pleasure.

Amy forced an indifferent expression and looked past him, pretending not to care. At some point, she wouldn't care or even think of him at all. When he was no longer necessary to ensure her safety, a job he seemed to have forgotten.

She sipped the refreshing cider while shifting her weight from side to side to relieve her aching feet. Her dance partners had included farmers and soldiers, as well as her betrothed.



The only man who hadn't asked her to dance was Buck, which was no surprise, considering the set down she'd given him when they'd parted the night before. She had burned his ears for kissing her, even as she'd cringed with shame for wanting it so much.

A few steps away, Fletcher was engaged in deep conversation with the local leaders. He'd been working the crowd like a politician on polling day. Perhaps he did have notions of running for office. If so, she wouldn't object.

He turned as the small group dispersed. "The mayor is grateful you rescheduled this dance for tonight. They were afraid you'd pack up these girls and go home."

"That wouldn't have served any useful purpose." She brushed a bit of lint from the lapel of his evening coat and shifted her gaze to his eyes. Being slightly above average height, he didn't tower over her and make her feel as tiny as a kitten. At the same time, she had no desire to curl up in his lap.

He bent closer and lowered his voice. "When will you extend your new offer?"

She smiled, confident in her inspiration no matter the source. Buck's comment about finding a way to help both sides had given her an idea for a way to get the settlers to replace ties burned by the Land League. The women had voiced their excited approval when she'd shared her thoughts earlier. "I'll let the ladies make the announcement a little later this evening. The men will respond to them better than they will me."

Fletcher's eyes sparkled with amusement. "You're brilliant. But you know that, don't you?"

His effusive praise sent pleasure coursing through her. "If my idea works, it should smooth things over with Mr. Joy and get us back on schedule. I truly believe most of these settlers are ready to put differences aside and get on with their lives. "

Her conversation with Buck had stayed with her through the night, troubling her sleep. She wasn't crushing men's dreams just because she was behind the railroad. Her intentions were good even if her original plans hadn't worked out quite like she'd imagined. This new approach would be better. She would show Buck how a noble cause was far superior to letting instinct rule. That was what animals did, not people.

"Speaking of timely opportunities, I wanted to tell you about one." Fletcher's face grew animated, as it did whenever he had some new idea to share. "I've purchased blocks of land around Girard and Baxter Springs. Property that will be quite valuable as the towns grow."

She blinked up at him, not sure she'd understood. There wasn't a square foot of land around those towns that hadn't been staked out. "Isn't that land already claimed?"

Glancing around, he lowered his voice. "The squatters on the tracts I purchased moved onto the land *after* Mr. Joy bought it, not before. They can't claim the same preemption rights as those who were on the land *before* he purchased it. I spoke to the land agent about this and he confirmed it. The law is on my side."

Using a legal loophole to buy land out from unsuspecting men didn't make it commendable. She was surprised he wasn't troubled by it. "Even if those settlers are there illegally, someone will have to force them to leave. We have problems enough as it is."

"There's no need to remove the squatters until after we've crossed the border and resolved our issues with those who have valid claims. We'll just sit tight until things settle down, and then move these men off one at a time." Fletcher's eyes glowed with pride. "This land could be worth a fortune over the next few years. These squatters know this as well as I do, but they're trying to use this dispute to get it for nothing. I've paid for it, free and clear."

“How much? I know Mr. Joy is asking top dollar for properties close to town.”

His face tightened. “You might exhibit a little more faith in my business acumen.”

Like most men, Fletcher was easily offended when questioned by a woman, in particular on matters of business. She knew him to be financially astute from her dealings with him as her banker over the past three years. Lately, though, he seemed drawn to riskier ventures, perhaps spurred on by the enormous wealth being made through land speculation.

In fact, the man he most admired, Mr. Joy, wasn't really interested in operating a railroad. He was a real estate tycoon who saw an opportunity to increase his wealth by owning the land his railroad would pass through. Amy wanted to run the railroad.

“I suppose I have a more conservative bent and prefer to put my money into businesses rather than speculate on land.” She placed her hand on Fletcher's arm in a placating gesture. “I trust your investment will return a good profit.”

“I assure you, it will.”

His curt tone rubbed against her already frayed nerves, but she swallowed her ire. She made her own decisions about how to spend her money and her father's legal expertise had ensured she could do so after marriage. But she would rather make decisions together. At some point, she needed talk to Fletcher about this, but for now she would model what a marital partnership should be like.

“I'd like to get your opinion on a number of new investments I'm considering. Why don't we discuss it when we meet to review the annual audit of my accounts?”

His eyes widened at her offer and then a smile appeared. “Of course. I'd be delighted.”

Clapping broke out as the music came to a temporary end.

She turned her attention back to the crowd and smiled with satisfaction. This dance was just the thing to get the settlers in the right frame of mind.

Buck passed through her line of vision as he escorted his giggling partner to the punch bowl. After pouring them drinks, he turned her over to an eager settler and walked away without a backward glance.

Amy released a pent-up breath. Apparently, his interest in the women he flirted with was as fleeting as each dance, which she would do well to remember. She followed him with her eyes as he moved with long-limbed grace, which reminded her of the big cats she'd seen lurking on the bluffs above the river. Wild and beautiful, but too dangerous to approach.

As he wove through the crowd, he combed his fingers through hair that was dark with dampness from his exertions. An illicit thought formed of running the tip of her tongue along his neck, tasting the tanginess and texture of his skin. Her breath hitched as the fantasy provoked the same pleasurable ache she felt whenever he touched her.

“Amy. I asked if you wanted to dance.”

She jerked her gaze back to Fletcher. What on earth was wrong with her? He suited her far better than Buck, and here she stood, lusting after the wrong man.

He shot a scowling glance in Buck's direction, but the other man had disappeared out the open doors of the barn.

Her face flamed from having been caught watching the bounder. “I, uh, my feet. They hurt. I think I'll sit down until its time for the announcement.”



Buck fanned his face with his hat as he strode out of the hot barn and into the cool night. He drew a deep breath to let the rain-washed air calm his agitation, which came from more than dancing. He'd behaved like a

complete ass by parading those women under Amy's nose. But every time he saw her in the arms of another man it made his gut twist up, and something mean inside urged him to strike out.

He tilted his head to gaze at the full moon and wanted to howl with frustration. He'd danced with every woman in there—except the one he wanted. Amy had become a fever in his blood. Every time she came near, he used any excuse to touch her. He craved their every contact and ached for her caress. The idea of bedding her held more appeal than ever. But if he gave in to the temptation, he might as well put a match to gunpowder. He'd never survive the explosion.

Sean clapped him on the shoulder. "You plan to give anybody else a chance? I swear you danced with every gal in there."

Buck wiped the sweat off his forehead. "Just getting some exercise."

He had caught Sean's eye when he'd headed outside to cool off, which was just as well. It was time to stop pining after a woman and focus on the job he'd come to do. He needed to fill his cousin in on their next move.

The wet grass dampened his boots and trousers as they headed toward an open field some distance away from where the other men were clustered, talking and smoking. "I got an idea for keeping that railroad slowed down a bit longer."

"Ah, I knew you'd come up with something."

"It's nothing I came up with, just something I heard." His conscience jerked a knot in his heart. He stopped and faced his cousin, determined to get this over with. "That MK&T is starting a new branch line and there's a shortage of workers to build it. The Border Tier can't afford to increase wages."

Understanding dawned on Sean's face. "So, if the Katy paid more to lure away workers..."

"The Border Tier can't afford to get them back." Buck rubbed his sweaty palms on his trousers. Now he knew what Judas must've felt like.

“Of course, this all hinges on whether that other railroad will increase wages, and who knows if they will.”

Sean gave a confident nod. “Oh, I’m certain they will.”

*Certain?*

Suspicion crawled up the back of Buck’s scalp. “How can you be so sure?”

Sean’s eyes rounded with a look of innocence. “Why wouldn’t they? There’s been a history of these lines outbidding each other.”

Buck clenched his jaw to hold back his anger. “Why are you doing this?”

“What, the railroad slowdown? You know why.”

“What’s your land worth if the Border Tier loses the race?”

His cousin shrugged. “We’re just making ’em sweat. They’re too far ahead to lose.”

“Not true. As Amy tells it, if more workers jump lines, and they have to build another seventeen miles of track, they could lose the race. If their competitor wins, it’ll be the only railroad allowed to expand into Texas. The only one to pick up all that cattle trade.”

Sean’s expression turned wary. “What are you saying?”

“You know *damn* well what I’m saying.” He stiffened his arms to keep from slamming his fist into Sean’s face. “Your land won’t be worth squat if Amy’s railroad loses the race. Either you’re a stupid, stiff-necked son-of-a-bitch to risk everything, or you’re tucking something in your other pocket. Which is it, cousin? I gave you not one, but *two* chances to tell me the truth.”

Sean’s face twisted in a resentful scowl. “I *did* tell you the truth. I can’t afford to pay King Joy’s price for that land. I’ll see the bastard in hell before I let him succeed in his schemes.”

God, this was too much. Did Sean think he was dealing with an idiot?

“What’s that other railroad paying you? Whatever it is, it better be enough to get you far away from here once your friends figure out you’ve double-crossed them to line your own pockets.”

With a curse, Sean surged forward throwing a punch.

Buck jerked back and at the same time grabbed the other man’s arm and flung him over an outstretched leg. His cousin tumbled face first into the grass. Buck dropped his knee onto Sean’s back and grabbed his hair. With icy calm, he whipped out a knife and held the blade to the man’s exposed throat.

“You lied to me.” He spoke through clenched teeth. If he let out the rage inside, it would surge through him and take control. “I thought family meant something to you, but you’re just using me in some game.”

Why had he trusted again when those closest to him were always the ones who broke faith?

With a curse, Buck threw the knife away, then shoved Sean’s face into the ground before rising to his feet. “I’m finished with you.”

Sean stood slowly, wiping away bits of grass and dirt that clung to his face.

Buck retrieved his knife. He wouldn’t kill Sean, but he would beat the shit out of him if he chose to continue this fight. Their eyes held for a long moment. Finally, Sean broke the stare, dropping his head to stare at the ground.

“I didn’t lie about needing your help.” The roughness in his cousin’s voice grated on Buck’s nerves. “I am near broke. I counted on getting that land cheap and then selling enough so I could improve my farm. But... yeah. You’re right about the other pocket. I wasn’t certain things would work out, so I took an offer from the Katy. The foreman said they’d pay me for information.”

Music drifted out of the barn. The joyous sound drove the nails deeper into Buck’s heart. He’d not only extended his trust. He had allowed himself

to once more believe he was right in his pursuit, which made ridiculing Amy about noble causes reek of hypocritical garbage. She had more honor in her little finger than he had in his whole body.

And Sean? He'd only done what most men would do—look out for his own hide, the rest of mankind be damned.

“That letter you were writing the other day when I came to your place. Was it a report to this other railroad’s foreman?”

Sean’s pinched expression begged for understanding. “I didn’t start to work for the Katy until a week ago. When I was out checking their progress, I met some of the boys working that line. They’re Irish, like us. They introduced me to their foreman and he made me an offer. I figured if we didn’t win this war with King Joy, at least I’d have something for my trouble.”

Tension tightened Buck’s shoulders. He started to pace, wanting to hit something. “Don’t try me, Sean. I told you I didn’t care what you were doing. I asked you to shoot straight with me, but you didn’t.”

“I thought you might want part of what they were paying me.”

Buck turned, incredulous. “You *lied* to me because you didn’t want to share?”

His cousin planted his feet, defensively. “I told you, I didn’t lie. I just omitted a few facts. I didn’t think it was that important. You don’t care if the Border Tier wins or not. I figured you were getting paid by that railroad lady, so you don’t need the extra money.”

The excuses piled up, but Sean didn’t get—or refused to acknowledge—the real issue. If he could lie about this, he could lie about anything.

“I don’t want your damned pocket change.” Buck started back toward the barn.

“Wait. You can’t back out now. I still need your help.” Sean trailed alongside. “I swear that’s the only thing I didn’t tell you. I was wrong to hide it, but that’s all I was hiding.”



Buck lengthened his strides to put more distance between them. How could he trust his cousin again? Sean had deceived him. No matter that he claimed it was a small thing. Betrayal always started with the small things. He'd seen it before, in his own men, in a woman to whom he'd given his protection and offered his name.

Resentment burned in his gut. Georgia's betrayal had been the worst. He'd offered her his love, his vow—and she'd left him to go after another man.

*She left you because you're no good, Bucko.*

"Buck, stop." Sean grabbed his arm.

His anger surged. Buck whirled and raised his fist, ready to pound the other man's face. If nothing else, fighting would release the savagery inside him. Let him focus on something other than his own pain.

Sean took a step back. His arms dropped to his sides. "I won't fight you."

Buck's breath came hard and fast. He blinked to clear the red haze that nearly blinded him. *Damn it*, not again. If he released his rage, the beast would rule him.

He let his hand fall. The movement released a tide of weariness. God he was tired. Mostly of being a fool. But it seemed he never learned from his mistakes.

"What do you want from me, Sean?"

"What I told you before. I want your help getting a fair deal. You were right when you said my land is worth more if the Border Tier wins the race. But it won't be my land if I can't afford to buy it." Sean came closer, pleading. "You've gotten close to that lady promoter. Maybe she'd listen to you, or you can use her to influence her boss."

"Use her?" Buck's stomach turned. Hadn't he already done that? Even if he hadn't bedded Amy, he'd still used her. He had manipulated her, won her faith and confidence, and then betrayed her. She'd entrusted him with her

life, had opened her home, maybe even a little piece of her heart. Yet, he'd been willing to betray her for a *good cause*.

Buck swore under his breath. He'd come back to Kansas to serve justice. Who got the right to declare what was just and unjust? It wasn't so clear and he was having a hard time ignoring a conscience that spoke up with increasing regularity. "I won't use her. Not anymore."

Sean held his gaze. "I talked to Amos and the other members of the Land League, like you asked. Nobody admits to trying to kill Mrs. Langford. I think they'd tell me if they were."

So, his cousin would play the only card he had left. Information about Amy's attacker.

Buck crossed his arms over his chest. "How do I know you're not lying to me?"

"You'll have to trust me."

Saints, his cousin had some nerve.

"Forget it. I won't feed you information or trick Amy into doing anything that'll hurt her."

"You'll figure something out. You always do." Sean held out his hand. When Buck didn't take it, he slipped it into his pocket. "I know you don't think you can trust me, but you can. If I'd wanted, I could've turned you in and taken the reward." One corner of his mouth lifted in a slight smile. "Though they're only offering a few hundred dollars. They must not think you're worth much."

The band around Buck's chest grew tighter. "You 'll hold that over my head to gain my cooperation?"

Sean drew back with a hurt look. "*Jases*, Buck, I'm not a complete bastard."

"Keep working at it. You'll get there." Buck's anger drained, which left a well filled with nothing but painful loneliness.

He had imagined—no, he'd foolishly hoped—things would work out differently. That he could reestablish ties with at least one person who cared about him. But why should his cousin care any more than his father, or his stepbrothers, or Georgia, or anyone else in his godforsaken world? He'd never been worth an ounce of affection.

“I won't betray you, Cousin,” Sean declared with more firmness than he'd exhibited at any other time. “Even if you decide you can't help me. I'll keep Amos from sniffing around. I've not told him everything about you, and I don't intend to. You're my only family, and I am loyal.” He shrugged sheepishly. “Just a wee bit selfish.”

Buck released a resigned sigh. His cousin had played the ace. Family loyalty. He couldn't turn his back on his only living kin, much as he wanted to. But where did that leave him?

He'd do his best to influence Amy's decisions, but he wouldn't seduce her, trick her or cause her shame. He would, however, continue this charade. If he revealed the depth of his deception, she'd throw him out—or shoot him.

“Hey fellows, you missed the big announcement!” The shout came from a lanky farmer who loped toward them. It was the same fellow who'd tried to bid on a basket at the rally. “Mrs. Langford says we can wed the ladies without having to pay their expenses, regardless of whether or not we sign our contracts.”

Buck frowned. Amy wouldn't play her hand without advancing her game. “She didn't put any requirements on it?”

The farmer shook his head, a big grin stretching his face. “Nope. But them gals said the men who cut the most ties will get the first shot at marrying them.”

## CHAPTER 12



*March 26, 1870*

*Fort Scott, Kansas*

**B**uck peered into the small mirror on the wall and fumbled with a black silk tie. How hard could it be to knot the damn thing into a bow? At last, he succeeded, then turned down the points of his shirt collar. Stepping back, he bent his knees to bring his head down. He'd forgotten to purchase a tonic and his hair wasn't cooperative on the best of days.

Why the hell was he so jittery about going to a party? It wasn't as if Amy would pay him much mind. Not with that trained hound at her side.

"You're a damn fool," he muttered to his image. "Why do you care what she thinks? You'll be lucky if she doesn't see you hanged after all this is over."

The train ride home from Girard had been more excruciating than the dance. Amy and Fletcher had sat in front of him, their heads close together, absorbed in deep discussion over something he didn't catch. She'd decided to marry the pompous ass, and that was all there was to it. They would

announce their formal engagement tonight at the Wilson's party, and he got to go along to make sure she didn't get killed.

He huffed in disgust. Why did he care who she married? He had to focus on catching her assailant. Some of the top businessmen in Fort Scott would be at tonight's party. None of them were on Amy's list, but he wanted to determine on his own what these men thought of her. She might not have guessed correctly. Betrayers were often those closest and most trusted, as he knew from experience.

He picked up his new coat from where he'd tossed it over a chair and pulled it on, then tugged down his shirt sleeves. He turned over his bare hands and stared at his calloused palms. What should he do about gloves? All gentlemen wore them.

A light rap on the door drew his attention. It might be Jacob, who liked to talk about horses. Amy's groomsman had warmed up to him after they'd discovered common ground. Their tentative friendship was probably the only thing that kept Sophie from poisoning him after Amy had decided against extending any more dinner invitations.

Buck opened the door. His heart slammed against his chest.

Amy stood at the threshold, a mouth-watering confection in a frothy yellow gown that showed off every lovely curve. Dainty lace sleeves were drawn off her shoulders, baring a lovely expanse of décolletage. Her waist was so small he could easily span it with his hands.

She gazed up at him, her fine brows drawn together as though she was uncertain of her welcome. "May I?"

He swallowed hard. "Come in."

For whatever request she'd sought him out, he'd grant it. Hell, he'd give her whatever she wanted if she just let him look at her a little longer.

She rustled into the room. The ends of a black velvet ribbon around her neck trailed down the back of the gown. It drew his gaze to her backside,

which was hidden somewhere beneath a cascade of flounces and frills. His fingers itched to peel away the layers of silk and lace.

He'd better lasso his thoughts before they dragged him into dangerous territory.

Amy turned, and with both hands extended a pair of light gray gloves.

He accepted her offering with awed reverence. The gloves looked large enough to fit him and were made of the softest leather he'd ever felt.

"I had them made special. I'm sorry about the other ones." Her eyes beseeched.

His brain refused to work fast enough to form a response. But an odd, giddy feeling, unlike anything he'd ever experienced, came over him. She'd bought him gloves. Didn't matter it was because she felt guilty. Amy had ordered something made just for him. No one, save his mother, had ever done anything so thoughtful.

"Thank you." His voice came out squeaky, like someone had forgotten to oil a hinge. He cleared his throat and blinked away the burn in his eyes.

"Why don't you try them on." She smiled, encouragingly.

He slid his fingers into the supple leather and flexed his hand. "They fit. Perfectly."

*Like we would.*

God, he was such a fool.

She took his hand and examined the glove with her fingertips. When she stroked his palm, desire jolted through him. He clamped his teeth together to restrain a groan. God in Heaven, she might as well be touching his naked body. He was going to lose the battle for control if he didn't do something fast.

He stepped back and drew on the other glove. "Did I do that right?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. "Like a gentleman?"

Her face paled as his barb found its target.

*Ah Bucko, you're such a mean bastard.*

“Just teasing.” He backed into an compliment. “Honestly, I don’t recall anybody ever doing something so nice for me.”

She clutched her bag in front of her like a shield. “I probably deserved that. You needn’t go so far as to suggest I’ve done anything special.”

*Oh, but you have.*

When he was an old man, he would still wear these gloves and her kindness would still touch him.

He cleared his throat again. “Your dress, is it the one you picked up at your friend’s store?”

Her hand brushed the low neckline in a nervous gesture. “It’s one of Charles Worth’s new designs. I’ve been dying to wear it, though now I’m not sure....”

“It fits...” He couldn’t think of what else to say. She looked so damned luscious, but he wanted to compliment her, not offend her. “Like a glove.”

Her eyes widened a split second before she gasped. “Oh, you almost had me there. That was subtle.” She eyed him with a saucy tilt of her head. “I shall take care not to split any seams.”

Did she think he was still poking fun about that prank with the gloves? She had to be aware of what she did to him. He was all but drooling. But did she know her smile took his breath away? And when she gazed up at him, those golden-brown eyes, snapping with intelligence, made his heart take off like a runaway horse. “Mr. Worth must’ve had you in mind when he designed that gown. I can’t think of any gal who’d look prettier wearing it.”

Her lips parted slightly, and her eyes took on a soft, bemused expression.

It was poor flattery, considering what he really wanted to say. But he had no right to say the sort of things a man would only tell a woman he loved.

*Loved?*

Dread twisted Buck's insides into a painful knot. *God, no.* He couldn't be in love with Amy. Not twice a fool—and this time an even bigger one because he knew all along *this* woman wasn't meant for him. What the hell did he know about love anyway, except how to fail miserably at it?

Flustered, he turned away to retrieve his hat. "You shouldn't have come all the way out here just to give me those gloves. You'll get that dress dirty. I'll see you back to the house."

The rustling started again, this time closer. "Jacob brought the landau around. He's waiting downstairs. We need to stop and pick up Fletcher on our way into town."

It was beyond rude to keep his back to her, but that startling realization had thrown him and he couldn't risk the chance she'd see how he felt. He'd sworn he would never let himself be that vulnerable again. He cast about for a subject that would deflect her attention away from his awkwardness.

"Have any more settlers taken you up on that offer to cut ties?" He schooled his features into an indifferent mask as he turned around. "I never told you, but that was a neat trick."

She cocked her head, seeming confused by his abrupt shift in direction. "It wasn't meant as a trick. I simply found something that would benefit both sides. You told me to come up with a fair deal."

*A fair deal.* Ah yes, the reason he'd come here in the first place. Not to fall in love, but to get justice. Justice required fairness. If he could get Amy to see the settlers weren't being treated fairly, it would change her perspective and she would be more willing to influence her boss. But how could he make the case? And when? Over the past week, it'd been impossible to pry her away from Fletcher, who wouldn't take his side in any matter.

"Why don't you ask the settlers what they consider a fair deal?"

Her brow furrowed. "They've made their demands eminently clear."



“I didn’t say demands. A fair deal is generally something you negotiate.”

“They’ve been unwilling to negotiate.”

“So has your boss. Why don’t *you* take the initiative and talk to them?”

She twisted her wrist to grasp the dangling reticule. Whenever Amy was troubled, she worried the strings on her bag. “I’m not in a position to carry through. Only the board of directors, or Mr. Joy, can extend an offer.”

Buck ventured closer. He gently pried her fingers open and took her hand. With his thumb, he stroked the back of her glove. Her eyes widened, then she yanked her hand away, but not fast enough to hide a tremble. It was small consolation to know that at least, in this way, she wanted him. “Don’t promise anything, other than to take the deal you negotiate back to the board.”

She stared up at him with wide eyes. “There have been countless attempts to forge a compromise. I don’t know that I’ll be any more successful.”

He couldn’t restrain a smile. Few men could refuse the appeal of a beautiful woman who was on their side. “That’s because everybody only considered their own interests. Go talk to the settlers. Really put yourself in their shoes. I bet you gain some sort of compromise your board will listen to, especially now. You’re short on workers, short on time and short on money. Remember what I told you once? About using the right weapons?”

A delightful flush pinked her cheeks.

He held her gaze. He wanted to travel a little lower, but that would be counterproductive to this conversation.

After a moment, she narrowed her eyes. “I’m not sure I trust your advice, considering how things turned out last time.”

*The rally.* He wouldn’t point out she hadn’t taken his advice. He’d been forced to trick Major Roy into offering protection. If she realized that, she might begin to suspect him. “What do you mean? You took my advice and

offered those settlers a fair deal when it came to those women, and that's worked out to your benefit."

She rolled her eyes, but the thoughtful frown that followed suggested she was at least considering his suggestion. "If I decide to do this, I'll need to go to the board first, to gain their support in advance."

"As a general rule, it's a bad idea to reveal your strategy to your opponents."

"They aren't my opponents, but I take your meaning. I'm not sure I want to risk it, given how badly things turned out at that rally."

"If you're able to forge a compromise, one that both sides can agree to, that would more than make up for whatever went wrong before."

He waited, seeing the silent struggle in her eyes as caution warred with ambition. Her lips tightened, and then her breath left in a rush. "All right, I'll consider it." She stepped back and smoothed her dress with a nervous gesture. "Let's get going. Fletcher will be waiting."

Buck clamped down on a surge of jealousy. She'd made her choice. Not that he was ever in the running. At least he'd gained her agreement to meet with the settlers, which could lead to a breakthrough if they came prepared to engage in true negotiation. He'd get word to Sean to ensure they acted in good faith.

He secured his hat before offering her his arm. "I'm ready."

Her gaze traveled over him. "You look very nice. Handsome."

Pleasure coiled in his belly. Lower, the fire started burning.

Her lips curved in a smile that didn't light her face. "Maggie will be pleased to see you."

*Maggie?* He didn't give a damn whether Maggie would be pleased to see him. He held back the retort. He wanted to kick himself for flirting with Amy's friend. He'd only done it to tweak her. Hell, he'd danced with every woman in Girard just to get a rise out of her, but she had only glared at him as if she believed he was nothing more than a womanizer.

Resigned, he led her out the door. Perhaps it was just as well she thought the worst. He couldn't tell her the truth—about anything.



The matriarch of Fort Scott's first family, Elizabeth Wilson, sat like queen at the head of the table presiding over dinner. Her feathered headpiece fluttered as she clapped her hands together and a mischievous glint lit in her eyes. "It's time for an announcement. After that, we shall retire to the parlor for games."

Amy nodded agreeably to their hostess although she inwardly groaned. The Wilsons were renowned for their dreadful games. It seemed the primary reason for playing were the forfeits afterwards, which often involved embarrassing activities, the more outrageous the better.

She laid down her fork and stared with dismay at the mound of potatoes still on her plate, along with most of the roasted turkey. Even with shallow breathing, she felt like she was suffocating. She had only herself to blame, having insisted on over-tightening her corset to accentuate an hourglass shape best suited for the gown.

Heiro Wilson, at the far end of the table opposite his wife, lifted his stout form out of the chair and regarded his guests with uncharacteristic solemnity. When he had everyone's attention, he motioned to Fletcher. "We have a very important piece of news tonight. Mr. Bain, as most of you know, has been courting Mrs. Langford for some time. It seems his fondest hopes have finally been realized."

Gasps went up from the ladies.

Fletcher stood at her right. Rather than offering her his hand, so they could make the announcement together, he took hold of the lapels of his evening coat. She wouldn't rise to her feet and bring attention to his oversight. Frankly, she was glad not to be in the spotlight.

A sparkling glow from the chandelier overhead reflected off his snowy shirt and white tie. Before he spoke, he made a measured survey of those seated, never one to miss the opportunity for a bit of dramatic flair. In this way, they were different, yet it would make them more complementary in business together. Another reason their marriage made sense.

She'd been listing all the pluses on her way over after that disturbing interlude with Buck in his room above the stables. After she'd given him the gloves, she would've sworn he'd been about to cry, until he'd fired off that snide remark. Inexplicably, he'd given her a compliment that made her body quiver and her spirit soar, then he had turned his back on her. Now he sat across the table completely ignoring her.

"You all know Mrs. Langford," Fletcher began.

She jerked her attention to her betrothed and smiled encouragingly.

"She has become our most benevolent benefactress through her untiring work for our railroad, through her generous support of our businesses, in the countless hours she spends on educational and cultural endeavors...

Goodness. How long would he go on without taking breath?

"She is admired by many, but adored by one."

Titters from the ladies rippled around the table.

Fletcher's effusive praise brought a blush to her cheeks. She'd worked hard to establish herself in Fort Scott, and had fallen in love with her adopted home. Was that love returned? The smiling faces around the table seemed to confirm this. She was astute enough to realize that affection often grew in proportion to the wealth of its object.

"As we all are eager to be off to our games, let me be brief."

Fletcher was never brief.

"I see a day when our fair city will be a Mecca of commerce and a gateway for those traveling west. Our state, the youngest in the Union, is a shining star of progress. Kansas has more than eight hundred miles of railroad track, most of which has been laid over the last three years.

Opportunity is unfolding for the farmer, the businessman and laborer alike. All of us gathered around this table are leading the way to a bright future, yet none more so than Mrs. Langford. This fine woman, whom I have long admired and pursued with diligence, has done me the honor of agreeing to become my wife. She and I will be wed one week after the Border Tier crosses the boundary into Indian Territory. May that day come soon.”

Polite clapping broke out. Congratulations were given. Toasts were offered.

Amy waited for the thrill. Instead, her body hummed with anxiety. Undoubtedly, a bout of cold feet. It was to be expected, considering all that had happened over the past few weeks.

Across the table, Maggie shone like a lovely gem, wearing an emerald gown that set off the color of her eyes and her dark hair. Buck lounged next to her with his usual countenance of wry amusement. At whose expense, this time?

Amy clutched her hands in her lap and silently willed him to look her way. Why hadn't he acknowledged her during the whole of dinner?

Irritated, she tore her gaze away. Why spend a single minute fretting over her bodyguard's mercurial moods? She ought to be concentrating on her soon-to-be husband.

“My dear, I am so happy for you.” Mrs. Wilson laid a hand on Amy's shoulder. “We've all been wondering when you and Mr. Bain would finally get around to tying the knot.”

Was that why they called it the bonds of matrimony? Somehow, the thought of marriage didn't elicit the joy Amy imagined she would feel. Nevertheless, everyone appeared quite pleased. That spoke well of her choice, didn't it? At least marriage to Fletcher would be calm, with no surprises. Unlike the union of her unpredictable mother and unfortunate father.

At last, Fletcher reached for her hand. She stood and smiled and pretended to bask in the attention given to newly engaged couples. Later, she and Fletcher could have their own quiet celebration, which would be much more to her liking.

All twelve members of the dinner party retired to the parlor where the first game commenced, one called *Marriage*.

Who could've guessed?

Amy shifted nervously on the flocked divan she'd sought out as soon as they'd entered the room. Hopefully, the plan she had hatched with Fletcher would relieve them both of any embarrassing moments as a result of the much-anticipated match-up.

Having suspected they would play this game she'd advised Fletcher to work around the order so they would face off with their pre-selected characters. He would present his suit, in character, and she would accept him as her perfect mate. That way, she wouldn't end up paired with someone outrageous like Charlie Goodlander or, God forbid, Buck. Just thinking about having to kiss him in front of the whole company made her shudder. Her attraction would be apparent to all and she'd be made a laughingstock.

Lizzie Goodlander, the Wilson's eldest daughter, sank onto the couch and took Amy's hands. Her hazel eyes flashed with pleasure. "You and Fletcher will have to come by and pay us a visit soon. Charlie recently returned from a buffalo hunt and has a whole new repertoire with which to entertain."

Wealthy and outlandish, Lizzie's husband was quite likable, but his practical jokes ran a bit too crude for Amy's tastes. However, he was one of the most successful businessmen in town and served on the railroad board. She couldn't afford to slight Charlie Goodlander and liked Lizzie too well to even consider it.

Lizzie's sisters gathered round, waving to the other women to come join them. "Mother has changed the rules on us," Jennie whispered, seemingly delighted by what Amy viewed as terrible news. "We don't get to choose our own characters from literature. The men are writing down their choices for us to select from, and we must write down our choices for them." She giggled like a schoolgirl. "I say, the more romantic the better."

Her sister Fannie handed out pencil stubs with bits of blue paper like those Mr. Chanute favored.

Dear heavens, was this an omen—or God's idea of a practical joke? Amy chewed her lip. How could she be sure of winning the game now? There was nothing to do but forge ahead and hope for the best.

"I've got mine," Amy muttered. She jotted down Romeo and folded her paper. Fletcher would remember and write in Juliet. She sent up a silent prayer before she tossed her name into the hat.

Maggie sat beside her and offered a sympathetic look. "I'm sure you won't have to get down on all fours and bray like last time, Amy dear. You're bound to find a suitable match."

Oh, good heavens, was her distress *that* obvious?

Jennie exchanged hats with Charlie and scurried back to the group. "Why don't you pick first, Amy?"

Amy closed her eyes and reached into the hat.

*Lord, make it Juliet.*

Her fingers closed on a folded bit of paper. A shivering sensation danced across her skin. This had to be the one. Excited, she unfolded it, then stared in horror at what was written.

*Venus.*

There was no question where this had come from. *The scoundrel.*

Amy closed her eyes, listening to gasps and laughter as the other women made their selections. Romeo could make a good case for marriage to Venus—if Fletcher had drawn that character.

“Line up ladies, the gentlemen have already arranged themselves.”

Lizzie pushed Amy to the front. “As our honored guest, you must be first.”

Relief swept through her when she saw Fletcher move to the front.

Charlie Goodlander caught his arm and pulled Fletcher behind him with a grin that showed beneath the walrus mustache. “Hold on there. Let’s not make this game too predictable. Takes all the fun out of it.”

“True enough,” Lizzie retorted, with a sharp look at her husband. “Amy, why don’t you come back here behind me?”

As everyone rearranged, Amy heaved a relieved sigh. If a woman turned down a man, she went to the next and the next until she had selected the most appropriate mate for her character. The remaining men were shuffled back through.

The game wore on, women and men pairing off until only four remained.

Amy fisted her hands in lieu of deep breathing, which wasn’t possible with how tightly her corset had been tied. Maggie faced Fletcher. Her friend would turn him down, of course, and move on to Buck. Dear Maggie would take Buck even if he were Hades. This would leave Fletcher the last man standing. It couldn’t be more perfect.

Maggie clasped her hands together and spoke in a voice so soft Amy had to strain to hear. “I am Juliet. Who comes to ask for my hand in marriage?”

Fletcher stepped forward, the muscles in his face tightening. “I am Romeo.”

Giggles went up from the women who were seated around the room with their respective *mates*. Amy bit her lip to hold back a groan. Dear Lord, how had this happened? Could Juliet refuse Romeo? She had to, because the alternative was unthinkable.

“What do you have to offer, sir?” Maggie asked softly.



“My heart and my life.” Fletcher intoned.

Romeo didn't sound convinced. Perhaps Juliet would turn him down solely on the basis of his being so obviously disinterested.

“Come on, Romeo, you're not putting forth much effort for the hand of the fair Juliet.” Charlie chided. Other guests around the room chimed in, insisting Fletcher play his part.

Fletcher's face reddened. “I would *die* for you, my sweet Juliet,” he blurted out.

Amy held her breath, staring at her friend's stiff back. What was she waiting for?

“I can't think of any man who would do so much,” Maggie whispered. “I accept.”

“What?” Amy clapped her hand over her mouth a second too late.

All eyes shifted in her direction. Some glinted with amusement, others with surprise, only a few reflected sympathy. Her skin felt hot and dry, as if she'd suddenly come down with a fever.

Maggie stepped forward to share a chaste kiss with Fletcher. His mouth froze in a tight smile as the couple took their seats. How could Maggie have done such a thing? She must've been flustered by Charlie's goading. That was the only explanation.

Amy steeled her nerves. Best to get this over with as quickly as possible.

“I'm Venus,” she snapped. “Who seeks to marry me?”

A sly smile spread across Buck's face as he took her hand then brushed the back of her gloveless fingers with his lips.

Desire crackled through her, as if he were a lightning bolt and she, the rod.

Still holding her hand, he raised his eyes. Within the silvery depths flickered wry amusement.

*Damn him.* He was enjoying her discomfiture.

“Casanova, the world’s greatest lover, seeks the hand of Venus, goddess of love.” His gravelly drawl caressed the name.

Heat suffused her face. *The cad*. She was not a love deity and he was no Casanova, how ever he might fancy himself to be. By jingo, she would strip away that civilized veneer he’d put on with those fancy clothes and reveal him as a fraud.

“What can a mere mortal offer a goddess?” she replied in her most arrogant tone.

Buck’s amused smile didn’t waver although surprise flared in his eyes.

What had he thought? That she would turn tail and run?

“Pleasure,” he murmured. He swept his thumb across the backs of her fingers, triggering another sizzling bolt.

She yanked her hand away. If she were to defeat him, she couldn’t let him touch her. The uncontrollable reactions were too distracting. “I already have pleasures aplenty.”

He arched a sandy brow. “Not the sort you’ll find with me. I’ve spent a lifetime cultivating knowledge of a sensual nature. Learning all there is to know about pleasing a woman. With me, every day will bring new delights you can open, like a present.”

Sharp gasps went up from the ladies along with the low chuckles of men.

Amy blushed to her toes. Where had Buck learned about Casanova? For that matter, where had he picked up that educated elocution? He’d surprised her—again.

Her gaze moved from his broad shoulders and chest, down to narrow hips and long legs, taking a return trip north to linger on his lips. Temptation whispered sordid suggestions in her ear. What would it be like to throw propriety to the wind and lay with a man like this? To explore things she’d thought of in the dark, but wouldn’t admit to in the light.

She shook off the sensual reverie, which seemed to have rendered her slightly dizzy. With a shaky breath, she put a hand to her stomach to still a fluttering army of insects that had taken up residence inside. It was time to put an end to this farce. “Perhaps you’ve learned a few pleasures I might find interesting. However, I am already married. I can’t have two husbands.”

Buck crossed his arms over his chest, holding her gaze prisoner. “You gods don’t live by the same rules as we *mere mortals*. At least, the legends reveal you’re not too particular. But if you prefer, we can have a marriage of the heart without all those messy vows of faithfulness.”

Amy’s head jerked around at a loud guffaw. Lizzie smacked her husband’s arm. This conversation wasn’t going in the right direction. If Buck won, he earned a kiss. If he lost, he had to pay a forfeit. And she dearly wanted to see him pay.

“I have an eternal lover. Mars, God of War. He can satisfy my needs more than a feeble man like you.”

“My lovely Venus, I may be feeble compared to your war god, but I would treat you more tenderly than that nasty-tempered fellow.” He dropped to one knee. This brought his eyes even with her chest. At the smoldering heat in his gaze, she feared her breasts had tumbled out of the low-cut gown.

She struggled to breathe.

He captured her hand once again. “Only a man who is expert at making love—not war—can truly appreciate your gifts and the essence of who you are.”

“Heavens, he would have had me at Casanova,” Lizzie quipped. “I think you’ve met your perfect mate, Venus.”

Shaken, Amy stepped back, taking her hand with her. She shook her head. None of this had the slightest basis in truth, no matter the seductive promise in his eyes. Buck was toying with her. Playing his part to the hilt.

“You’re a rogue, a lover of women who can’t be satisfied with just one. I’m a jealous goddess and I won’t abide your unfaithfulness, even if I’m not held to the same standard.”

He remained on one knee, but held out his hands like a supplicant. “That might’ve been true in the past, that I couldn’t be satisfied with just one woman, but you are not one woman. You are the epitome of every man’s fantasy, all women rolled into one. You would satisfy even the largest appetite.”

His tongue swept his lips. She nearly came out of her skin. “Accept my proposal. Take me, for as long as you like. Then cast me aside if you tire of me later.”

Her legs trembled. Dear Lord, if she didn’t do something quick, everyone would realize the effect he was having on her. She had to end this game. *Now.* “I’m not just looking for pleasure. I want love. You’ve not said you love me.”

Casanova’s lips twisted in a sneer. “Any man who’s quick to proclaim words of love is a liar and a fool.”

A thrill shot through her. For some reason, Casanova didn’t want to tell Venus he loved her. This was it. Her ace. “But without words, my dear Casanova, the *pleasure* of love is diminished. Every woman, especially one who represents all women, must be assured by words, heartfelt and true. That is the only way you will win me.”

He narrowed his eyes. Amy struggled to control her excitement. She had him on the run.

“It’s not words that should assure you, it’s what a man does that shows his true feelings.” The urgency in his voice didn’t match his mocking smile, and his eyes blazed with an intensity that made it seem as though his world tilted on her axis, his existence determined by her whim.

Her breath lodged somewhere between her chest and her throat. This wasn’t real. Buck was acting. Even if he was putting on the best show she’d

ever seen.

“Give me the words, Casanova,” she whispered, caught up in the fantasy. “For even a goddess longs to hear them.”

Her request hung in the air. Breathing was suspended. The tick of a clock on the mantel was the only sound disturbing the silence. That, and the pounding in her chest.

His smile fell away. “Venus,” he started, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper. “Don’t you know you own my heart?”

Cheers erupted.

Amy’s head swam, and voices faded as the room grew small and hot. Buck’s concerned expression wavered in and out of focus. *Almighty*. This blasted corset was too tight.

She blinked furiously to erase the black spots clouding her vision, but they wouldn’t retreat. Her lungs wouldn’t expand.

Her knees wobbled...right before the curtain dropped.

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## CHAPTER 13



“*I* still can’t believe I fainted.” Amy sat down at Maggie’s kitchen table and accepted a steaming cup of tea from her dearest friend.

Maggie offered her milk, along with a sympathetic smile. “Perhaps your corset was too tight? Or you held yourself too stiff. Everyone seems to have an opinion about what happened.”

Amy dropped her head and shook it. Oh yes, she had certainly been the subject of much speculation since her *delicate episode* at the Wilson’s party two days earlier. Not that there was anything delicate about collapsing.

Had Buck not been so quick to react, she would’ve ended up in a heap on the floor. Instead, he’d caught her up in his arms and carried her limp form into a bedroom. The entire party gathered to watch as she was treated to Mrs. Wilson’s smelling salts.

*How humiliating.*

She took a sip of the fragrant jasmine tea, but her attention wandered to the open window facing the street where her bodyguard stood watch in front of the dress shop beneath her friend’s apartment. Buck’s embarrassing *courting* scene wouldn’t have happened if... “Perhaps I fainted because you walked off with my husband-to-be.”

Maggie stared into her own cup. “Is that why you came to see me?”

Wouldn't that be petty? Yes, and it was over and done. Almost.

"No, I didn't come here to scold you." Amy took another sip. "I do wonder why you accepted Romeo's proposal. Was it Charlie's goading that got to you?"

Maggie heaved a heavy sigh. "How does Juliet refuse Romeo?" She reached across the table with a plea in her eyes. "Oh, Amy, I'm so sorry. I don't know what got into me. I should've refused, I was flustered."

Amy gave her friend's hand a squeeze. She'd been the one who had tried to manipulate the outcome to her advantage. Perhaps God had struck her down for cheating. "Don't apologize. You played the game according to the rules. As much as I hate to admit it, so did Buck. I was rather surprised by how well he played his part. I didn't think he could pull it off."

"Did you not?" Maggie's eyes twinkled. "He strikes me as a man with hidden talents."

Amy studied her teacup. She didn't want to discuss Buck's *hidden talents*. "He's apparently familiar with Casanova. I don't know as that speaks well of him."

"What's really troubling you?"

*Dear Maggie.* She always cut to the heart of a matter.

Amy cradled the cup to let its warmth calm her frayed nerves. She'd come to her friend's home, to this kitchen smelling of tea and toast, to find reassurance. That incident at the party had unnerved her. Why had she pushed Buck to declare himself? She would've won the game if she'd refused him when he first evaded her request. Yet, something inside her, something pathetic and desperate, had urged her on. She not only humiliated herself, she had embarrassed her betrothed. And for what reason? She didn't know.

"Maggie, I'm doing the right thing by marrying Fletcher." Amy raised her eyes and met her friend's concerned gaze. "He's successful. Smart. Ambitious. Precisely the kind of husband I need."

“Are you trying to convince me or yourself?” The kindness in Maggie’s expression softened her pointed question. “Tell me, are you in love with him?”

Amy’s heart grew heavy. How could she explain that she didn’t want to be in love? That feeling was fleeting and much too risky. Her parents’ relationship had more than proven that.

She swirled the remaining liquid in the cup and watched the dark leaves as they floated to the bottom. If only she could see the future as well as she could recall the past. “My father loved my mother to distraction. He worshipped the ground she walked on. The only thing he ever did against her wishes was to move us to Kansas.”

Amy set down the tea cup. She had to unburden her heart to someone. Maggie, who had trusted her with a dangerous secret, seemed a safe choice. “Mother didn’t like it here. Fort Scott didn’t offer the social life she was used to, and the conditions at that time were very harsh. But it wasn’t her unhappiness that finally undid her. It was...uncontrollable passion.”

“What do you mean by uncontrollable?” Maggie asked.

“When Mother was in one of her exhilarated moods, as Father called them, she was wonderful, so alive and energetic. I was too young to realize the destructive nature of passion, how it fuels an insatiable appetite, until...” Amy swallowed and forced herself to continue to the bitter end. “Until I walked in on her with a man who wasn’t my father. She swore me to secrecy, but Father eventually discovered her unfaithfulness. It devastated him, and ultimately drove her to end her life.”

Amy squeezed her eyes shut. They burned, but she had no tears left, having filled an ocean after her mother’s death.

Muted sounds drifted through the window—the rumble and creak of wagon wheels, jingling traces and shouts of vendors, women calling their children. Life went on. It didn’t stop. Even when it seemed, at times, it should.



Maggie's cool fingers slipped under Amy's palm. "Oh honey, I'm so sorry."

She grasped her friend's hand tightly. "I don't want to be like her. I don't want to feel passion, and I don't want the kind of love that destroys you when it's gone."

"Amy, you aren't your mother."

Now the tears started.

"My rational mind tells me that, but I'm not going to test myself to be certain. I'd rather avoid strong passion. It's safer. Besides, I'm not missing much." She used her handkerchief to dry her eyes.

"You don't really believe that," Maggie chided. "Passion can be a wonderful thing between two people who love each other."

An odd perspective from a woman whose husband had beaten her with regularity.

"How can you say that after what you experienced?"

Maggie grew solemn. She refilled Amy's cup and then her own. "It wasn't passion that caused my husband to beat me. It was his violent temper. Loving with passion is very different than letting yourself be ruled by unrestrained emotions."

Perhaps there was a difference. Amy wasn't buying it just yet. "What happens when passion clouds your common sense? I've seen more than my father's life destroyed because people couldn't control their baser urges."

Her friend looked sad. "I may not be the best person to advise you in this, but I will tell you, my parents had a loving marriage that lasted until they died. I made a mistake and picked a man who couldn't manage his demons. But I still believe that a caring, passionate relationship is possible, with the right person. I can't tell you who it is, that's something you'll have to decide for yourself."

"Maybe that kind of relationship will come with time, once Fletcher and I have been married for a while. I've heard of love growing between people.

It seems that might be better than to be taken in by a flight of fancy.”

“Perhaps.” Maggie sipped her tea, dropping her gaze.

Amy’s spirits sank. She’d come here to allay her doubts. Why wasn’t her friend cooperating? “I don’t understand. You were so encouraging when Fletcher first called on me. Why are you acting like this? What’s changed?”

Maggie seemed to hesitate. “I saw the way Buck looked at you.”

“Oh good grief, he was *acting*.”

“What about that time in my store?”

“He was *flirting*. He flirts with everyone. He flirted with you.” Amy set her cup on the saucer harder than she intended and tea sloshed over the side.

“I’m sorry.” She dabbed with her napkin at the stain on the tablecloth.

Maggie continued, ignoring the spill. “More importantly, I saw the way you looked at him,”

“What?” Amy tried to laugh. “How was that? Like I wanted to kill him? Earlier that morning, he’d interrupted an important business meeting. Not to mention, he kissed me the night before—without my permission—and then waltzed into the store the next day and started making faces at you. He’s just toying with us. Can’t you see that?”

Perspiration beaded on Amy’s forehead. Why was this room so hot? She’d worn a light muslin day dress, but it felt as if she was sitting on top of a furnace.

The smooth lines of Maggie’s face reflected an annoying calm. “I think Buck was trying to make you jealous. Based on that prank you played on him, it must’ve worked.”

Why had she brought that up that awful incident?

“It wasn’t a prank, and I wasn’t jealous. I was...annoyed. When you were out of the room searching for that suit, he made a very rude remark. I’ll admit, it wasn’t well done of me to dupe him into trying on those gloves. I replaced them.”

Maggie leaned forward to grasp her wrist. “I’m not saying this to make you feel bad. You may be right about Buck. He could be a philanderer. But the things I’m seeing between the two of you, the other day and at the party, the way he romanced you—”

Amy shook her head and pulled her hand away. How could Maggie’s voice sound so reasonable when she was saying something crazy? “No, he wasn’t—”

“He *was*, and it wasn’t an act. And you...I saw something in your face that’s made me wonder whether your feelings for Fletcher are strong enough to sustain a marriage.” Maggie leaned back in her chair with a worried expression. “I don’t want to see you trapped in an unhappy relationship. I know what that’s like.”

“No! It’s not like that at all.” Amy twisted the napkin in her lap to keep the panic out of her voice. “Fletcher and I are well-suited—in our personal lives, our backgrounds, our interests. Buck is...” Protective. Courageous. Far too compelling. “I know next to nothing about him, but I know he’s not the right man.”

Maggie heaved a long sigh. “I won’t try to convince you to consider Buck, but I will ask you to examine your motives for marrying Fletcher. You may decide you don’t want love. What does *he* expect? Does he think you love him? Does he care? If neither of you are looking for that, then perhaps it is a good match.”

Amy winced at the guilt Maggie’s words stirred up. What *did* Fletcher expect? Always an attentive suitor, he’d been eager to please and anxious to marry. He’d made it clear he cared for her, respected her, desired her, but he’d never declared his love. She hadn’t been looking for that, so it didn’t really bother her. That much.

She placed her napkin on the table and stood to leave, feeling worse than she had when she walked in the door.

Maggie leapt to her feet. “Don’t go, Amy. I’m sorry. I have no right to question you.”

“Our friendship gives you the right to say whatever you believe to be true.” Amy’s voice wavered. She could handle well-intentioned criticism, even if she didn’t necessarily agree, but she had to leave before she burst into tears. “I’m not upset with you for speaking your mind. I hope you always will. I need honesty, and there are few around me who are willing to risk it.”

Maggie rushed around the table and reached out. “You’re like a sister to me. I love you, and I want to see you happy.”

Amy returned the tight hug, closing her eyes to staunch the tears. “Thank you for being my friend. I will think on what you said. I owe Fletcher that much.”

“Even more than that...” Maggie drew back. “You owe it to yourself. I have a feeling Fletcher knows what he’s getting. I’m just not sure you do.”



Amy hurried along the wooden walkway, anxious to get to the bank so she could talk to Fletcher. It bothered her that she didn’t know whether he believed their relationship was a love match. Either way, he deserved honesty. She wasn’t looking for love—at least, not the all-consuming, heart-rending variety—but if mutual respect and affection weren’t enough for him, then she would release him from his pledge.

Buck strolled beside her, taking one long stride for every two of hers although she’d noticed he let her set the pace. When she’d exited the store, he’d been standing near the street surveying the rooftops. He casually tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow, but she sensed a coiled tension, a watchfulness that was always present.

Maggie had to be wrong about Buck. He wasn't wooing anyone. She wasn't interested even if he was. True, they shared an unfortunate attraction. If she was entirely truthful, she would admit she liked him. Actually, quite a bit. Friendship wasn't something they could afford to cultivate, but she could enjoy it for the short time he would remain in her employ.

"Is everything all right? You seem sad." Buck's solicitous inquiry made her heart trip. How could he be so attuned to her emotions? That was an odd trait in a man, although she hadn't noticed he'd exercised this gift around anyone else. Was it something that existed only between the two of them? *No*. That would make more of their relationship than it merited.

"It's nothing to concern yourself about. I just need to talk to Fletcher."

He gave her a raised eyebrow. Had he really expected her to share her worries? When most people inquired about one's wellbeing it wasn't because they wanted to hear a litany of problems.

She sighed with relief when he shifted his attention to the street.

They took a brief walk to the three-story brick building housing the bank. How should she approach this sticky conversation with her betrothed? Fletcher might decry her for misleading him. She'd gone into this relationship thinking primarily of what it meant for her.

*How selfish.*

Buck opened the door and, with an appreciative gaze, followed her inside. The fact that he made no attempt to hide his attraction should infuriate her. Instead, her body reacted with tingling anticipation. Another example of *uncontrollable*.

Voices murmured in the cavernous space. Clerks served customers from behind a high counter. The marble floors, dark paneling, and brass lamps topped with globes of etched glass exuded a sense of wealth and refinement. This place suited Fletcher and he suited her.

In the back, his office door opened. A lean, fair-haired man exited. He slapped his hat on his head and crossed the room with long-legged strides. An angry expression puckered his face. Apparently, this farmer, or whoever he was, hadn't had a good meeting.

She glanced back. Buck had noticed him, as well.

Her betrothed spotted her and hurried over, reaching out to capture her gloved fingers in a light grasp. He brushed a kiss on her cheek. "My dear, what brings you here? Would you like to join me for luncheon? I can clear my appointments."

"Thank you, but no. We're on our way to the mine. I just came by to..." she stumbled, suddenly nervous. "We need to talk."

He shifted his eyes to look over her shoulder and his brows knitted with obvious irritation. "Why don't we go somewhere we can have more privacy."

Behind her, her bodyguard snorted.

Her shoulders tensed. These two men would never get along. The most she could hope for was a wary truce until they parted ways.

Fletcher ushered her into his office. She stopped in front of the large desk he'd commissioned nearly two years ago. It was an exact replica of the one in her study. When she'd first seen it, she had been annoyed at his presumption, but upon reflection had realized the imitation was meant as a compliment.

The door clicked shut.

Fletcher put his arms around her waist and bent to kiss her. A smoky taste lingered on his lips. After allowing the brief touch, she drew back. "Can you come to dinner this evening?"

He looked chagrined. "I know we still need to meet and discuss those investments, but I have a number of important business dinners this week. Then I'll be going to Indian Territory to negotiate those land deals I told you about. It's a very busy time. Can we do this when I return?"

“That’s not what I want to talk about.” She paced across a thick rug and rested her fingers on the edge of his desk next to a stack of papers.

What appeared to be a mortgage document had the word *Foreclosed* written across the top. Maybe that was what had upset the man who left. Fletcher had recently complained about the growing number of customers defaulting on their debts.

She felt bad for the young farmer, but she wasn’t here to discuss loans. Gathering her courage, she turned to face him. “I need to know your expectations for our marriage.”

“My expectations?” His eyes lit with interest. “Do you mean...”

Her cheeks warmed. “I’m not talking about our physical relationship. I understand those expectations.” She took a deep breath. “I mean, do you expect...a love match?”

With a few strides, he closed the distance between them and took her hands. “What you said at the party about needing to hear a man’s feelings, was that meant for me? You must know I adore you.” His lips curled in a knowing smile. “I would worship at your altar, my Venus.”

She jerked her hands out of his. “No! I don’t want... What I’m saying...” Dear heavens, this was so *difficult*. She didn’t want to hurt him. “My feelings are not as strong as yours. I have great affection for you and I respect you, but...I’m not sure...I love you.”

Amy felt lighter, as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. If he wanted love, they could call off the marriage before it was too late.

“My darling.” He captured her hands again, and his eyes grew warm. “I know your feelings aren’t as strong as mine, but respect and affection can grow into love. I’m willing to wait for the flower, if you’re willing to nurture the plant.”

Her throat tightened. “I-I’m relieved to hear you say that.”

He smiled down at her, not appearing in the least put off by her awkward declaration.

She took a steadying breath. At least she'd settled the question of his expectations. Truly, she was relieved, even if she didn't *feel* relieved.

Her marriage to Fletcher would be a joining of like minds, and eventually—hopefully—of like hearts. It wouldn't be a tumultuous journey, tossing her to and fro on stormy waves. He didn't tease and tempt, arousing untrustworthy passions—like Buck.

“Darling, put your mind at ease.” Fletcher's soothing assurance eased the remaining tension. “Most people get nervous before they wed. It's perfectly normal.” A crease appeared between his brows. “I do wonder, though, if some of your uncertainty is due to negative influences.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I'm sure you'll agree, Mr. O'Connor's behavior at the party was highly inappropriate.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper. “I was certain you'd be ready to rid yourself of his annoying presence, so I put together a list of suitable replacements. Just give me the word and I'll be happy to let him know he's no longer needed.”

“I don't think that's necessary,” she started, and then backed down at his frown.

Why wouldn't she agree? Buck's antics had made her a laughingstock. No, she'd done that to herself. Oh, why was she so confused?

“Yes, you're right.” She forced a smile. “I do appreciate your offer, but I'll take care of it. Soon.”



## CHAPTER 14



**B**uck peered past the edge of the buggy's roof into a pearl gray sky. A flock of black-winged birds shifted into the shape of an arrowhead. Geese. They were leaving their winter homes, headed north with the warmer weather. Even the bird-brained knew when get out of town.

He shook the reins and the white-stocking bay picked up the pace. He was running out of time. Unfortunately, he was also running out of ideas.

Amy sat next to him with her gloved hands tucked primly in her lap. The light blue dress she wore, with its lace trim and puffy sleeves, fit her to perfection, even if it did seem a tad fancy for a visit to a mine and a flour mill.

He eyed the pert little bonnet secured with a bow tied at a jaunty angle. Maybe she was taking his advice on how to use her advantage to the fullest. One look and any man would grant her three wishes, unless he was the one trying to hurt her.

Buck shifted his gaze to budding trees and swept the wooded areas along each side of the road. Things had been quiet since that day her attacker had struck. Too quiet. He might've scared the bastard into hiding. He could hope so, but he wasn't risking Amy's life by counting on it.

“A group of newspaper editors from across the state are coming in to meet with the railroad commission next week,” she started.

Now she had his full attention, even if it had little to do with what she’d said. “And you plan to go?”

“Yes, it’s an excellent opportunity for me to lay the groundwork for a town hall meeting with the settlers.”

She hadn’t just taken his suggestion. She’d improved upon it.

“A town hall meeting, that’s good. And I like your idea about getting publicity in advance. Makes it look like the railroad is reaching out. That’ll hogtie your detractors. They’ll look bad if they call it off.”

Her lips curved in a pleased smile.

Pride swelled his chest. She was one sharp gal, his Amy.

*Hold on, Bucko. She isn’t your Amy.*

This confounded ruse had messed up his thinking. He wasn’t her lover or even her friend. He was her bodyguard—and a man who’d deceived her.

He gritted his teeth as his conscience writhed.

“There hasn’t been an attempt on my life lately.” Her voice turned uncharacteristically soft. She was leading up to something. A request or...

“What are you saying?”

“It’s possible you scared away that man when you chased him.” She stared out at the budding trees and wouldn’t meet his eyes. “Fletcher thinks I should let you go.”

*Of all the self-serving...*

Buck’s anger flared like a match set to kindling. He stomped it out. It wouldn’t do to rail about the bastard. That would only make Amy more defensive. He’d appeal to her common sense, a quality old Fletch seemed to be missing.

“I wouldn’t bet your life on that assumption. Whoever’s after you might be waiting for you to let down your guard before he strikes again.”

Dang it, she *still* wouldn’t look at him.

“Fletcher isn’t suggesting I do without a bodyguard. He just wants me to replace you.”

*Pompous ass.*

Buck seethed, furious with Fletch and with her, but mostly with himself. It had to be that stunt he’d pulled at the party, which had gone all kinds of ways wrong.

Hell, he’d gotten too attached anyway. The problem was, he wasn’t finished here. Without Amy’s assistance there was no hope of the railroad reaching an agreement that would help his cousin. The uneasy cease-fire would end and it would be back to war. A war the settlers couldn’t win. Hadn’t he seen enough to know the time for battles was over? It was the savvy negotiator who would come out on top in this opportunistic decade. That meant he had to hold onto this job until Amy held those town meetings. After that, he would leave her in Fletcher’s care—as much as that thought revolted him.

Amy finally looked at him. “I told Fletcher I wasn’t comfortable making a change right away.”

Buck released a pent-up breath. He still had time to accomplish his task and figure out how to slow down her railroad.

“But I’m certain he’ll bring it up again when he returns in two weeks.” Her fingers twined around the cord of her reticule. “He *is* going to be my husband, so I know you’ll understand if I have to—”

“Where?” Buck cut her off before she could finish firing him. “Where did Fletch go?”

Her solemn expression remained unchanged, but her eyes grew sad. “He’s negotiating with the Quapaw whose land is directly south of Baxter Springs. Mr. Joy wants to bypass Cherokee land altogether to get around the treaty requirements. If we build straight south, we can connect with the Texas Central coming up from Galveston.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

A damn risky plan, given the Indians' growing frustration with the railroads.

Buck mulled over the implications. If James Joy thought he had a bird in hand, he wouldn't feel pressured to settle on a lesser price for his land. Not unless he couldn't hold onto enough workers to win the race. "Didn't you say the Border Tier is losing workers to the Katy?"

Her eyes widened. "I don't recall saying that, but yes, the MK&T did increase wages. I'm not sure why or how. They're as overextended as we are. But I've found some private investors who are willing to help with additional funding, so we should be able to outbid them."

Astonishment struck him dumb. No matter what obstacle he put in her way, Amy found a way around it. His admiration increased, even as his mind whirred with alternate plans.

Winning her over to his way of thinking was still the best strategy. "Have you thought about how you'll reach a compromise with the settlers?"

"I have some ideas, nothing definite. It's difficult to find a solution that both sides believe is beneficial. Especially when neither wants to budge on price."

The difference between the two sides amounted to only a few dollars per acre, but the real issue boiled down to making money later, after the railroad's success increased the value of the land.

"Why can't Mr. Joy profit from developing what he owns around the town? You know, lease buildings for stores and offices? Then he could offer a lower price on the outlying land to encourage farming."

Amy took a moment to reply, which meant she was thinking about it. "Yes, that's a sound idea. But he's already lowered the price on farm land. I don't know how much more he's willing to come down. It's not likely to be enough to appease the settlers."

"They want to make money, too."

She lifted an eyebrow. "*Everybody* wants to make money."

“So?” He shrugged. “All you got to figure out is how everybody can.”

“You make it sound so simple.”

Buck breathed a laugh. “If it were simple, you wouldn’t want to do it anyhow. You like a challenge.”

“True enough.” She pointed down a side trail leading through the trees. “Turn off here. It’s a shortcut to the mine. I want to show you something.”

After glancing behind them to ensure they weren’t being followed, he guided the buggy down the bumpy path. “Where are you taking us?”

“Be patient.”

The trail led into an unplowed field with nothing in it except a stone well.

“Over there.” She pointed to the well where something flickered at the top.

“Is that fire?” He pulled the mare to a stop, fascinated.

“Let’s walk over. This burning well is something of a local wonder.”

He helped Amy down, took her arm and guided her across a patch of uneven ground. As they drew closer to the well, he could see water bubbling up beneath the flames.

“I’ll be. Fire out of water. How is it doing that?”

Amy’s eyes shone like a magician with a new trick. “A miracle?”

Buck chuckled. He couldn’t help it. She was too damn cute. “First you’re Joshua leading a bunch of pig-headed farmers into the Promised Land. Now Elijah, setting water on fire. What next?”

“You seem to know a lot of Bible stories.”

“My mother made me listen to them.”

“You think I’m prophetic?”

“You’re too sassy to be a saint. Now, stop stalling and tell me how this is possible.” He edged closer, leaning in until he could feel the heat on his face.

Threads of steam rose from the surface as blue fire leapt up out of the boiling water. The sheer impossibility struck him with childlike amazement.

Suddenly, he didn't want to know the answer. He just wanted to enjoy the miracle. It gave him hope—a kind of burning-well faith—that this was a sign God would somehow lift the curse off his life and give him a gift. Someone who could love him. Someone like Amy.

Her puffed sleeve brushed his arm and his body hummed like a telegraph line, sending a heated message through his veins. “When the owner of this field had the well dug, they struck both water and gas. The scientists surmise the gas comes up through the water. Somehow it got set on fire. No one's been able to put it out.”

Her explanation extinguished the wonder. He felt like a damn fool. There were no miracles anymore. Certainly not for him.

“That's real interesting. I'll bring the buggy around so we can get going,” he muttered, and set off with long strides. He didn't want her to see whatever crazy emotions might be leaking out onto his face. Normally, he was good at concealing his feelings, but Amy turned him inside out. He feared he couldn't hide from her much longer.

A loud crack sounded. The punch in his right shoulder spun him halfway around and he staggered backwards, all in the space of time it took the gunshot to echo through the woods. Cold rushed in, followed by a burning pain.

“Get down!” He ran, stumbling, toward Amy, who stood like a statue by the well with a shocked expression on her face. He fumbled in his haste to draw his revolver with his left hand. “Get behind the well, dammit.”

She vanished faster than a fleeing rabbit.

He rounded the well, dropped to his knees next to her.

She huddled against the stone. Her eyes widened with fright. “Was that a gun shot?”

“Right. Keep your head down,” he ordered, before he leaned around the edge to peer at the far woods. Why the hell had he lowered his guard even for an instant?

Each beat of his heart sent a wet stream down his arm. Blood pooled between the fingers he had pressed against the hard earth. He took a deep breath and blinked to clear his lightheadedness.

A glint in the trees caught his eye. He aimed at it, and fired.

Leaves rustled before a flock of birds burst into the air. The sound of hooves—one horse he’d guess—retreated. Whoever fired that shot had fled. Or so he wanted them to think, until they were ambushed from another angle.

Fear clogged Buck’s throat. He had to get Amy out of here. But if he didn’t get the bleeding stopped first, he’d pass out, leaving her helpless.

He leaning back against the stone well and drew back his coat to get a better look at the wound. His shirt was soaked with so much blood his sleeve was stuck to his arm. The pain had settled into a dull throb.

“Dear God,” Amy whispered. “We have to stop the bleeding.” She scooted over in front of him, yanked out a handkerchief and pressed it against the wound.

He released a low chuckle, couldn’t help it. “That lacy hankie...might as well try to stop a flood with a dishrag.”

“This is useless.” She reached inside his coat, pulled his knife from its sheath and cut off a length of white cloth from beneath her skirt.

Buck observed her frantic movements through a misty haze. “Wad it up.” He winced as she pressed the ball of cloth against the wound.

“Temporary, at best.” She set the knife aside then wrapped a length of petticoat around his shoulder and tied a tight knot. “We can’t stay here. You’ll bleed to death.” Her voice sounded breathy, like she’d been running. “I’ll bring the buggy around.”

“No!” He grabbed her arm. “I’ll get the damn buggy.” He handed her one of his revolvers. “You stay behind this well. If you hear something, shoot at it.”



“Gid’up, you lazy thing!” Amy cracked the whip. The mare broke into a gallop, making the buggy sway.

“Don’t kill your horse,” he muttered. “I’m not dying.”

“You’d better not.” Her voice came out shrill with fear. She wouldn’t slow down and give the assailant a chance to catch them. The wheels hit a bump, eliciting another rough groan.

Amy slid a frantic glance to the wounded man leaning heavily against her. *So much blood.* It soaked his shirt, his coat, even the seat.

She strained to breathe, as fear constricted her airway. Dear God, this couldn’t be happening again. Not another person she cared about snuffed out of her life.

They raced into town and she headed the nag straight for the doctor’s office. She pulled up in front of a covered porch, leapt down, and caught hold of Buck as he slid out of the buggy. Drawing his uninjured arm across her shoulders, she helped him inside the crowded waiting room that doubled as the doctor’s parlor.

While urging Buck to move forward and trying not to jostle him, she nearly collided with someone’s chest. Her gaze tracked up a double row of brass buttons. She wanted to scream at him to get out of her way.

The youthful soldier removed his hat. “Mrs. Langford?”

She focused on his face. “Major Roy? Please, we need the doctor.”

His piercing blue gaze shifted to Buck. “Dr. Hall is setting a broken arm on one of my men.”



She tightened her grip around Buck's waist when he swayed, and she shifted to better support his weight. His eyes drooped. He couldn't sit out here and wait. He'd bleed to death.

"A-a broken arm isn't life threatening, is it? Surely it could wait? Would you tell her there's a man here who's been shot?"

On the far side of the room, a door opened and a raven-haired woman emerged. She ushered out a young soldier with his arm in a sling.

"Dr. Hall. Thank God," Amy breathed.

The doctor assessed Buck in one sweeping glance. "Bring him in here before he collapses. Have him lie down on the examining table."

The treatment room reeked of camphor and the sour smell of sickness. Amy's stomach lurched. She took shallow breaths as she helped Buck onto a narrow wooden table bearing the dark stains of previous mishaps.

He stretched out and she settled his head on a small pillow. Blood soaked the cloth she'd wrapped around the wound, as well as his shirt. His eyes were glazed and his skin felt clammy.

She leaned over him to tenderly smooth back strands of hair damp with sweat. For the first time, she noticed light freckles on his face, scattered like bits of sand across his cheekbones. It made him appear younger, though there was nothing childlike about this man.

"Doctor Hall is the best in town." Amy tried to keep fear from infecting her voice. "She'll get you fixed up."

Buck regarded her through half-closed lids. "You look like you're about to be sick. Go wait in the next room."

Fear held her glued to his side. What if he died while she sat in the other room?

The doctor took over and peeled back his shirt to expose the soaked petticoat. "You did good to staunch the bleeding. I'll come get you as soon as I'm done."

Amy wobbled into the waiting area and sank into a chair. She waited, shifted her feet, drummed her fingers, comforted herself with positive thoughts. Dr. Hall was a brilliant physician. She'd come from the East with a full-fledged medical degree, which was more than most sawbones in the area could boast. Buck was in good hands.

Major Roy dropped into the chair next to her. He leaned forward and braced his hands on his knees. "Tell me what happened."

It was all her fault. If they hadn't taken the shortcut, if Buck hadn't been out in front...

She put her hand to her forehead and choked back tears. "We were on our way to see whether they'd gotten the mine properly closed off after that collapse a month ago. I asked Buck to stop by the burning well."

She launched into an explanation, but her thought process kept misfiring and she meandered and started to cry. She reached for her handkerchief, only to recall that she'd used it as a makeshift bandage.

The major handed her his clean one. "Did you get a look at who fired the shots?"

She shook her head. "Whoever it was, they were hidden in the trees, then they left."

"The man you brought in, that's your—?"

"Bodyguard. I believe I told you once before, I hired him after I became aware someone was trying to..." Her hands trembled as she wiped her face. "Kill me."

Major Roy leaned close. "If you believe this is because of your work with the railroad I would have jurisdiction in the matter. I could assign a detail to guard you."

God bless him. He'd made an offer to come to her aid. But she couldn't say for certain the attacks had anything to do with the railroad. "Nothing has happened outside of Fort Scott. That makes me think it's someone here. Not one of the settlers."

The major sat back and regarded her steadily. “You need only say the word, Miss Langford. I can assign troops for your protection. It doesn’t appear your bodyguard will be much good to you. At least, not for a while.”

The door opened and Dr. Hall motioned for her.

Amy shot to her feet, then turned to the major. “Thank you. I’ll let you know what I decide.”

Without further delay, she hurried back to the treatment room. To her surprise, Buck had sat up and was perched on the edge of the examination table. Bare-chested, with his right shoulder swathed in bandages. He’d propped himself up with his good hand and appeared to focus most of his energy on remaining upright.

“Mr. O’Connor, you’ll have to take it easy for a couple of weeks. I’d prefer you stay in bed. Regardless, you should do nothing strenuous.” Dr. Hall reached behind her to untie her apron, now spattered with fresh blood. She hung the stained garment on a wall hook. “Watch for infection. If you see redness or swelling, or notice a foul odor or discharge, let me know right away. I’ll send along something for pain.”

She removed a small bottle from a sturdy wooden cabinet where tools and medicines were arranged in a tidy display behind a glass-paned door. “That shoulder is going to hurt like the dickens. I’ll give you enough laudanum to last a couple weeks.”

The doctor moved to a desk crowded with books, papers and a tray of sharp-looking instruments. Amy’s stomach clenched at the sight of the bloodied tools. It must have hurt terribly when the doctor removed the bullet. She hadn’t heard him scream.

His lips were compressed into a thin line that communicated his pain straight to her heart.

She ventured closer, yearned to comfort him, but felt awkward and uncertain.

“Will you hand me my clothes?” He gestured with his chin to a nearby chair.

Amy lifted the blood-soaked shirt and shuddered. “You can’t wear this.” She tossed it away. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

His buckskin coat was torn and stained, but not as bad. She held it while he slipped his uninjured arm into a sleeve. Coming up on her toes, she reached around him and carefully drew the garment over his injured shoulder. His body was a fascinating contrast of angles and planes, its lean, corded strength covered over by pale skin marked with old scars.

Her nostrils flared at the sweaty scent of his body, but it didn’t repel her. In truth, she longed to wrap her arms around him and breathe in the raw smell of a living, breathing man. He could have easily been killed because of her.

Distressed, she fumbled with the buttons.

“You don’t have to dress me.” He gently captured her hands. Warmth radiated up her arms and spread through her body, melting away the fear that had frozen her insides.

She looked into a pair of eyes as light as the edge of sunrise. The intensity and brilliance of blue and gray shifted with his moods, like the endless changing of the weather. “Thank God you’re all right,” she said in a ragged voice.

He brushed away a tear with his thumb, a light touch, unbearably tender. “Don’t.”

*Don’t what? Don’t cry? Don’t care?*

Unnerved, she stepped back.

Hiring a bodyguard had sounded so practical, like hiring an extra hand. Reality had struck the moment she’d seen him sitting there, soaked in his own blood. She would never forgive herself if he died trying to protect her, whether or not it was his job. She’d carry a gun, wear a suit of armor, do

whatever was necessary, but she would not put him in danger to secure her own safety. As soon as Buck was well, she would send him on his way.

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## CHAPTER 15



*A*my tiptoed up the narrow stairs and slipped into the Buck's room above the stables. She lifted the lantern. Light spilled across the still figure on the bed. Was he resting or had his condition worsened? Earlier, he'd been in pain, unable to sleep.

Worried, she crossed the room and set the lamp on the table, along with a glass containing laudanum mixed with weak tea. It wasn't yet time for his next dose, but she felt compelled to check on him to reassure herself. Overly concerned, perhaps. He'd gotten through that terrible ordeal yesterday and had walked out of the doctor's office, so that must mean the wound wasn't as bad as she'd first surmised.

He'd pushed the sheet and blanket down to his hips, probably didn't remember shucking his clothes as he'd crawled into bed. She certainly remembered. The fact that his nakedness had produced a quiver of excitement instead of calm concern said something about her character.

She sat on the edge of the bed. With a feeling of self-consciousness, she readjusted her velvet wrapper to cover herself. He hadn't opened his eyes or acted like he noticed her.

His bare chest rose and fell with comforting regularity, a lock of hair had fallen casually across his forehead, giving him a rakish appearance. She

smoothed it back then placed her palm against his forehead. Warmer than when she'd last checked on him around midnight.

Fever could be setting in.

What should she do? Whenever she was ill, Sophie covered her up.

Amy pulled the sheet and blanket over Buck's chest and shoulders. With a restless sigh, he pushed the covers to his waist. She jerked her hand away, holding her breath while she stared at his bare chest, with its light sprinkling of hair.

*Really.* She had to stop gawking at him. She'd seen a naked man. Once. Skinny, almost frail. He'd looked nothing like Buck, who would get better sleep without her help.

Earlier, she had tossed and turned. When sleep finally overtook her, the old nightmares about her father's death had returned. After that, sleep was impossible.

Buck's eyelashes fluttered. He regarded her with a look of confusion, as if he couldn't place her or didn't remember what was going on.

"What time is it?" His voice sounded as rusty as the hinge on an old door.

"A little after five...in the morning," she said softly.

He passed his tongue over his lips.

"Are you thirsty?" She retrieved a cup Jacob had filled with water earlier in the evening. At last, a way she could be useful.

Buck struggled to rise on his uninjured arm. She brought the cup to his mouth. He cradled it with one hand and drank with loud gulps.

"Easy," she whispered. "You'll choke yourself."

He released the cup and tried to sit up.

"No, don't. You need to be still." She plumped the stack of pillows behind him and he lay back with a sigh. "Sophie will bring breakfast in a little while, if you think you can eat."

"You'll know I'm dying if I can't eat," he muttered.

A chill shot through her. How could he joke about that?

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Don’t get your hopes up, Venus. You won’t get rid of me that easy.”

She couldn’t work up the will to scold him for his use of the hated moniker. Instead, she busied her hands by fussing with the sheet, and in the process, pulled it over his chest she wouldn’t be tempted to stare at him. How she reacted to him physically worried her less than the emotions stirred up when she’d thought he would bleed to death before she could get him to a doctor. Lord above. She didn’t want to admit what her anguish might mean or deal with the whipsaw emotions that shredded her heart. Most of all, she didn’t want to be responsible for his death. He had to leave as soon as he was well.

“Major Roy offered to assign men to guard the house.” She fidgeted with the fringe of her wrapper. “He’s treating this as a railroad-related incident, I think because he feels compelled to come to my aid.”

Buck’s steady gaze set off a nervous flutter in her stomach. “A true gentleman, our Major Roy.”

She frowned at the sarcastic tone. “Do you not agree he should have offered?”

The mocking smile leveled into a solemn line. “I’m glad he did, considering I’m not much help to you right now. You can get rid of them later.”

Would the soldiers’ presence make her feel safer? Not as safe as she felt with Buck, although she’d not tell him that. It would only encourage him to stay. “More protection can’t hurt, now that my attacker has graduated to shooting at me.”

A shudder passed through her. She’d held onto a thread of hope that the accidents were meant to scare her. There was no mistaking it now. Her mysterious assailant sought to kill her. She closed her eyes so Buck wouldn’t see her despair.



He covered her hand with his larger one and rubbed his thumb lightly over her skin, which produced a hailstorm of trembles. “I’ve been layin’ here thinking, when I’m not sleeping. I don’t believe he meant to aim at you.”

Her eyes opened. “What? Of course, he did.”

“Amy, either he’s the worst marksman in the world or he tried to get rid of me and just missed a fatal shot.”

Dread sluiced like ice water through her veins. She had put Buck directly in the line of fire. Not only was she a target, now he was one as well. What had she been thinking to bring this man into her life and thrust him into danger? She was like a horse with blinders that could see only one direction—the path to her own safety and security.

“Oh Buck, I’m so sorry I dragged you into this.” Tears spilled over. “I shouldn’t have hired you. It was selfish on my part.”

“Hold on there.” He struggled to a sitting position and took hold of her arm. Whether to keep himself upright or draw her closer, she wasn’t sure. “You offered me a job I’m well-suited for and I took it. I knew the risks.”

So did her father when he chose to stay in Kansas, even as the state dissolved into a bloodbath. So did her husband when he’d ridden off to war never to return. They had both known the risks and had paid with their lives. This time, she wasn’t willing to gamble. Not with Buck’s life. He was too important, too precious to her.

She twisted to free herself from his grasp. “I want you to leave as soon as you’re able. Get away from here. Get away from me.”

“Stop. Please.” The tightness in his voice cut through her panic.

She stilled. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

His hold gentled, but his face tightened with fierce determination. “This isn’t just your fight anymore. That fellow made it mine when he shot me. And I’m not leaving until I get that sorry son-of-a—” The sudden burst of

strength seemed to drain out of him. He dropped back against the pillows with a rumbling groan.

Her anxiety spiraled again. “Fletcher doesn’t want you here.”

“I don’t give a damn what Fletch wants.” Buck closed his eyes. The muscles around his mouth tightened. He was in pain.

This was all *her* fault.

She stood and went to the table, mostly to hide her tears. A distraught female was not what he needed right now. She had to be strong, for his sake. “It’s time for your medicine.”

“You just want to shut me up.”

She blinked the tears away and kept her tone wry. “I can only hope.”

Regret slammed into her when she thought about how that must sound, even though she’d been joking. He’d think she resented caring for him, and there was nothing further from the truth.

She helped him raise his head enough to drink the laudanum she’d mixed with sweetened tea. “I don’t want you to lie here in pain.”

“Laudanum ain’t gonna cure what ails me.” he muttered, but drank it dutifully.

What else could she do to relieve him? Frustrated, she plumped the pillows again to make him more comfortable. As she pulled up the sheets, her gaze was drawn again to his broad chest and long arms with muscles as hard as steel bands. Those arms had embraced her, had lifted her as though she weighed no more than a doll.

Desire shimmered through her.

She dropped the bedclothes like they were on fire.

It was time she returned to the house.

He caught her arm. “Don’t go.”

His cynical mask fell away. The aching loneliness in his eyes called to her, as nothing else would have. She sank down beside him. At this moment, she would give him anything.

He only laced his fingers through hers, as if to bind them like strands of hemp.

She stared at their twined fingers, dismayed by the sense that destiny was at work in ways she didn't understand. The Fates, in a fit of mischief, had thrown them together. Logic would declare that she couldn't afford to get drawn into his life. He wasn't someone who could work beside her, share her goals and help her achieve them.

"Why Fletch?" Buck's rasp cut through the silence.

She jerked her gaze to his face at the unexpected question. The answer came easily. She'd recited it often enough. "He's a good husband for me."

"Even if he's the wrong man?"

This wasn't a conversation she wanted to have with Buck. She tried to pull her hand away, but he held tight. With a sigh, she gave in rather than hurt him again by jerking her arm. The medicine would take effect soon enough. In the meantime, she would humor his presumptuous question. He wouldn't remember anyway. Her mother had never remembered anything after she'd taken her medicine.

"Fletcher believes in the same things I do."

"You believe in getting rich?"

Amy stiffened at the cutting sarcasm. Why was Buck challenging her? It wasn't as if he had a stake in her future.

*He could, if you let him.*

Why would she do that? she argued in her head. He had nothing to offer.

*Only love.*

Ridiculous. Buck didn't love her. He lusted after her. Besides, she didn't want love.

*Oh yes, you do.*

"No, I don't."

"Course you don't, that's my point."

Her heart stopped. What had she said? He must've thought she was responding to his snide remark about getting rich. Thank God he couldn't read her thoughts.

He dragged her hand onto his chest, over crisp hair and hard muscle. The contact sent a tingling relay through her body that made her blush from head to toe. Her fingers refused to obey a half-hearted order to break the connection.

“Does he love you?”

*Good heavens.* That medicine had certainly loosened Buck's tongue. It was the only explanation for this bizarre conversation. “He's proud of my accomplishments.”

“I didn't ask if he loves what you do. Does he love *you*, for who you are?”

Was there a difference?

“What I've accomplished is who I am.”

“You don't believe that,” he slurred.

She didn't want to, but life had taught her the truth. She'd gained her father's affirmation through what she did and how well she did it. Those achievements gave her life purpose while success validated her existence. “Aren't we all defined by what we accomplish?”

He paused through the duration of the rise and fall of his chest.

“I've accomplished nothing,” he stated flatly.

She gaped at him, astonished. “How can you say such a thing?”

“Jus' answerin' your question.”

Her throat grew tight. This strong, capable man couldn't think so poorly of himself. It must be the laudanum talking. She bent and looked deep into his heavy-lidded eyes. “You've kept me alive and ensured my safety. I'd say that's accomplishing something.”

His uninjured arm rose slowly, as though it were strapped with weights. He gripped her thick braid and pulled her to him until they were nearly

nose-to-nose. “I promise,” he whispered. “Won’t let anybody hurt you.”

His eyes drifted shut.

Her gaze caressed his face: the tawny brows and thick lashes, a slight bump on the bridge of his nose indicating it might have been broken once, his mouth, relaxed in sleep and half hidden by the silky mustache. Some powerful current tugged, an intense longing that swept away the last of her resistance.

She leaned forward to press her lips against his—softly, tentatively, then with more confidence when he remained in a state of sleepy acquiescence.

He sighed, a soft sound of pleasure, as she explored his mouth. She glided her tongue over the smooth flesh of his lip before slipping into the warm recesses. He tasted like sugared tea with a faint bitterness from the laudanum.

She ought to be ashamed to take advantage of him. *Ought* to be, except shame had no place in her heart at the moment. Her breath quickened. Desire throbbed with each heartbeat. The heat emanating from his body made her long to crawl into bed beside him and curl up like a kitten.

He exhaled on a long breath and his mouth went lax. She felt the moment he surrendered to the effects of the medicine. The hand in her hair loosened and dropped, and hung off the side of the bed.

Amy sat back, thoroughly shaken. An acute longing lodged in her chest. She yearned for something she sensed only Buck could give her. Something far more than the passion that steamed the air between them.

The muscles in his face had relaxed and his lips remained parted, still damp from her kisses. He looked heartbreakingly vulnerable.

Insight struck with frightening clarity. Buck needed her. Not just as a woman to warm his bed, or even a friend who could share his accomplishments. He needed her in a way no other man had ever needed her.

She stood on shaky legs. Her mind rejected what her heart cried out. His need, her longing, those feelings couldn't be allowed to take root. He wasn't part of her future. She had mapped out her destiny, knew the steps she had to take to succeed. Her mother had ruined everything by giving in to her passion. She would not repeat that mistake.



A woman's voice whispered soothing sounds. Liquid coolness bathed his face and trickled down his neck, which eased the terrible heat. He tried to catch a drop with his tongue. His mouth felt as dry as a creek bed in late August.

*Water.*

Had the word passed his lips or was it still stuck in his mind? If only he could get out of this cottony haze and away from the flames scorching his skin.

*Flames?* Apprehension shot through him and he tensed.

"Shhh." The woman's breath caressed his ear. "Hold still. The wound needs to be cleaned."

*Wound?* Had he been shot? He couldn't remember.

"Georgia?" he rasped. She would be the one who treated him. The *boy* who'd followed their company. He'd known her secret and protected her. If only he had protected her sooner.

He struggled to open his eyes. He had to wake up. His men needed him. Except the darkness sucked him down, deeper into a mass of thick clouds. He couldn't see anything. He could no longer hear the soothing voice. She'd gone and left him. Alone.

White-hot fire seared his shoulder. His thoughts dissolved in a blur of pain. In a frantic bid to escape, he tried to jerk away from the coals

blistering his skin, but iron bonds held his arms. Someone had him tied down.

An image wavered and took shape. The lean face mottled with drink, those wintry eyes agleam with malicious intent... No, God, it couldn't be. Da was dead.

*I warned you, Bucko. Now you'll take yer punishment. You'll take it like a man.*

The malicious threat sent spiders crawling over Buck's skin. His heart thudded wildly and terror wrenched a protest from the darkest depths of his soul. "No! Da, don't..."

*Shut yer mouth, you whiny baby. If ye beg, I'll put your other hand in the fire.*

Buck groaned. He fought to hold back another plea, but the pain... It was too much. He couldn't stand it. His courage crumbled and a wretched appeal spilled from the lips of the child locked inside. "Da, no! Ah God, please. Don't burn me!"



Buck's hoarse cries tore through Amy's heart. His body bowed as he struggled to free himself from Jacob's determined grip. For some reason, the chloroform hadn't rendered him fully senseless. Her legs trembled from squatting at the front of the bed while she tried to soothe him and hold him still.

She recoiled from the stench of rotten flesh being scraped out of the wound, which had festered. Her stomach heaved. She swallowed the bitter taste and held on. She would not leave Buck's side until he was out of danger.

"Hold him," Dr. Hall barked, glancing over. She pressed the white hot blade to his injury and he screamed again.

Amy bit down on her lip until it bled. The last time she'd smelled burned flesh had been during that hellish massacre in Lawrence. She'd heard the anguished cries of men who'd been left inside burning buildings to die.

"We're past the worst." The doctor's soft remark jerked Amy out of the past. "All that's left is to apply a dressing and bandage him up."

Amy gentled her hold. Buck's head lolled in her arms as he slipped into lax unconsciousness. Finally. Good Lord. Hadn't he suffered enough?

She couldn't stop her hand from trembling as she stroked his hair. "It's over now," she whispered, and pressed a light kiss against his heated temple. "No more pain, I promise."

Her throat tightened. She couldn't keep such a promise to herself. Buck suffered because she'd brought him into her life, and no amount of arguing would change that. She would make him go even if it ripped part of her heart out in the process.

Amy waited until the doctor had dressed the wound, then repositioned herself at the side of the bed. She dipped a rag in a bucket of cold water. After wringing it out, she gently wiped Buck's flushed face and neck. She'd been bathing him down for three days and nights, and still the fever hadn't broken. He'd slipped into delirium the previous day and she'd dragged the doctor to his side.

She met Jacob's solemn gaze. "Can you get Sophie? I'll need her help to move him."

"I've given him morphine for pain." Dr. Hall packed away her instruments. "He can have another dose in four hours. I'll leave written instructions. Use this salve to dress the wound. Now that I've disinfected it, he should start to heal."



“Thank you, Dr. Hall.” Amy gently lifted Buck’s right hand in hers and stroked the raised blemishes on the back of his fingers and knuckles. She’d noticed them before, but had assumed it was an injury related to the war.

A frown marred the doctor’s brow. “Those are old scars. They look like burns. He might have fallen into a fire when he was a child.”

*Or someone put his hand into one.*

Their eyes met. Amy knew they were both thinking the same thing. Her heart constricted with pain like none she’d ever felt. What kind of father would do that to his own child?

A fierce protectiveness rose up within her. She wanted to wrap her arms around Buck and promise she’d never let anyone hurt him again.

The best way to keep him safe would be to send him away as soon as he was well. He was in danger as long as he remained by her side.

“Keep bathing him. Keep him warm, but not too warm.” Dr. Hall picked up her medical kit and started for the door. “Don’t hesitate to send for me if you need me. I’ll be back tomorrow to check on him.”

Amy nodded while she kept her eyes on Buck’s unconscious form. Fresh blood had already seeped through the cloth. The cauterization should stop the bleeding soon.

She swallowed another urge to empty her stomach. She couldn’t stand the sight or smell of blood, not since the day she’d knelt over her father as his life drained out in a ruby pool.

Regardless, she wasn’t going anywhere. There had been nothing she could do for her father, but she could save Buck—if they could get his fever down.

With renewed determination, she folded the sheet over his hips. His fair skin glowed as if burned by the sun. She gently bathed him, starting with his face and not stopping until she reached the edge of the sheet.

She wiped the cool cloth over his stomach, and blushed at how boldly she’d kissed him when he had lain near senseless from the effects of the

laudanum. There must be something terribly wrong with her that she would take advantage of a sick man.

Her fingers drifted over his skin and she noted the numerous scars marring his body. Faint, discolored slashes on his arms, a small dip that looked like an old bullet wound above his hip, a jagged lesion on his side that could have been made by a knife or sword.

Her heart ached for the pain those wounds must have caused him. It was a miracle he'd survived the war. She could find no other evidence of burns, although the worst scars were likely ones she couldn't see. Hadn't he said his father died when he was nine? If her hunch was correct, that meant he had been abused as a child possibly from a very young age.

The tears started up again as her heart cracked open, breaking for the wounded boy and the scarred man.

Familiar footsteps sounded on the stairs. She wiped away her tears. If Sophie caught her crying, the questions would start, and she didn't feel comfortable sharing something Buck wouldn't want others to know.

Sophie swept into the room in a flurry of calico with fresh sheets and towels bundled in her arms. Jacob followed close behind, setting another bucket of water by the bed and a teapot on the table. "I brewed up my strongest sweatin' tea," Sophie said, piling the sheets and bedclothes on a chair. "We need to get all of it down him."

Without a word, the burly groom went to the head of the bed. He gripped under Buck's arms and hauled him up, provoking a groan. Amy grabbed the sheet as it slid off, revealing Buck's nudity. Her cheeks flamed and she jerked it back over his hips. The two servants had stripped him after his fever had gotten so high that they'd needed to bathe him with regularity.

"Lord, child, you don't need to be doing this." Sophie shooed her off the bed. "You go on back to the house and let us take care of him. Don't you have them newspapermen coming here tomorrow night? You got plenty to do to get ready for that."

Amy poured the pungent tea into a cup. "I don't care if every editor in the state shows up at my doorstep. I'm not leaving until his fever breaks." Fear congealed in her throat. Buck had to get better. She wouldn't allow herself to think otherwise.

As Jacob cradled Buck's sagging body, she cupped her hand beneath his chin, put the cup to his lips, and tipped it to coax a little warm tea down his throat.

He choked then coughed, spewing tea into her face.

The full cup flipped out of her hand and onto her lap.

Amy leapt up with a startled cry. She wiped the moisture off her face, tempted to dissolve into frustrated tears. Instead, she stalked past her wide-eyed housekeeper and poured another cup. Buck was barely conscious. She would have to wake him enough to get him to drink the tea, and he had to drink it so he could get better.

"Hold him steady, Jacob," she said, turning back to the bed.

Buck's head drooped forward as Jacob lifted him straighter.

Sophie took the cup with more tea.

Amy sat on the bed and gripped beneath Buck's chin. She patted his face. "Wake up."

His eyelids fluttered, then drifted shut.

She jostled, cajoled.

His eyes remained closed.

Distress made her desperate. He had to get this tea down so he could sweat out the fever. She smacked him on the cheek with the flat of her palm.

He opened eyes and regarded her with a glazed look. "Wha'd you do that for?"

Amy swallowed her tears. She'd rather thrust a knife through her heart than hurt him. "I'm sorry. You have to wake up and drink this tea so you

can get well.” She took the cup from Sophie’s outstretched hand. “Here, drink up. Then you can go back to sleep.”

He tried to raise his right arm and winced.

“I’ll hold it. You drink.” She put the cup to his lips, carefully tipped it and watched his throat work as he drank down the tepid tea. She handed Sophie the empty cup to be refilled.

He screwed up his face. “Tastes like horse piss.”

Her lips twitched as relief threaded through her. If his sense of humor was intact, that had to be a good sign. “How do you know what horse piss tastes like?”

“Didn’t...until you gave it to me.”

She lifted the next full cup. He didn’t know it, but he was about to drink an entire pot of the stuff.

In the time it took Buck to drink the tea, Sophie had whisked away the dirty rags and tidied up the room. Just their brief exchange and the effort of drinking the tea took all Buck’s strength and he drifted off to sleep after Jacob eased him down onto the stacked pillows.

Amy remained planted at his side, determined to stay put until his fever came down and she was certain he was out of danger. She pulled the sheet to his waist to afford him as much dignity as a sick man could expect.

Sophie dragged the bucket over and thrust a rag into her hand. “You gonna sit there, might as well bathe him down.” She clucked and shook her head. “Don’t know why you being so stubborn.”

*Why?* She was terrified that she might lose him.

She averted her eyes to hide her fear and swallowed twice before finding her voice. “I feel responsible.”

A chair scraped. The woman who’d cared for her from the time she was a grieving, motherless child took her fingers in a gentle grasp. Sophie’s coffee-colored eyes regarded her with love. “Honey, this boy’s gonna be

fine. He's strong as an ox and just as mean. Don't you worry none, we'll get him well."

Amy reached out, seeking reassurance as she had so many times before. The hug was returned full force. Ah, what would she do without Sophie? This woman who had survived enslavement at the hands of brutal men somehow possessed the softest heart in the world.

Sophie gripped Amy's shoulders and pinned her with a frank look. "Tell me, now. This is about more than a hired hand getting hisself shot, ain't it? I been watchin' you. I see you got feelings for this man."

Amy's chest tightened. *Feelings?* That didn't begin to describe the commotion in her heart. But if she spoke the emotions out loud, that would make them real and something she had to face. For the first time in her life, she was afraid to meet a challenge head-on. It would turn her life upside down, throw open a hope chest of dreams she had locked away years ago. She didn't need a white knight. Didn't want heart-stopping passion and endless love. She didn't. It meant hoping, risking. Grieving.

"He was shot while protecting me," she choked out. "Why wouldn't I have feelings about that?"

Sophie's eyes narrowed. Lies had never worked with her. She had an uncanny way of seeing into the shadowy corners. "'Course you'd be grateful, but that's not what I'm talkin' about and you know it."

Amy pressed her lips into a mutinous line. She refused to acknowledge the truth.

Sophie's expression softened, erasing the surprisingly few lines on her face. She picked up a rag and dipped it into the water. With brisk efficiency, she wiped the wet cloth over Buck's face and neck. He sighed and turned his head, but didn't resist.

Water dampened his hair, darkening it to the color of dead grass. Silvery streams snaked down the strong column of his throat. Sophie tugged the sheet lower, nearly exposing his private parts. "We got to bathe him down

all over, then change the sheets. Do the whole thing again once he sweats this fever out.”

Amy couldn't tear her gaze away from Buck's recumbent figure. He was most assuredly strong as an ox, but he was far from a *boy*. Even in a drug-induced sleep, his rugged body emanated strength and power. He was so vital, so full of life. All the light in her world would go out if he died.

She dashed her hand into the bucket and swirled the rag, then wrung it with a sharp twist. “Soon as he's well, I'll send him on his way.”

Sophie drew back with widened eyes. “Why would you do such a thing? You've been attacked twice. I believe you better keep this one around a while longer.”

Amy shook her head. She would no longer allow Buck to endanger himself on her behalf. “I'm accepting Major Roy's offer to post a guard to protect me. I won't need Buck anymore.”

Tension charged the air as they finished bathing him down.

Afterwards, Sophie touched his face and chest. She leaned back with a look of satisfaction. “He's cooler now. Let's change these sheets.”

Change the sheets? That meant stripping the bed while Buck was in it. Naked.

Sophie, without batting an eye, snatched off the soaked top covers and dropped them on the floor. Amy averted her gaze while she tried to tug the sheet from beneath him, but his size and weight impeded her progress.

“He's too heavy for you to move. Let me get Jacob.” Sophie started for the door.

“No,” Amy shouted. This was no time to act missish. “Just tell me what to do.”

Sophie's face tightened with displeasure. “There's no call to hurt him just to prove something to yourself.” With a sigh, she came back to the bed, reached over Buck and tugged out the bottom sheet. “I'm gonna use this to roll him toward you. Make sure he don't fall off.”

By carefully rolling him to each side they managed to get the sheets changed.

After they were done, Amy sank wearily onto the edge of the bed. She fussed with the covers and smoothed back his hair. Her overwhelming need to touch him was fueled by some complex emotion she refused to name. “I’ll stay with him, if you don’t mind bringing my supper out to me. When he wakes, we can get him to take some of that broth you made up.”

Sophie gathered the wet sheets, but stopped at the door. “*Sending* him away ain’t gonna rid you of them feelings. If you love him, you better face it and decide what to do about it.”

Fear filled the room, making the air thick and hard to breathe.

Amy shook her head. She couldn’t risk love again when the people she loved most were inevitably ripped out of her life. “I can’t love him. He’s not the kind of husband I need.”

The grave expression on Sophie’s face melted into kindness. “Love don’t always come packaged the way we want. But it’s a gift when it comes. Remember that.”

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## CHAPTER 16



*A*nother seven days passed. Buck couldn't stay in bed another minute. *Amy's Army*—what he called the doc and housekeeper, had hovered over him until it about drove him crazy. The only woman he'd wanted to see had been conspicuously absent. Maybe Amy had decided she was done with all that mollycoddling. *Fine*. He was, too.

He led his horse out of the stall to give Goliath some exercise. The stallion had gotten antsy after too many days without being ridden. This morning, the big roan had nearly kicked down the walls in his eagerness to get out.

"I understand," Buck confided. "I couldn't stand it any longer either."

A good ride was something they both needed. It would clear his head so he could get started on finding that killer. Whoever it was, he apparently wasn't after Amy. Or maybe there were two of them. He'd find them. Then he'd take care of them. Permanently.

"Hold on, *bodyguard*."

The only person who called him *bodyguard*, like it was his name, was Jacob.

What about Amy's manservant? Did he resent being displaced? If he'd wanted his perceived competition dead, he could've accomplished it easily over the past week.



Buck's gut instinct told him Jacob hadn't fired that gun. "You can call me Buck," he said for the umpteenth time.

"Miz Amy wants to see you up at the house, *bodyguard*." Jacob maintained a straight face, but there was a flicker of amusement in his dark eyes instead of the previous glint of resentment.

Buck noted it with relief, then handed the reins to the groomsman. "Would you take Goliath out for some exercise?"

A rare smile split Jacob's dark face. "Sure will."

The taciturn groomsman had taken good care of the stallion over the past two weeks. He would see to it that the horse got some of his frustration worked out, which was more than Buck could say for himself.

His memory remained a bit foggy, but he recalled Amy telling him he had to go. She was listening to Fletch again or she was worried he'd let himself become a target. Not a chance. He would not be caught off guard again.

He confidently strode in the back door and through the kitchen. Two soldiers who sat at the table cast disinterested glances in his direction before going back to their card game. Extra watchdogs were only helpful if they kept watch.

"Mr. O'Connor, it's good to see you up and around again." Sophie dropped a wad of dough in a shallow bowl and wiped her hands on her apron.

"Must be all that fine food." Buck said with gratitude. When he'd come to his senses, the housekeeper been there clucking with worry and plying him with food and homemade remedies. Her change of heart had been quite a surprise. What tale had Amy spun? Whatever it was, it must've been a good one. "Do you know where I can find Mrs. Langford?"

"She's in the study." Sophie picked up a plate of cookies and held them out. The gingery aroma made Buck's mouth water. "Made 'em fresh. Why don't you take some?"

“I’ll share.” He nabbed four and hurried out of the kitchen.

Amy couldn’t intend to replace him. Even if old Fletch wanted her to, she had a mind of her own and it just plain didn’t make sense to send him away. He was the best man for the job. She had to see that because, by God, he wasn’t going anywhere. At least, not until he’d found whoever was behind these attacks and took care of them.

He climbed the stairs two at a time and turned down the hall to the room that served as Amy’s office. The door stood open.

She sat behind the big desk positioned in front of her map of dreams. Her glorious chestnut hair was arranged in ringlets around her head, without any adornment detracting from its beauty. He imagined taking it down and running his fingers through the soft waves.

As he walked in, she looked up and her lips curved in a half smile. The light from the lamp set her face aglow and sparked a memory of soft, pink lips pressed against his. An image so real it stopped him in his tracks.

“Good morning, Mr. O’Connor. I’m glad to see that you’re looking very fit.”

“Thanks to all that good care from your army.”

Had he grabbed her and kissed her when she’d come to see him that first night after he was injured? He’d thought it was a dream.

“My army?” Still smiling, which meant she wasn’t angry.

“The doctor and Sophie.”

The only touch he’d recalled—until now—was that resounding slap she’d given him for some unknown reason. He’d probably mouthed off one too many times. Laudanum always gave him bad dreams and made him snarly as a treed coon. He couldn’t recall it making him lusty, but with Amy, all bets were off.

“Why don’t you sit down?” She gestured at a chair. Too far away.

He walked to the edge of the desk with a knot in his gut. She had good reason to fire him if he’d manhandled her. No matter if he’d been out of his

head, which would explain the slap. “If I did or said anything amiss while I was sick, I hope you know I didn’t mean it. I didn’t do it on purpose. I mean —”

“I know what you mean.” She looked down at a ledger in front of her and wouldn’t meet his eyes. That didn’t bode well. “You didn’t do anything wrong or disrespectful.”

“That’s a relief. I can be a bear when I’m sick.” He stood in front of the desk, as awkward and uncertain as a green boy. Completely flustered in the presence of a woman who didn’t even reach his chin.

He held out the remaining cookie. “Brought you a ginger snap.”

She raised her head and her smile softened to appear less forced. “Sophie already brought me one. Go ahead and enjoy yours.” She gestured to a chair behind him. “Please, sit down.”

He dragged over a straight-backed chair. With her behind the desk, it felt like he was back in the schoolroom, except no schoolmarm ever looked like a vision or smelled like summer fields warmed by the sun.

Buck finished the cookie to distract his senses. “What did you tell Sophie? Seems she’s not so inclined to poison me.”

“I told her how you risked your life to save me.” Amy focused on the ledger again. She drummed a pencil against the surface.

Buck studied the stiff expression and the tightness in her jaw. He knew what she wanted. She just hadn’t yet found the courage to tell him, but she would in a moment. She didn’t have a yellow bone in her body. “You still thinking about firing me?”

“Major Roy has assigned a guard until the assailant is apprehended or the attacks cease. This negates my need for a bodyguard.” She exhaled after the last word, a soft sigh.

Pain lanced his heart. She sounded downright relieved to be rid of him. Why not? He’d been a pain the ass and a damn useless nuisance over the past week.

He crossed his arms and slumped in a sprawl of indifference. He'd be damned before he revealed how much her rejection hurt. "I told you. I won't leave until I find out who tried to kill me."

She set the pencil down with a thin-lipped expression of annoyance. "You were shot because you were with me. Not because the killer has something against you personally. It's foolish for you to remain here and invite trouble when it's not trying to find you."

Buck reined in his impatience. He shifted forward and braced his hands on his knees. "Trouble already found me. I'm part of this whether you like it or not. Think for a minute. Whoever shot me could have picked you off easily enough—before or after. Why didn't he? What's he really after?"

Her emotions played out across of her face: uncertainty, anxiety, fear. She was so transparent, yet she'd deny those feelings with her last breath.

"I-I don't know." She blinked rapidly.

Tears. She'd refute them, too.

He dragged his fingers through his hair, frustrated, mostly with himself for not being more careful. God, he hated to cause her worry or see her so fearful. "That's what I intend to find out. Those other soldiers can trail after you while I investigate and get to the bottom of this. There's something we're missing. Give me time to figure it out."

"Major Roy's men are capable enough. He can investigate."

Buck came to his feet and smacked his hand on the desk, making her jump. "Dang it, Amy, those soldiers are down in the kitchen playing cards. They aren't invested in your wellbeing. They don't care about you like I—" He snapped his teeth shut before something popped out that would assure his departure. "I got a stake in this fight," he grumbled.

She laced her fingers into a tight fist and her expression turned mulish. "I refuse to let you put yourself in danger a moment longer on my account."

*Hell's bells.* She would fire him because she felt guilty? Fine, he could take that argument apart. "So, you don't mind it if those soldiers risk their

lives?”

She drew back with a distressed expression. “Yes—I mean—no. They’re soldiers. This is the kind of thing they’re paid to do.”

“Exactly. Consider me a paid soldier doing my job.”

“No. I don’t want you doing this job anymore.”

“Why not?” He leaned closer. He’d make her admit her guilt if that’s what it took. “Why am I different?”

Her cheeks flushed pink. She caught her lip between her teeth.

He gaped at her with pure astonishment as the reason hit him. Her antsy need to dismiss him had nothing to do with fear for his life or her guilt about it. Amy desired him. He could see it in her hooded eyes. Could smell it in her warm, womanly scent. She couldn’t handle her yen for one man while she married another.

Buck let out a humorless laugh. “You’re just anxious to be rid of me because I distract you from your well-planned—”

“Stop it!” She jerked out of the chair. Her chest heaved, which drew his attention to the square-cut neckline of her dress and the deep cleavage between her full breasts.

He flexed his fingers.

Her face flamed like she knew exactly what was on his mind, and didn’t mind it half as much as she pretended.

She spun away, sending a ripple through the soft fabric draping her lush curves. “This...this *thing* between us has nothing to do with it.”

“*Thing?* Is that what you call it?” He stalked her around the desk, took hold of her wrists and dragged her to him, determined to make her admit to the same weakness that plagued him. “It’s called lust—or desire, if you prefer—and it has *everything* to do with it.”

“Don’t do this, please.” She turned her face away, but she didn’t try to fight. It was like she’d given up.

Was that what he really wanted? Her surrender?

Hell no. He wanted her to come to him willingly or not at all.

He gathered her into a tender embrace. “Amy, sweetheart, let me show you how much I—.”

“I can’t,” she moaned. Her fingers fisted his shirt. “Buck, please. Don’t you understand? I don’t *want* these feelings.”

He stiffened at the shot, which went straight through his heart. She didn’t want to desire him because she knew she couldn’t love him. He was a fool to think otherwise. “Neither do I, but it seems I can’t do a damn thing about it. Except this.”

He gripped her chin, turned her face up to his and took her mouth.

Her lips parted on a gasp—surprise or pleasure he wasn’t sure—but he took the advantage and plunged in. She tasted like tears and ginger.

Whatever resistance she’d rallied drained away and she sank against him. She wound her arms around his neck, threaded her fingers through his hair and scraped her nails over his scalp. A touch that made him throb and burn.

He cupped his hands on her bustled buttocks and lifted her until they were fitted together in perfect agony. A few layers of fabric, the only thing between him and Paradise.

He pressed frantic kisses across her face and down her neck. Breathed in the summery fragrance of her skin. Though she was easy to hold, his arms trembled.

God in heaven, he’d never wanted a woman like he wanted this one.

Desperate need shook him to his core—every defense, every good intention, collapsed with the force of the quake. His voice came out rough with emotion. “Let me love you.”

“Don’t make me feel this,” she whispered against his insistent kisses.

The agony in her plea cut through a haze of lust and frustrated longing. He eased her down his body, but continued to hold her close. “I’m can’t make you feel anything you don’t already feel.”

The desolate look in her eyes stabbed him.

“You won’t admit you want me because I’m not like your precious Fletcher.” He curved his palm to fit her soft cheek and lightly stroked his thumb over her lower lip.

She trembled in response.

The time for pretending was over.

He bent to brush his lips over hers in a soft, teasing touch. “You want me,” he murmured into her mouth. “Admit it.”

She sighed and her hooded eyes signaled her surrender. “I do want you,” she breathed, “but...I’m afraid.”

“I wouldn’t hurt you for the world.”

“It’s not you I’m afraid of, it’s...me.”

Now she wasn’t making any sense. But if she had even an ounce of fear, he wouldn’t press her. He’d hate himself more than he already did if he forged ahead with full knowledge she was tormented by some terror.

With a huff of frustration, he released her.

“Just so you know, I’m not leaving.” He turned on his heel and headed for the door. It was time he got his body under control and his mind back on the task at hand. He would find the assailant and make sure the bastard never threatened anyone again.

She caught his arm. “Buck, please, you have to go. I don’t...I don’t want to lose you.”

The thread of his patience, already strained, snapped.

He whipped around. “You tell me to leave, then you say you don’t want to lose me. Do you know how crazy that sounds?”

She jerked back like he’d slapped her. Her eyes grew bright, which heaped coals of fire on his conscience. Why the hell had he struck out to wound her? He was such a bastard.

“Ah, hell, I didn’t mean—” he started, and tried to find another word for *sorry*.

Her lips quivered another second before she pressed them in a tight line and lifted her chin. “Be out of here by tomorrow. Get as far away from me as possible.”



After a few hours, Amy still hadn't been able to calm her jitters. The scene with Buck had wound her into knots. But she couldn't think about that right now. Her immediate problem was the presence of two eminent visitors seated at the railroad board's conference table.

James Joy and Nathaniel Thayer had unexpectedly shown up for a special meeting of the railroad directors. Newspapers all over the state had announced the railroad would hold a town meeting to resolve their differences with the settlers—much to the directors' surprise.

It had been a calculated risk on her part, but if it didn't succeed, more than her position would be lost. Her fortune and her future were also at stake.

She scanned the room to seek a friendly face. All the men around the table wore solemn expressions. Even Charlie.

“Tell us again, Mrs. Langford, why you thought it appropriate to announce a public meeting before gaining permission from the directors?” Kersey Coates glowered at her.

This situation made it appear the president wasn't in control—a fatal flaw in Mr. Joy's book.

Lord, her mouth felt dry. She grabbed the glass in front of her and took a drink of water before she answered. “As you know, when the editors came into town, I hosted them at a dinner in my home. We chatted about a number of things being considered to improve relations with the settlers. I said the board would consider a meeting where our detractors could air their



grievances and we could openly discuss an acceptable compromise. It was the editors who reported it as already planned.”

God forgive her for that white lie. It was true, she hadn't sent out announcements. She had every intention of doing so after the directors realized they couldn't call off the meeting without looking bad.

Buck had lauded her plan when she had come up with it. He'd been proud of her. He had always been there for her. Not just to protect her, but to encourage and support her decisions. Yet, she'd sent him away like he meant nothing to her.

She swallowed back a surge of tears. It was for the best.

Mr. Coates crossed his arms in an attempt to maintain an air of authority. “I recall a rally that didn't turn out quite the way you'd hoped. What makes you think the outcome of this town meeting will be any different?”

Her face heated. He would bring that up. “Major Roy has increased security along the line and there will be no diversion of troops. Only a small guard will be needed at the meeting because we'll invite fewer people. Just the leaders of the Land League and a few important citizens in the community.”

Mr. Joy leaned back and laced his fingers over his chest beneath a flowing white beard. His pewter eyes took on a keen look. “I'm more interested in hearing what Mrs. Langford thinks will be accomplished by this grievance session.”

Her shoulders tensed. She should've known better than to think James Joy would be fooled—even for a second—by her ruse. As Buck would say, it was time to shoot straight.

“Troops have been sent in. The settlers are still rebelling. Intimidation hasn't worked, and we've had an overabundance of one-way communication. Might we consider the wisdom of a dialogue? Even if we don't achieve a compromise, the fact we reach out should sway settlers who

are on the fence and separate those of a moderate disposition from the more radical elements.” She held her breath as the two most important men exchanged a meaningful glance.

Mr. Thayer’s dark brows formed a vee. “What bait do you suggest to attract this moderate variety of settler?”

She affected a calm mien and kept her hands in her lap to hide her white-knuckles. “Award them stock in the railroad.”

“Are you insane?” Mr. Coates blurted. “These men have destroyed our property and nearly brought us to ruin, and you want to make them *stockholders*?”

She flushed at the insult. That was twice in one day her sanity had been questioned, although only Buck’s accusation truly cut deep. He didn’t know how much she feared inheriting her mother’s unpredictable inclinations. He’d struck out at her because she turned him down. Or fired him. Either way, right now she had to focus on the one man that really mattered. Her boss.

“What better way to gain the settlers’ loyalty than to give them a share in our success? It doesn’t have to be a great deal of stock. Offered only to those who settled on the land before Mr. Joy purchased it. They are the most vocal minority.”

“That is one option.” Mr. Joy would be an expert poker player.

Her eyes darted to Fletcher, who’d joined the meeting to provide an update on his progress to secure Indian lands south of Baxter Springs. The corners of his mouth inched up slightly and his eyes warmed with encouragement. Earlier, he had assured her that he would speak up to support her plan. Now would be a good time.

Mr. Joy leaned back and crossed one leg over the other in a seemingly relaxed pose. “Mr. Thayer has generously agreed to extend loans to the settlers. They can borrow enough to pay our asking price. Under our terms,

they won't have to make a payment on principal for thirty-six months. That should answer most of their concerns, don't you think?"

Amy stared in shock. These two Easterners were entirely out of touch with reality if they thought the settlers would be satisfied with more generous terms on loans. These men didn't want to take out loans in the first place. "Accrued interest over three years could become a burden the average farmer can't bear."

"Then they should plan accordingly, and make payments as soon as they see a return from their labors."

Razor thin margins. Compounded interest. Why couldn't Mr. Joy see this was a recipe for disaster?

Amy played her next card. "Another idea. If your generous loan offer isn't well received, we could provide certificates good for the storage and transportation of goods."

Mr. Thayer scowled. "Bribes for stock or free transportation will only encourage bad behavior every time we get sideways with squatters."

Bribing politicians also encouraged bad behavior, but that didn't seem to stop these two.

Amy's stomach churned with frustration. She forced a pleasant demeanor. "Might we consider another modest reduction in the price set for farm land? We can make profits from the development of prime property in and around towns—lease buildings for stores and offices, build granaries and cool storage facilities."

Mr. Joy laced his fingers in his lap and his eyes turned hard as glass. "It appears the settlers have a new champion."

A steel rod shot up Amy's spine. "I am simply considering this from all viewpoints. We'll reach a solution that moves us more quickly toward our goal."

"Have you forgotten the goal, Mrs. Langford?" her boss asked in a soft voice.

She drew back, offended by the put-down. “More than anyone, I want to see our railroad achieve success. However, we are, at present, pointed toward the wrong end of the border. The Katy steals our workers to speed their progress. The Land League burns up ties.”

Her voice rose along with her ire. “We must turn the tide of public opinion to win the favors we’ll need, both here and in Washington, to be declared the winner.”

Silence fell across the room. She scrutinized the faces of the men around the table and her throat closed. Some looked angry, others incredulous. Fletcher had focused his full attention on a piece of paper in front of him.

Disappointment washed over her in a hot wave. He hadn’t spoken a word in her defense. Would her boss fire her in front of the board? Or would he wait and send her dismissal papers with Mr. Chanute, as he’d done with a former land agent who’d challenged him one too many times.

The glacial stare he leveled at her chilled her blood. “I understand and share your concerns, Mrs. Langford. But giving in to troublemakers is not the answer. We will hold a town hall session, as it appears you’ve already committed us. But we’ll discuss your future role with the railroad after this meeting adjourns.”



The hitching rail outside the Wilder House was a perfect spot to sit and observe the railroad offices across the street. Buck shifted to a more comfortable sitting position. He would remain on watch while not appearing obvious. The assailant might show up after Amy left the meeting. Best to be ready for anything.

Charlie Goodlander settled his bulk on the rail and finished off whatever was in the silver demijohn he’d fished out of his coat pocket.

Buck had seen the railroad director outside the hotel a few minutes earlier and decided to strike up a conversation to see what he could learn.

The lumber mill owner, who served on the board with Amy, proved to be a font of information. Thus far, none of it helpful.

Charlie upended the small flask and peered at it with disappointment. “Looks like I need to refresh my medicinal supplies.”

Buck nodded sagely. “Never know when you might get snake bit.”

“It is good to be prepared. I never travel without my medicine.”

“You going somewhere?”

A good-natured grin lifted the impressive mustache. “There’s a pub down the street. Want to join me for a nip? I’ll buy.”

“Appreciate the offer, but I’ll have to take you up on it another time. I’m waiting for Mrs. Langford.” Buck slipped a watch out of his pocket. Half past four. Amy had been in there with her boss for nearly an hour after the regular board session ended. Not a good sign.

He heaved a frustrated sigh. He still couldn’t believe she’d actually fired him. She obviously felt no loyalty, though that should come as no surprise. He was no more than hired help as far as she was concerned, and he’d best remember that.

Besides, he knew there was no future whatsoever with a woman who would hate him if—no, *when*—she learned the truth. He couldn’t hide his past forever. But he could still protect her until he found the killer. In the meantime, he’d make sure Sean got his fair deal. Amy had pitched a worthy plan.

“What do you think? Will the bigwigs accept her idea?”

“Nah. They aren’t that smart.” Charlie rubbed his chin. “In fact, she might get the boot. She got in a tussle with Mr. Joy.”

Buck grimaced. His attempt to help her had worked out in ways he hadn’t anticipated. Another reason she’d hate him. “Seems awful unfair. She’s worked hard for the railroad.”

“All I can tell you is, she struck out, but went down swinging.” Charlie grinned. “I actually liked her idea for giving the settlers railroad stock. Just enough to make them more responsible. Might even spur them to build out the rest of that track to boost their earnings.”

Buck heaved a heavy sigh. Amy had stood up to her boss and gotten herself fired. Guilt had gnawed right through his conscience and worked its way through his heart. Regardless of his abrupt dismissal, she’d shown a great deal of concern for him. He, on the other hand, had pushed her down a detrimental path for reasons that had nothing to do with her wellbeing. Hell, he had no right to expect anything from her after he’d given her neither loyalty nor truth. “Did Bain voice his support?”

“No one spoke up for her.” Charlie’s voice lost its ebullience. “She went nose-to-nose with Joy and Thayer all by herself.” He shook his head. “She’s got bigger balls than every man in that room, including me.”

Buck glared at the building across the street and wished he’d been there to defend her, even if she wouldn’t want it. “My mother once told me that most women can look after themselves just fine. But the Good Lord needed to give men something to do, so they wouldn’t feel useless. Amy’s strong *because* she’s a woman, not in spite of it.”

“Oh, I wasn’t speaking ill of her,” Charlie countered quickly. “She’s an enterprising gal. Knows how to get what she wants. I don’t doubt she’ll land on her feet, regardless of what James Joy decides to do.”

That was true. Amy had plenty of grit. But she wasn’t driven by avarice or a lust for power, as was the case for ambitious men. She strived to please a father who’d been dead some seven years. A man who could no longer love her, encourage her, or tell her how proud he was of her.

Heaviness settled in Buck’s chest. Was he the only one who saw the tenderhearted girl beneath that tough exterior?

“Too bad Fletcher Bain has a cinch on the girl.”

Buck jerked his head around. “Why do you say that?”

Charlie offered a sympathetic smile. “Well, you’re sweet on her, ain’t you?”

The air left Buck’s lungs. Was it *that* obvious?

“I had to apply considerable effort to win my Lizzie,” Charlie continued in a blithe tone. “She’d set her sights on a certain lieutenant. In the end, she chose the better man.”

Buck’s heart thudded harder. Charlie’s implication was obvious. Step up. Be the better man and win Amy. If he revealed a portion of his past, he could step into a role that would be more beneficial to her. He’d been a buyer for his stepfather’s mercantile, had managed the store and learned all he could about running his own business. Once he told her this, she might see him in a different light.

If she lost her job here, could take her somewhere else and help her start over. Maybe they could go to Texas. Even California. Away from this trouble and away from his past. Away from everything that conspired to keep them apart.

*You can’t hide forever, Bucko. She’ll find out, and then she’ll hate you.*

His hopes sank into his boots. Even if he could win her, he would lose her the day she found out about his involvement in the Lawrence massacre.

He twisted his lips into a mocking smile. “I’m not pursuing Mrs. Langford. She’s already decided on the better man.”

Charlie gave him a dubious glance. “If you say so.”

“You don’t like Bain?”

“He’s a bit too contriving for my taste.”

*Contriving?* That was an interesting description Buck hadn’t heard before. Yet it fit with what he’d suspected all along. Fletcher wanted to marry Amy to get rich and look important, not because he loved her. “What makes you say that?”

Uncharacteristically, Charlie kept silent. Perhaps he’d reconsidered what he would tell someone he didn’t know well. At the party, they’d struck

up a quick friendship but that didn't mean Goodlander would trust him with unflattering observations about another influential man. However, Charlie had opened the door to that conversation.

A formation of soldiers on horseback passed in front of the hotel.

Charlie smiled and waved at the captain. Once the patrol had passed, he turned to Buck. "Fletcher Bain came out here from New York shortly after the war. He opened a bank and started loaning money. Seemed a good thing at the time, but lately I hear he's been calling in the loans and taking property when folks don't pay up. I don't know if it means anything. Might be some of his customers can't make payments, and he's got to do it to stay flush. But it does cause me to wonder."

Buck crossed his arms and mulled over what Charlie had said. Fletcher took advantage from the misfortunes of others. He wouldn't be the first banker to do so. But the question was, did Amy know? That fellow who'd stormed out of the bank the day she'd gone to see Fletcher looked like an angry customer. "Would any of the folks he's foreclosed on have a reason to go after Mrs. Langford?"

Charlie's tangled brows shot up. "I can't imagine they would hold her responsible for his actions. I know she has some radical ideas, but I can't think of anyone who would want to hurt her."

"There's somebody out there who wants to hurt her."

"One of the settlers, no doubt."

"I don't think so." Buck frowned. There was no proof it *wasn't* a settler, but based on Sean's report and the fact there had been no attacks outside of Fort Scott, it just didn't fit.

Music followed the dust kicked up by the passing soldiers. The brisk polka was an odd accompaniment to creaking wagons and jangling harnesses.

Buck craned his neck to find the source.



Down the middle of the street came what looked like a contingent of circus performers who'd lost their parade. A man with a pointed red hat and frizzled white hair held a chain attached to a bear, which lumbered along behind. Three musicians dressed like gypsies brought up the rear. As they made their way down the street, chaos reigned. Horses whinnied and shied away, resisting their riders' attempts to calm them. Wagons veered aside as drivers stopped to stare at the spectacle. Children skipped alongside, laughing and pointing.

Charlie hooted. "Would you look at that? Wonder if a circus is coming to town?"

It sure looked that way, but Buck hadn't seen any posters or heard any talk, and the arrival of a circus was always a topic for conversation. "Could be a gag to attract attention for a new store opening. My stepfather used to pay a fellow to walk on stilts down the street and sing out when a load of goods got delivered. Can't recall he ever used a bear."

"Don't that beat all." Charlie said in an awed voice.

Across the street, the doors of the railroad office opened and Amy walked outside, trailed by Fletcher and two well-dressed gents. Their steps slowed and then stopped as they took in the impromptu performance. Her head turned and she scanned the street until she saw Buck. She quickly looked away as though she hadn't been searching for him.

If she wanted to pretend not to see him, he would play along—for a while.

He turned his attention back to the strange little show.

The actor had stopped in front of the hotel. The bear, restrained by a chain and sturdy collar, rose up on his hind legs to roar—or maybe that was supposed to be singing. The trio of musicians spread out to give it room to move.

In front of the bear, a wiry man danced and played a flute. Like the other two musicians, he wore a bright scarf tied above the open collar of a

loose-fitted shirt. With his swarthy complexion, black hair and beard he looked like a pirate, but he leapt around like a—

*Monkey.*

The performer whirled and stopped. His dark eyes widened.

Buck jolted up as his mind drew forth an image of a man peering over a roof.

The pipe-playing pirate turned tail and ran.

“Sonofabitch!” Buck came off the rail in a fury. He took off at a dead run after the fleeing suspect. He sidestepped the weaving bear and shouted at the puzzled clown who held the chain. “Get this damned thing out of my way.”

With his eyes fixed on the fleeing man’s red scarf, Buck darted through stalled traffic, barely missed colliding with a child by twisting to one side.

Damn, he was losing the man—again.

He waved at a cluster of soldiers in front of a building where the flute player appeared to be headed. “Stop him! He’s wanted.”

Wanted by someone who dearly wished to pound him into the dirt.

The fugitive pulled up, just as the soldiers realized they were supposed to stop him. The man turned on his heel and raced toward an alley. Like a monkey, that agile bastard would disappear as soon as he found a way to ascend.

Buck panted from the exertion, cursed his lingering weakness from being ill. He sprinted faster, determined to catch his prey.

A tall wooden fence at the end of the darkened alley cut off access to the other side. The man leapt up and grabbed the top to hoist himself over.

Buck pulled his revolver and fired to the side of where the man gripped. In one fluid motion, he cocked and aimed at the man’s shoulder. “Come down, and I won’t kill you.”

If that bastard insisted on going over, he’d have to shoot him, but he wanted him alive. He had some questions that needed answers.

The man dropped to the ground. He turned slowly with his hands up in the air. His black eyes beseeched. "*Per favore perdoname signore*. I no hurt lady."

A foreigner? What the hell? Somebody must've paid him to attack Amy. "Step over there. Away from that fence." Buck motioned with the revolver.

The gypsy looked past him as the sound of running feet drew closer.

Buck didn't take his attention off the man. This one would take advantage of any distraction, and it was probably just a curious onlooker.

"Signore?" A tremulous smile appeared on the gypsy-pirate's face. His hands lowered, one reaching out.

A loud retort sounded by Buck's ear.

The man's head jerked back and blood spewed. He collapsed like a broken toy.

Buck whirled around, expecting to see one of the soldiers.

Instead, Fletcher stood behind him. The banker stared with a stunned expression at the crumpled body in the dirt. He dropped his arm to his side. Gripped in his hand, a smoking gun. The acrid smell of gunpowder lingered in the air.

"You idiot!" Buck stormed over to the crumpled gypsy. The bullet had struck the side of the man's forehead, ripping away part of his skull.

There would be no answers now. The trigger-happy fool had killed their only lead.

Buck swore as he holstered his revolver. "Did it occur to you we needed him alive?"

"I thought he was going for a weapon," Fletcher muttered in an obstinate tone. He squatted down beside the dead man. "He reached for something in his waistcoat."

"I had a gun pointed at him. He didn't reach for anything."

Fletcher pulled back the dead man's vest and slipped something out of an inside pocket.

Buck snorted. "He sure as hell wasn't going to kill anybody with a flute."

The banker gripped the instrument in his palm. His eyes flashed with disdain. "Actually, it's a piccolo—but you wouldn't know that, would you?"

"You arrogant ass." Buck grabbed the idiot's lapels and jerked him up. "Even a fool would know the *real* threat is still out there."

God, he dearly wanted to tie this dandy in a knot, but taking his frustration out on Amy's betrothed would only serve to antagonize her and attract the wrong kind of attention. He flung the man away in disgust.

Fletcher stumbled and fell onto his backside. Slowly, he got to his feet, brushed the dirt off his coat. His face stiffened into an impassive mask through which his eyes gleamed with pure hatred. "That man is no longer a threat to anybody. Your job is done. I suggest you leave, as Mrs. Langford requested."

"Like hell," Buck retorted. "Somebody hired that gypsy. I intend to find out who. You get in my way again and I'll shove you so far down a hole, you won't know which end is daylight."

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## CHAPTER 17



“*B*uck threatened you?” Amy blinked in disbelief at Fletcher’s accusation. She set down her fork, unable to finish the chicken and dumplings Sophie had prepared just for her. How much more grief could one day bring? Firing Buck had just been the start.

“Not only did he threaten me, he assaulted me without provocation.” Fletcher wiped his mouth, having polished off his portion. Whatever roughing up he’d received at Buck’s hands hadn’t affected his appetite.

“*Assaulted* you?” Her incredulity was such that she could only echo the accusation. How bad could it have been? Fletcher had looked ruffled but unharmed when he’d returned from chasing after Buck and the fleeing suspect. If Buck had intended to harm him, he wouldn’t have been able to stand up, much less walk back. “You don’t appear to be injured.”

Fletcher sucked a piece of food from his teeth. “He stopped short of that because a crowd had started to gather. The man is an unschooled brute. I can’t tell you how glad I was to hear you had the good sense to fire him.”

She stiffened with irritation. Her betrothed had made a grave mistake when he’d killed her assailant before they could question him, and now he was looking for a scapegoat. “I didn’t invite you to dinner so you could disparage Mr. O’Connor.”

Fletcher's face tightened. "I'm giving you the facts. I thought you'd be interested."

*Almighty.* He sounded like a spurned debutante. "The only fact I'm interested in knowing is who hired the man you shot."

A crimson flush appeared above the stiff white collar of his shirt.

Amy took a breath, then exhaled her frustration and dashed expectations. She'd hoped dinner would be a time they could focus on devising a strategy for how she might recover from that disastrous meeting with Mr. Joy. At the very least, she expected Fletcher to offer tender reassurances and heartfelt support. She was getting neither. However, throwing Fletcher's mistake in his face wasn't going to make the evening better.

"I'm sorry," she ventured. "This has been an upsetting day."

Fletcher reached for his wine. "Of course, you're upset. Who wouldn't be?" His voice took on a soothing tone. "I'm certain Sheriff Lawson will let us know as soon as he's learned something useful. Frankly, I believe any trail of evidence will lead to that despicable Land League."

"Do you?" She clutched the napkin in her lap. Discovering the identity of her purported assailant hadn't answered any questions. It had given rise to more.

The dead man, an Italian musician and former circus performer, had been living in Fort Scott for the past year doing odd jobs around town. She didn't know him, had never even met him. "Mr. Capelli seems an odd choice for a Land League assassin."

Fletcher shrugged. "Who else would've hired him?"

*Who else, indeed?* Yet, something didn't feel right. Even Buck had been disinclined to believe the threat stemmed from the most obvious culprit.

"Darling, you can relax. Your assailant is dead and you'll have a military escort until the case is resolved, as I'm certain it will be. Very soon." Fletcher finished the last of the claret and carefully set the stemmed

glass on the table. “Major Roy has promised extra protection for your meeting with the settlers in Girard. That should ease your mind.”

“It does.” She forced her attention away from the mysteries surrounding the dead man. “I am worried about that meeting. I’m not sure I can find a just solution.”

“I’d advise staying away from anything controversial, given Mr. Joy’s reaction to your unorthodox proposals.”

She stiffened, as Fletcher’s advice rubbed against the earlier hurt that he’d dealt her. “You didn’t think my proposals were unorthodox when we discussed them prior to the director’s meeting. In fact, you encouraged me to present the ideas. Then, you sat there and didn’t utter a word of support.”

“I could tell they weren’t going to be swayed by anything I said,” he reasoned. “And speaking up would’ve undermined my credibility. You’ll recall I did urge Mr. Joy afterwards to allow you to host that town hall meeting as your last official duty. This gives you a chance to redeem yourself by coming back with a negotiated agreement.”

Her breath hitched as she wrestled with wounded pride. It wasn’t a grievous wrong to want a solution that would benefit both sides. Yet, she’d been publicly called down, then forced to accept a less conspicuous position as assistant to the board. Fletcher didn’t seem to realize how much it galled her that she would be little more than a lackey for the president, even if her husband ultimately held that role. “Do you have any suggestions for proposals I might present to the settlers?”

“The best course is to stick to Mr. Thayer’s offer for deferred payments on loans.”

Hurt congealed into a knot of resentment. She swallowed it with difficulty. On second thought, she didn’t want his advice if all he was going to do was parrot Mr. Joy. “Very well. Thank you for that thoughtful suggestion. Since we’re both leaving in the morning, why don’t we retire to the parlor and review your analysis on those investments I’m considering.”

His abashed expression threw the lid off her forced calm. “You haven’t even looked at the information I sent over, have you? Did you at least bring the audit on my accounts?”

He cleared his throat. “As you know, I’ve been very busy with these land negotiations, and I wanted to give the audit my personal attention. Can it wait until we meet in Baxter Springs?”

“That celebration is three weeks away.” She clenched her fists, wanting to pound the table. Nothing in this miserable day had gone the way she imagined. She’d hoped releasing Buck would remove her longing for him, but it hadn’t. In fact, it only made it worse.

Now Fletcher was so wrapped up in his new role with the railroad he’d lost sight of other priorities. Being demoted into insignificance by Mr. Joy was bad enough, but she wasn’t about to let her future husband relegate her to the bottom of his list. “I refuse to wait that long. If you can’t see to it, assign one of your junior officers. But I want everything on my desk by the time I return.”

Brick red spread from Fletcher’s neck into his face. He shoved his chair back and stood up, dropping his napkin onto the table. “You seem to have forgotten our success hinges on my ability to wrangle a favorable agreement with the Indians by the time we reach the border. Considering how much we have at stake, I would assume that would be your priority, as well. But if you can’t wait until I can give these other matters my personal attention—which you requested, I might add—then I’ll have someone see to it while I’m gone.”

Giving her a curt nod, he strode out of the dining room, calling for his coat. A moment later, the front door slammed.

Amy jerked at the sound. Bitter disappointment burned in her stomach, and she wrestled an intense desire to throw something.

Fletcher’s attitude of late seemed to have changed. Or had she just become more aware of the self-centered sulkiness beneath his polished



veneer? Perhaps she'd painted a picture of a husband that didn't exist—a man like her father, but without his weakness for a woman like her mother. Her passionate, promiscuous mother. Fletcher didn't seem to be swayed by passion, but the possibility of more power had gone straight to his head. And a massive ego wasn't conducive to an equitable marriage.

Closing her eyes, she forced her breathing to calm and her emotions to settle. No, she would not behave like her mother, making rash decisions in the heat of the moment. Three weeks apart from Fletcher would give her time to make a sound judgment.

“Miz Amy?” Jacob appeared in the arched entry. “You all right?”

Amy sighed. There were times she wished others weren't present in the house. “I'm fine. Mr. Bain had some important business that called him away.”

Jacob nodded, although his expression conveyed that he wasn't buying her excuse. “I was comin' to tell you, Mr. O'Connor, he moved out like you told him to. Left this for you.” After placing an envelope by her plate, Joseph dipped his chin and exited through the butler's pantry.

Buck had left before the imposed deadline and without saying goodbye.

She swallowed another wad of tears. Sending him away had been the right thing to do, for his own safety. She refused to contemplate her other, more complicated motive for banishing him. Sophie hadn't been fooled for a minute, and Buck would have figured it out had she allowed him to stay.

She had fallen in love with her bodyguard.

A dull ache settled in her chest as Amy fingered the envelope. They hadn't parted on good terms. Had Buck written kind words or was this a final salvo? Resigned, she withdrew the letter. A dog-eared piece of paper fell out from between the folds. It was her list of suspects. On the back, a brief note was scrawled in a bold hand.

*Venus, your admirers are many, but your list is incomplete.*

*Look for me soon.*

*Your faithful Casanova.*

She blinked in confusion, then frowned as the implications sank in.

*Drafted man.* What was he up to now?



There was standing room only at Billy Hack's Beer Saloon on Wall Street. Buck leaned back, propped his elbows on the beat-up bar and surveyed the crowd. Based on the coveralls these fellows were wearing, the large quantity of liquor they consumed, and the lilting obscenities sprinkled throughout their conversations, he'd guess most of the men were Irish railroad workers. The same workers Amy hoped to lure away from the Border Tier's competitor. Now, she wouldn't get the chance.

The barkeep wiped a greasy rag over a spill. "Want something to drink, mister?"

"I'll take a beer," Buck said absently, as he watched the door for Charlie Goodlander.

One of the richest men in town had picked a seedy bar as his preferred watering hole. Charlie's utter lack of pretense was one of the reasons Buck liked the man so well. Charlie had promised to share what he'd learned about that Italian musician. What more had been uncovered by the lumber mill owner-turned-detective?

After taking a swig, Buck set the bottle on the bar. He'd left that note for Amy, knowing full well it would irritate her to realize he was still sniffing around. But he'd also wanted to assure her he wasn't far away and would protect her whether or not she kept him on her payroll.

Bits of information he'd gleaned the day her attacker was killed had confirmed in his mind she was on the wrong trail. Now, three days later, he had the feeling he was about to pick up a scent that would lead to her true enemy—and his.

Through the sunlit door, a tall man strolled in. It was that surly bank customer. He darted a furtive look around and started for a corner table, only a fraction larger than a stool. As he dragged up a chair, two smaller men sitting there hurriedly downed their drinks and left, apparently not eager to stay and visit.

When Fletcher walked into the bar, Buck started in surprise. He turned his back, so the banker wouldn't see his face. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Fletcher approach the surly giant. Was this where the banker held his business meetings? Not likely. His preferences ran finer than this watering hole. What was he doing here, and why seek out an unhappy customer?

Someone slapped Buck's shoulder. Startled, he whipped around, clamped his hand around a beefy wrist.

Charlie's eyebrows shot up. "Hey, cowboy. What's got you so antsy?"

Buck threw a quick glance over his shoulder, then grasped his friend's arm and pulled him around the end of the bar, out of direct sight of the two men who sat huddled in conversation. "Don't be obvious, but take a look at that man in the corner with Fletch. Know him?"

Goodlander twisted his head. "The big blond fellow? That's Clay Thornton. He's got a place out on the Marmaton River. Bought up a bunch of land he thought had mining potential. Never could get his investors lined up. Maybe he's trying to get Bain to loan him more money."

"He was at the bank the other day. He left in a hurry. Looked like he was ready to kill somebody. I thought he might be one of those bank customers Fletch foreclosed on."

Charlie shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe they buried the hatchet."

"Why here? This doesn't look like a place a banker would frequent."

"I've seen Bain in here a few times. Billy Hack's has a diverse clientele." A grin lifted Charlie's drooping mustache. After waving the bartender over, he ordered a beer.

Buck sighed with frustration. Likely there was nothing going on, though he'd love to uncover dirt on the man Amy planned to marry. Jealousy was near eating him alive.

He drained his glass and turned his full attention to Charlie. "Tell me what you found out about that dead musician."

"You having another beer?" Goodlander motioned to a small table vacated by two burly railroad workers. "I hate drinking alone."

"I'll get something later." Buck pulled up a chair. "Now, tell me what you learned."

Charlie's brow furrowed. "Last I checked I wasn't in your employ."

"No, you're not." Buck heaved a sigh. "But I'm not feeling real patient right now."

His friend's face fell into sympathetic lines. "Might help if you tell her how you feel."

"Hell, no. And you don't say nothing either."

"You must've been a general during the war, the way you give orders." Charlie gulped down the beer, smacked his lips and set down the empty glass. "I believe that little gal has got you tied up in knots. Have you told her you're staying in our carriage house?"

"Didn't see a need." Buck couldn't fathom why Charlie had made the offer. But he wasn't about to question the businessman's generosity or draw attention to it. "Figured I'd keep you out of trouble with Mrs. Langford."

"I appreciate that." Charlie motioned the bartender over. "I'll take a whiskey and my friend here wants another beer."

Buck didn't have the heart to object. Truth be told, he was ready to down a whole jug of Sean's "Stone Fence" just to banish Amy's image from his mind. Not just her image, the feel of her in his arms and the taste of her on his lips. He breathed in the odors of cheap cigars and stale beer to blot out the lingering fragrance of wildflowers that seemed to follow him

wherever he went. Hell, he had to get his mind back on business before he went stark raving mad.

“Did you ask me here just to have a drink with you?”

Charlie shook his head. “There are lots of boys I can drink with. I found out that Italian fellow was up to his ears in debt.”

Buck tried to make sense of the man’s actions. “Why go after Amy? She said she didn’t know him, so he couldn’t have owed her money.”

“Don’t have the answer to that one.” Charlie shrugged. “I did find out he borrowed money to start a music store, then lost it when he couldn’t repay the loan. Maybe he was angry with Bain and went after Mrs. Langford.”

Buck sat back, startled by the unexpected turn. The man might’ve owed Fletcher money. The banker couldn’t collect from a dead man. Maybe he didn’t want Amy to know the crazy Italian who attacked her was one of his customers.

Buck ran his fingers through his hair, aggravated he couldn’t piece together the puzzle. “Did Fletch tell the sheriff that musician owed him money?”

Charlie pursed his lips. “I don’t know. Maybe you can ask him.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Buck spotted his nemesis head for the door. “No point getting things stirred up until I know more.”

There was no chance he would go to the sheriff and invite an investigation. He’d prime a few pumps around town, but in the end, he’d need to question Amy, and warn her to be on her guard. Generally, men killed their rich wives *after* they were married, not before. But there was something about this connection with Fletcher that stunk worse than week-old fish.

## CHAPTER 18



*A*my stepped off the train in Girard to attend the town hall meeting. She'd no sooner touched her foot to the platform than she spotted a tall, fair-haired man, who leaned casually against the whitewashed wall of the new depot.

She smiled. Then caught herself, and frowned.

Why was Buck here? She'd told him to leave two weeks ago. He was supposed to be long gone. Out of danger and out of her life.

He pushed off the wall and strolled down the platform in her direction. Ran his fingers through his hair before settling his hat back on his head. The simple gesture brought on a flood of emotions that swamped her heart and drowned out every reason she shouldn't be glad to see him.

She gripped her reticule in the hope he might believe she'd whack him with it. "I thought you were gone."

His tawny mustache lifted slightly on one side. "Hope springs eternal."

He was so irritating. But seeing him somehow restored her balance and made her ridiculously happy. She wouldn't tell him, though. Not if she intended to get rid of him. She wasn't here to get drawn off course, which was something that seemed to happen with regularity whenever Buck was around.

He took the small satchel from her hands. “Looks like you won’t be here long.”

“I return home tomorrow after the town meeting. If I’m able to wrangle an agreement with the settlers, I’ll leave my mark on the railroad’s success—which at this point seems certain, based on reports from our spies.”

Buck’s expression showed less faith.

“Have you heard something different?”

“No. I just don’t make it habit to count chickens until I get rid of the fox.”

She rolled her eyes. “That is not the old saying, but I’m sure you’d love to provide an explanation. Sadly, I don’t have time.” She scoured the platform, but didn’t see any blue uniforms. “I’m supposed to meet a military escort.”

Buck shrugged with suspicious insouciance. “The troops recognized me as your bodyguard from the last time we were here. I told them I’d meet you when they happened to mention you were coming in today.”

*Happened to mention?*

More likely, Buck had wheedled his way into their good graces.

Now she was annoyed. “You are no longer in my employ. I thought I made that clear. How did you find out I was...? Never mind. The less we talk the better.”

Buck just smiled and took her hand. “I told you, I’m not going anywhere until I catch whoever shot me. Keeping my eye on you is the fastest way to figure that out.”

Staying close to her was the fastest way to an early death. Hadn’t he figured *that* out?

She pulled away with a huff. “The man who shot you is dead.”

“No, he isn’t.” Buck retrieved her hand and snagged it in the crook of his elbow, pulling her along as he walked toward the center of town. “That Italian fellow didn’t carry a gun. His friends said he didn’t own one.

Whoever shot me was well enough acquainted with a rifle to hit a moving target from a distance. I don't think the man who caused your accidents is the same person who tried to kill me. But whoever shot me is the one who hired him."

A chill slithered up her spine. "If someone wanted to get rid of my protection, why would he shoot you but not the soldiers who guard me?"

Buck stopped in front of the hotel. "Good question, Venus. I've wondered that myself."

She opened her mouth to object to his continued use of the inappropriate nickname, but the air left her lungs when he lifted her hand to his lips. Even through kid leather, his touch set off a shivering response, just like the time before, and every other time he touched her.

He was both temptation and tormenter. Her secret desire and her greatest fear. Whether or not she married Fletcher—and her heart had been in full mutiny lately—she couldn't choose Buck. The love she'd held back would burst through the dam she'd so carefully constructed. Then, when something happened to him, it would destroy her.

"Why don't we get a bite before that meeting?" He released her hand with obvious reluctance. "I'm sure you're hungry."

*No, she really shouldn't.*

"You got to eat."

It was two hours until the meeting, which was just across the street.

She crossed her arms, trying to appear put out. Inwardly she was pleased at the thought of spending a little time with him. That is, before she told him to make himself scarce. For his own good. "You won't take no for an answer, will you?"

"No ma'am, I surely won't."

It made no sense to send him away without discovering what he'd been up to the past two weeks. She'd nearly worn a hole in that note he'd left for



her, which implied he knew something she didn't. "Let me check in and freshen up. I'll meet you in the dining hall here at the hotel."

An hour later, she set her napkin aside. Her nerves hadn't allowed for more than a bite or two of the steak and roasted potatoes. Buck had polished off his meal, and then finished hers when she insisted that she wasn't hungry. Was he not using the money he earned to feed himself? She would charge this meal to her room so he didn't have to spend anything. He was probably trying to make his funds last.

Her eyes roved the walls, which were now adorned with flocked wallpaper. With the addition of the etched lamps and plush carpet, she could be fooled into thinking she was in a fancy hotel in St. Louis instead of a frontier railroad stop. How she longed for the day when Fort Scott would be the new western center of commerce and Kansas the brightest star in the Union.

Once her railroad reached the border and her wealth expanded, could she declare success? Somehow, the thought of having the right marriage and an elevated position in society didn't bring the sense of fulfillment she thought it would. Her spirits sank, unable to be buoyed by dreams that had driven her for years.

She shook off her rumination and met Buck's quizzical gaze. "You've yet to enlighten me about that cryptic note you left."

He leaned back and crossed his fingers over his chest. "Not the best subject to discuss before you go into an important meeting. We can talk about it later."

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?"

Something that looked strangely like regret flickered in his eyes. "Did Fletch tell you that Italian fellow had borrowed money from his bank? Seems he foreclosed when Mr. Capelli couldn't repay his note."

A sudden constriction in her chest made it hard to draw in air. Fletcher had told her nothing of the sort. Hadn't even acted as if he knew the man.

Her attacker. Her breath came in shallow spurts, making her lightheaded.

Buck shifted forward in his chair and circled her wrist with his fingers. His sandy brows gathered in a worried frown. “You all right?”

She nodded, unable to speak. Had Fletcher truly known the man who’d tried to kill her repeatedly? It couldn’t be true. “How do you know this?” She forced out the question.

“Got it from a reliable source. Charlie Goodlander. Though he’d appreciate it if you didn’t share that knowledge with your Mr. Bain.” Buck’s voice carried a familiar ironic tone, but the tenderness in his gaze made her eyes water.

“You didn’t know.” Buck sat back with his arms crossed. “I didn’t think so.”

“You’re not just making this up because you hate him.” Her voice wavered despite her efforts to control it. “Tell me you wouldn’t do that.”

The skin around Buck’s eyes and mouth tightened. “What do you think, Amy? Do you reckon I’m that sort of man?”

She moved her head side-to-side. “Why?” she whispered. “Why would Fletcher withhold something that important?”

The chair creaked as Buck leaned his arms on the table and curled his hand into a fist. “I hoped you might could enlighten me,” he said in a tight voice. “Before I snap him in two for putting you in harm’s way.”

Fletcher could be selfish and presumptuous, but he would never put her in danger.

“That’s a huge leap. One I’m not ready to make,” she said with less confidence than she felt. If Buck had information, she ought to listen to him, and then draw her own conclusions. “Go ahead and tell me what you’ve learned.”

He launched into a rapid-fire explanation. Antonio Capelli had borrowed a large sum from the bank. When his business faltered, he’d borrowed more from individuals in an attempt to pay off the bank loan. His

few friends insisted he was a good man who'd gone astray financially, but they all agreed he wasn't violent. It wasn't like him to attack someone, unless he'd been pressured to do it. The implication couldn't be clearer.

Amy sat back, aghast. "You can't believe Fletcher would send that...that miscreant after me. He's begged for my hand for months, and we've worked closely for the past three years." Her mind refused to accept it. This didn't fit with the man she knew. Yet, the man she knew wouldn't lie to her either. Her stomach turned at the thought.

Buck flattened his hands on the table. "You told me he predicted those attacks on you would stop if you two were married. Recall what I told you about that slave who hurried along his master's death? Maybe old Fletch was trying to scare you into a quicker decision and it got out of hand."

She laughed at the absurdity. "Oh, for heaven's sake. He knew I planned to accept his suit. Having to exercise a little patience wouldn't send him on some insane quest to frighten me into accepting sooner. That's the workings of a desperate mind, and Fletcher is not a desperate man."

If so, why were her insides quivering?

"Hold on." Buck lifted his hands. "That's just one theory. Here's another. Somebody who's angry with him is doing it to blackmail him into forgiving a debt or to get back at him. He's foreclosed on a fair number of loans. That musician owed him lots of money. Maybe they're targeting you as a way of getting him to cooperate."

"That doesn't explain why someone would want to kill you, unless you're wrong about that and the gunman was after me."

His face turned to stone. "I'm not wrong."

The rest went without saying. He thought Fletcher was responsible for shooting him.

*Preposterous.* She'd never even seen Fletcher with a gun. He had mentioned he enjoyed hunting, but not human beings.

Rather than show her fear and uncertainty, she stared at her clasped hands in her lap. There had to be an explanation. Perhaps Fletcher had made a bad loan to an unethical man. If so, why didn't he just come out and say so? Nothing made sense.

She stood abruptly. "I have to go prepare for the town hall meeting. I can't think about this right now."

Buck leapt up and helped her to her feet. "I shouldn't have told you right now."

No, but she'd insisted.

"The truth is," he continued, "I can't see past my personal dislike for Bain. Don't take it at face value. Look at it from a different angle. Maybe something he's said or done will stand out, and all the pieces will fall into place."

They stopped outside the hotel. Buck took her hand and tucked it over his arm possessively. "Will Fletch be at the meeting today?"

"No." She pulled her arm away and crossed the street with mechanical steps, still in a stunned state of disbelief and denial. "He sent a message. He's been held up in negotiations with the Quapaw. It appears the chief isn't ready to sign the verbal agreement he made."

"Don't surprise me none," Buck muttered, as he strode alongside her. "Fletch has got a few things to learn about Indian politics."

Fear sent a shiver down her arms. Fletcher's recent behavior and this cover-up suggested he had something to hide, though she couldn't imagine he would have reason to harm her. But how could she know her enemies when she didn't even know the man she'd agreed to marry? The only one it appeared she could trust was the one she'd sent away.

Buck opened the door to the town hall. He looked down at her with concern. "Let me come in with you. Just to make sure you're safe."



Amos Sanford rose to his feet again to interrupt her again. “You can tell your Mr. Joy we aren’t interested in his attempts to lure us into slavery with these accursed loans...”

His voice thundered and his eyes shot lightening, as he addressed the thirty or so men who’d shown up for the meeting. Men handpicked, no doubt, by this snake that cared more about his political future than the lives of these settlers who followed him.

“Excuse me, sir. I did not recognize you.” Amy gripped the sides of the podium to keep her hands from shaking. “If you’ll give me a moment to explain...”

Grumbles rose from the restless audience.

The loan offer wasn’t going over well, just as she’d predicted. However, she had promised Mr. Joy to give it her best effort. She’d also gained his agreement to listen to any ideas that might be proposed—as long as they didn’t involve discounts, stock awards or other incentives. Might as well fight with her hands tied behind her back.

“This offer is being made in good faith. Mr. Joy and his partner, Mr. Thayer, will personally secure these loans. Not a penny of the principal will be due for three years, which gives you time enough to improve your land and repay your debt. You simply have to plan for it.”

The scent of fresh pine hung in the air from the hurried construction of benches for the spacious hall. When she’d entered the room, with its new plank floor and fresh coat of paint, it had smelled of opportunity. Now, it reeked of discontent.

Her eyes sought Buck, who leaned against a wall near an open window. The determination in his gaze and the firmness of his jaw gave her more confidence than the handful of soldiers in the room, who stood around and looked vaguely uncomfortable.

She surveyed the settlers’ unhappy faces. Loans, be damned. “Listen to me! This is an open forum for serious negotiation. Let’s cut through the

posturing and get down to business. If someone has a better solution, speak up. I'll entertain any idea that makes sense. If I believe in it, I will argue the merits before the board. I will be your advocate."

"Advocate?" Sanford hooked his thumbs underneath his bright red suspenders, a pretense he used to show he was no different from these other men. That was like saying a coyote was the same as a hunting dog. "You have done everything in your power, madam, to see these men impoverished. We're wise to your schemes."

"Mrs. Langford just called for ideas," Buck thundered. "You obviously don't have any. Sit down and give somebody else a chance to exercise their jaw."

The room went dead silent. Every eye turned from the stone-faced man by the window to the glowering leader of the Land League.

Amy's heart lodged in her throat. She prayed with all her might that angels would be sent swiftly to prevent a riot.

"All right, then." Amos jutted his jaw out. "Anybody got any ideas they want to share with our *advocate*."

"I got one," a man yelled, as he jumped to his feet. "Lower the price of the land."

She shook her head. "We've been around and around about that. It's not a solution. It's a stalemate. Next?"

Man after man leaped up with suggestions. Most revolved around paying less for the land. Amy's hopes fell through the floor. This wasn't working. She would go back empty-handed. Whether the railroad made the border first or not, she would've failed in her job and in her role as intermediary.

"Who wants to make more money?"

Her head jerked around. That bold question had come from her bodyguard. What was he up to? God forbid he would do something to embarrass her.

“How?” a man ventured.

“Cooperate together to sell what you grow and buy what you need.”

The crowd hummed like locusts on a summer’s eve.

Sweat broke out on Amy’s brow. Where was Buck going with this?

Amos held up a hand to silence the crowd, undoubtedly so he could regain control of the conversation. “That’s got nothing to do with the price of our land or the railroad.”

Buck crossed his arms over his chest, a sign he would not back down. “Sure it does. You pay the asking price for what you’ve staked out. In return, the railroad donates prime land for building stores and storage facilities jointly owned by all of you—in a *cooperative* venture.”

More muttering.

“Sounds like we’re spending money. Why don’t he just give us a discount on our land?”

“That’s a one-time benefit,” Buck argued. “This other gives you ownership in something. You get to keep more money off what you sell.”

Amy stared open-mouthed at the bodyguard she thought she knew. *Who* was this man? Not a drifter or even a cowboy. No. She’d already realized there was more to Buck than that. He enjoyed playing the hayseed, but he wasn’t one. Now, he’d offered up an intriguing idea that just might work, with a little tweaking.

“That’s an excellent idea,” she called out, unable to keep the excitement from her voice.

She suspected Mr. Joy wouldn’t want to donate even an acre of land, but she would be able to buy it once her investment in the railroad paid off. She could have the buildings constructed and recoup her money by leasing them back to the cooperative.

Perhaps if she explained more, the settlers would catch the vision. “There have been cooperative societies in England for years, mostly for laborers to purchase cheaper goods. What if you farmers could create your

own cooperative? Buy and sell through stores you own. Gain discounts on necessary services and products with your combined purchasing power? Mills and processing plants could become part of the equation. Cooperating together to achieve greater profits means greater prosperity for all of you.”

“Sounds good to me.”

*Who said that?*

Her eyes scanned the crowd until she found him. The black-haired settler with the crystal blue eyes who’d challenged her at the rally. He was standing up, looking at Buck as though he knew him. Perhaps her bodyguard had made inroads down here she didn’t know about.

A few men began to engage in discussion with the blue-eyed farmer. He was handsome in the same rugged way Buck was handsome, although darker in coloring and not as tall.

On the buzz of conversation, Buck’s idea took flight. Amy reined in her eagerness to engage in the discussion. It wouldn’t be figured out here, in this mass of people.

“Why don’t we assign a committee to draft a proposal for me to take to the board? You,” she pointed to the dark-haired man. “Would you be willing to serve as a representative?”

“This is ridiculous.” Amos Sanford swam through the crowd, approaching the podium. “This has nothing to do with the price of our land.”

Amy’s stomach knotted with apprehension. This political shyster had been a thorn in her side from the first day she’d met him. Would he now ruin the progress they’d made?

Buck was there in two bounds. He planted himself in front of the podium, as he had at the rally. “You got another suggestion that needs to be entertained?”

Her bodyguard faced off with the newspaperman, whose face had turned bright red.



Sanford sputtered, glared at Buck for another minute. “You’re going to regret this,” he bellowed, and stormed out the door.

Several men followed him, but most stayed. Some engaged in deep discussion, others remained in their seats and looked hesitantly interested. With Sanford and his cronies gone, a different kind of excitement charged the room.

*Almighty.* She’d found the key.

Her mind whirred with ideas while her body hummed with nervous energy. She felt like dancing around the podium.

Her gaze shifted to Buck, who’d been drawn into conversation. His arms moved with animated gestures that conveyed his enthusiasm. Never had she seen him like this.

Her breath caught as awareness dawned.

*She* hadn’t found the key at all. Buck had given it to her.

Her skin quivered as she recalled their last kiss. He’d been furious, yet his touch had been tender. Even after she’d fired him, he had sworn he wouldn’t abandon her, and he had kept his word. Not only was he a stubborn protector, he was her biggest supporter. He was also, apparently, a man who knew enough of business to come up with a downright brilliant solution to this stalemate with the settlers.

From the start, she’d realized his intelligence and education were above what he portrayed. Only, she hadn’t wanted to delve too deeply into his past. Hadn’t dared to consider the frightening possibilities before she’d erected defenses designed to protect her from the pain of loving too much. Who was he, this man who’d breached the ramparts around her heart?

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## CHAPTER 19



The cool night air bathed Buck's face. A sense of calm settled over him. They'd made it through that nerve-racking meeting and had come out with a fair chance at success. There for a minute, he'd feared Amos Sanford would spark an uprising. That man had too much power and too little intelligence. Not a good combination.

The clack of Amy's heels on the wooden walkway slowed as they reached the hotel.

Buck restrained a smile, knowing she was trying to figure out where he'd come up with that crazy idea. She'd taken up the banner and run with it, just as he hoped she would.

Directly after the meeting, she'd organized a committee, helped them draft a first pass at a proposal and assigned Sean to be their spokesman. His cousin was a natural organizer and had a good way with people. Amy had seen his potential, now that she'd made his acquaintance.

All that remained was to ensure her safety, which meant convincing her to be wary of Fletcher until they determined whether he was involved in these attacks.

Buck slanted a glance in her direction. It didn't mean she'd choose him. She had made it clear that she wanted him gone. Besides, he couldn't change his past, no matter how badly he wanted to. He couldn't have Amy.

But he could try to prevent her from marrying a man who would use her, possibly even harm her, to get what he wanted.

He gestured to a bench near the door. "Let's sit here a minute. Enjoy the breeze."

Amy situated her bustle and arranged her skirts. She'd taken his advice about using her advantage. The brown and blue striped dress trimmed with velvet the color of chocolate brought out the creamy undertones in her skin and the golden highlights in her hair.

She adjusted the brown velvet hat and brushed back a curl that had strayed to her cheek. Every move she made was graceful and womanly. Sadly, he wouldn't be around much longer to appreciate it. Soon as he made sure she was safe he would get out of her life as she'd requested.

"All right." She crossed her gloved hands in her lap. "Out with it. Tell me where that idea came from?"

She sounded surprised that he might've come up with it. Why wouldn't she be? He'd never shared enough about his life to fill a thimble.

The ache in his chest spread to his whole being. More than anything, he wanted Amy's respect and admiration. Her love. He just didn't know how on earth to get there. Not with all the deceit he'd planted between them.

He braced his arms on his knees and stared at the ground. Should he tell her Sean came up with the idea? That would certainly help his cousin and deflect her inquisition. She would figure out in a snap it wasn't the truth, and this was one bit of honesty he could give her. "My stepfather was interested in cooperatives some years back. I learned everything I could about them to start up my own store."

"I didn't know you were interested in trade."

Was she impressed or did she think he'd made that up?

"I have a lot of interests." Now why had he blurted that out? It was like bait for a hungry fish. He turned his head to meet her gaze. The light from a

nearby street lamp cast shadows across her face, making it impossible to detect what sparked in those golden brown eyes. Curiosity, no doubt.

“Tell me more. I want to know about your interests and how you came to them.”

His fingers tightened reflexively on his knees. If she wanted to know more about him, that meant she must care, at least a little. She’d cared enough to worry whether he was warm that cold night he’d rescued her, and enough to stay glued to his side while he was out of his head with fever. She cared so much she’d sent him away because she feared he’d come to harm.

He removed his hat and threaded his fingers through his hair. His hand shook. Should he risk revealing more about himself? Nothing could come of it. All these years, hiding his past had kept him safe. It had also left him adrift. Alone. But he’d never felt so lonely as he did right now with Amy here beside him, yet not knowing him.

Perhaps he could risk a little if that’s what it took to get her to trust him. Just so he could steer her away from a dangerous marriage.

“My stepfather was a merchant. Real smart and successful. He put me to work for him when I was fourteen. That’s how I learned the business. He had two natural sons, so I knew I wouldn’t inherit anything. But I hoped to earn enough to one day have my own store.”

His stepfather’s trust and affection had made him believe he could be somebody. That good man would be so disappointed at how low his stepson had sunk.

“The war changed everything. My stepfather was killed in an attack on our town, our business got burned down...” Buck rubbed his sweaty palms over his knees. He couldn’t very well tell Amy about his bushwhacking days. That would guarantee she wouldn’t trust him.

“Before the war, Mr. Campbell, my stepfather, took me to England on a buying trip. That’s where I learned about cooperatives. Seemed a good way for common folks to band together and have access to things only rich

people were getting. I got to thinking this idea might work for farmers. Hadn't sorted through all the details when I threw it out there. Just hoped they might take the bone."

"And they did." Her light touch on his shoulder drew out the ache. Then her hand traveled to his neck and her fingers threaded through his hair, igniting a flash of heat beneath his skin. "I knew it was your idea."

A wry smile tugged at his mouth. "Why? Because it's crazy?"

"No. Because it's *brilliant*."

Love exploded in his heart like a well-placed shell. His breathing grew ragged. He cast about for a smart reply, but couldn't come up with a thing to say. Instead, he bent his head and kissed her.

A soft gasp drew the air from his mouth into hers.

He cradled her jaw between his thumb and forefinger and savored her lips. His body grew heavy with a dull, insistent ache that had to be soothed or he'd die from the wanting. Honor poked him in the ribs. He had no business kissing her out here in public view. Hell, he had no business kissing her at all.

He jerked back, abruptly breaking the contact. Like pulling a splinter, it was less painful if he did it quickly.

Her dazed expression, the swollen fullness of her mouth and the soft look in her eyes telegraphed a message straight to his groin. She could be his. All he had to do...

He braced his hands on his knees and hung his head. By God, he would not seduce her just to satisfy his own selfishness.

Next to him, the soft rustle of skirts, a loud intake of breath, then a sigh. She'd come to her senses in a minute. Tell him to make himself scarce. He couldn't though. Not before he warned her about Fletcher. If she didn't listen to him, he might have to take matters into his own hands.

"I need to write up a report on today's meeting while it's still fresh in my mind." She was back to business again. "Would you walk me up to my

room? I want to give you my card to take to that man you introduced, so he'll know how to reach me."

Buck stood and offered her his hand, glad to be given a task. It would distract him from his misery. "We need to finish our conversation. About Fletcher."

Her chin tipped up and she frowned. "Tomorrow morning. We'll talk about it then."

He nodded, and they went inside.

As they mounted the stairs, his steps were heavy. Even if he talked her out of marrying the lying bastard, he still might not be able to ensure Fletcher wouldn't harm her, unless she let him stay on as her bodyguard. But every day he remained in Kansas increased the risk he'd be found out. On the second floor, she stopped at the last door.

She fumbled with the key, appearing nervous. Was she fearful he'd pounce on her?

He smiled with a twinge of regret for having put that suspicion in her mind.

"Here, let me help." He twisted the key in the lock then held open the door.

She took a half step before she turned, grabbed his vest and yanked him inside. Then she pushed the door shut with a bang.

He stared down at her, as his mind cast about for a reason behind her odd behavior.

She came up on her toes and circled her arms around his neck. "Kiss me."



Amy's heart hammered in her chest as she offered herself to the man she loved. Despite her attempts to avoid the truth, despite her fears, her heart

knew Buck O'Connor was the right man. He protected her without suffocating her, challenged her with just the right amount of encouragement, supported her in her work, and had proven he would stand by her, come what may. But most of all, he loved her.

Wasn't it obvious? Dear Lord, yes. In every look he gave her, every touch. Being a woman who did nothing halfway, now that she'd decided he would be hers, she wanted to show him that she belonged to him as well.

"I said, kiss me." She tried to still her trembling limbs. Great days, he did still want her, didn't he?

His eyes reflected confusion, but within the blue-gray depths there was also a longing that echoed her own. He pressed a soft kiss against her mouth that seemed far too reverent for the moment. Then he pulled back. "You know what you're doing?"

*No.* She didn't have a clue, having never seduced a man in her life.

"I hoped you might," she whispered, and leaned against him.

He hesitated for a heartbeat. Then he gathered her into his arms, and, at the same time, pressed his lips against hers in a kiss that lifted her off the ground.

*Oh yes, he knew exactly what he was doing.* The hot, slick kisses, the whispered promises as his lips moved down her neck. His dexterous fingers flipped open buttons and untied laces, as he divested her of her clothes.

Heat flushed beneath her skin when she finally stood before him, naked as the day she was born, shivering with desire and shy uncertainty.

"Lord have mercy, Venus." He spoke with awe, as he glided his fingers over her bare shoulders. "You take my breath away."

Amy trembled. His roughened hands set her body ablaze. He stroked her arms, spanned her waist with his hands, skimmed her ribs and fondled her breasts, as his heated gaze followed every move. His thumbs drew lazy circles around her stiff nipples. Sizzling desire leapt from nerve to nerve and ignited a roaring passion that buckled her knees.

“Please,” she begged, hanging onto his arms to stay upright. “I can’t...”

“Neither can I.” With a low growl, he swept her up in his arms. He deposited her on the bed before ripping off his coat and shirt. The mattress sank when he sat to tug off his boots.

She watched, mesmerized, as he revealed, with the removal of each item, the powerful body she’d mapped while he lay ill. Only, he hadn’t looked quite like this.

Corded muscles flexed in his arms as he drew down his trousers. That part of him she’d averted her eyes from now jutted proudly from a nest of light-brown hair, which arched up his belly and forked out across his chest. He had a rugged beauty like the land they lived on, and it rendered her speechless.

He crawled across the bed with a predatory smile. His unruly hair fell across his forehead. She plunged her fingers into the thick waves before he tumbled her onto her back and pressed her into the feather mattress.

“I want to taste you,” he murmured, trailing kisses across her cheek. He tracked down her neck, and lower, to her breasts. With one cupped in his hand, he drew a pebbled nipple into his mouth.

She moaned with pleasure, bowed her back to welcome his hands and mouth. He suckled her breasts until they swelled and ached for more of the delicious torture. Never had she imagined such pleasure from a man’s touch on her body.

His lips forged a damp, hot trail down her belly, his tongue explored the sensitive dip he encountered along the way. After nudging her legs apart, he cupped her, then tickled open tender flesh and slipped a finger deep inside.

With a gasp, she yanked his hair.

He rose up with a rueful smile. “Patience, sweetheart.”

Her face flushed hot. “I-I’m sorry.”

He levered up and kissed her nose. “Sorry for what? I want you eager for me.”



His finger moved inside her with slow, sure strokes. He pressed his thumb against a place that made her breath catch. Upon finding the hard pearl, he teased it into a throbbing mass of want, all the while watching her face with avid interest.

The heat of a blush spread down her neck and across her chest, but she was too lost in a sensuous storm for her mind to hold onto embarrassment. She writhed with need, as his touch released a damp flood of desire. “Buck, please...”

He moved away and then she was lifted, her legs draped over his shoulders. The touch of his tongue where his thumb had been jolted her with the force of lightning.

Alarmed by the sense she was losing control, she tried to move away. “What are you doing? Stop, don’t...”

“Easy,” he crooned, and kissed the quivering flesh of her upper thigh. “I just want to love you. Trust me. Let me show you how good it can be.”

Amy fisted the sheets. She swallowed her fear and forced herself to lie back and let him have his way.

He gently parted her flesh, licking her, flicking the tip of his tongue over the throbbing bead. Passion shot through her veins, lifting her body and taking control. Her breaths came faster as the need—the ferocious need—coiled tighter and tighter.

Her hips danced, undulating in a rhythm guided by the touch of his lips, tongue and fingers. She thrashed her head back and forth. The coiled pressure became unbearable, overwhelming, even frightening. But he had asked for her trust and she wanted him to know he had it. She let her legs fall open, inviting his invasion, and released her slim hold on sanity.

The coil sprang. She cried out at the release. Pleasure crashed over her in wave after relentless wave, tossing her on a sea of sensation until it ebbed, rippling through her flesh, making her weep and tremble.

Her mind slowly floated back to shore.

She hadn't imagined passion would be like this. This wasn't bondage. It was freedom.

"Venus." Buck's breath blew warm across her skin. His lips brushed her stomach and then her breasts. "My beautiful, passionate Venus."

With his hands braced on either side of her, he fastened his mouth on hers in a kiss that tasted of salt and musk. The blunt end of his stiffened member pressed against her damp flesh, and the length slid easily into her slick, wet passage until it began to stretch to accommodate his size. As the pressure became uncomfortable, she shifted, but didn't pull away. She wanted all of him. She wanted everything he could give her, and more.



Buck hesitated. He pressed once more against the barrier. *A virginal barrier? Impossible.* She'd been married, and only a dead man wouldn't bed a woman this passionate.

"Mm." She twined her arms around his neck and burrowed her fingers through his hair, using her nails to scrape his sensitive scalp. He sucked in a sharp breath, wanting nothing more than to bury himself inside her, plunge again and again into the hot, tight sheath.

He lifted up on his arms to look at her face. Her sated expression had been replaced by tension around her eyes and mouth. Whatever her story was, it didn't matter. He was about to take a virgin. He had to slow down to ensure he wouldn't hurt her more than he already had.

He eased back to take pressure off the membrane blocking his entry into heaven.

She sighed. With relief? That was the last thing he was feeling.

"We'll take a slow," he gasped.

"Whatever you want," she murmured.

Slow was not what he wanted at the moment, but this wasn't about his wants. It was about making sure her first time would be a good memory.

She drew his head down and traced the inner edge of his ear with her tongue. His heart sped up. He exhaled a harsh breath and fisted the sheets, trembled as he forced himself to hold still for her tentative exploration. He'd die before he hurt her or did anything to make her feel unsure. But, oh lord, her tongue was in his ear, and her warm breath. Now her teeth had fastened onto his flesh, nipping.

Pleasure shuddered through him, and on its heels, an intense need to complete the act of coupling with her.

"Amy." Her name came out in a groan.

"Yes." Her lips moved to his neck. "I want a taste, too." She licked his neck like it was a peppermint stick.

His arms shook. Desire battered the defenses he'd hastily erected to maintain control. God help him, he couldn't hold back much longer. Not under this onslaught.

He let his weight shift forward, which brought him up against the barrier. A battering ram against the closed gate of a castle. There was nothing to be done but breach it. Break through and take the keep. It would hurt, but only for a minute. Wasn't that what he'd heard? Hell, he didn't bed virgins. What did he know?

"Have to...to break through," he stammered. "I'll try not to hurt you."

"I trust you."

Her whispered words drove a stake through his heart. He was the *last* person she should trust. Yet, he couldn't stop now. He couldn't back away and let her go because he needed her. He needed her more than air in his lungs. More than life.

He blocked out everything but the urge to join with her. Flexed his hips and thrust through the membrane, silencing her small, clipped cry with a kiss.

An indescribable sensation took hold. It forced out a moan that came up from deep down in his soul. Being inside her was heaven on earth.

He stroked her shoulder, her breast, down to her hip, trying to soothe the tension from her body. As he began to move, he slipped his hand between them, touching the place he knew would arouse her.

She jerked, then drew a shuddering breath.

Was he still hurting her? He had to remember how small she was and not used to a man, much less a large one. He rolled onto his back and pulled her with him, all the while keeping them joined. His hands skimmed up her legs to her hips. "Let's try this way."

"I-I don't know what to do."

"Whatever you desire, darlin'." He skimmed his fingers over her belly and fondled her breasts. "You take the reins. Ride me however you want."

Her expression shifted from uncertainty to something that looked a lot like gratitude. She braced her hands on his shoulders, closed her eyes, and settled back onto him, seeming to test how deep she could take him.

He released a shaky breath as he slipped further into her warm, welcoming center.

Her hips rotated. She rose up slightly, and then pressed down, grinding herself against his body. He encouraged her with his words and with his hands on her knees, as she rode up and down on his throbbing shaft, her breasts bouncing.

She was a goddess. A dream. Every secret desire he'd ever had, all gathered up in one delicious, womanly form. Even more marvelous, she wanted him as much he wanted her. He could see it in her eyes and in the soft, pouty set of her mouth.

He struggled to draw in air and felt himself slip. Surrender was as easy as sliding down a hill. With a groan, he gave her his body. Thrust his hips to her commands while she rode him with the natural finesse of a woman made for passion. It was better than his wildest imaginings.

Pleasure coursed through him and the heaviness in his groin increased. The pressure grew stronger, the tension built, like being in the midst of an electric storm before the storm became a tornado. He wanted her with him when it swept him away.

He slid his hand up her leg to the apex of her thighs, used his thumb to rub the sensitive button in a way he knew would bring her to her pleasure.

She dropped her hands onto his chest and moaned. Her muscles clenched around him.

The intense sensations surged. He roared as it ripped away his tenuous control and sent him soaring, out, over the cliff.



Amy woke to a robin singing outside the window. Sunlight tiptoed in through the parted curtains. She closed her eyes and her body warmed as erotic images from the previous night played through her mind.

After they'd loved the first time, Buck had bathed away her soreness and pleased her again, bringing her to a fever pitch before they joined a second time. Afterwards, she'd explored his body with the same thorough attention he'd given hers, and again they'd coupled. They'd fallen asleep, still entwined.

She smiled against his shoulder and stretched her arm across his broad chest. Her choice the previous night had changed everything. Love was as inevitable as the morning. She could no more hold it back than she could stop the sun from rising. Love meant risking everything, but the alternative would be a kind of slow death she couldn't bear. Now that she had given him her body, he would certainly ask for her heart and her hand. She would trust him with both. Gladly.

She snuggled in his arms, the only place in the world she truly felt safe and loved.

His lips brushed her hair. “How do feel, sweetheart? Still sore?”

She shivered at the endearment whispered in his raspy drawl. It had hurt when he’d broken through the barrier. Only for a moment. After that, there had been such pleasure she couldn’t find words to describe it. “I’m fine. More than fine, actually.”

A rumble in his chest signified a chuckle. “I’m more’n fine myself.”

He drew her upwards to place a tender kiss on her mouth then looked deep into her eyes. “If I’d known you were untried, I would’ve...been more careful. You said you’d been married.”

“I was.” She propped her arms on his chest. “My husband left to return to his company an hour after we’d said our vows. He was killed in battle two weeks later.”

“Bad timing.” Buck’s solemn gaze didn’t convey amusement. He lifted a lock of her hair twined around his finger. “I’d have bedded you five minutes after saying, *I do.*”

She couldn’t restrain a smile, albeit a sad one. “It wasn’t that kind of marriage. James Langford was a family friend. One of my father’s business associates before he joined the army. After Father was killed, James came back to Lawrence on a two-day leave and asked me to marry him. He offered his protection because I didn’t have any family left. I was grief-stricken and feeling so alone, I agreed. We respected each another. I’d known him most of my life. But we weren’t in love, so conjugal relations seemed like something that could wait.”

Buck smoothed her hair down her back as one might stroke a cat. “I’d say I’m sorry, but I’d be lying.”

“Now you know why I wasn’t...experienced.” She sat up, letting the sheet slide off as she rested her arms on her knees, surprisingly at ease with him, despite having never been with a man. He made her feel beautiful. Desirable. Adored. She tossed loose hair over her shoulder and tried on a sultry smile. “I worried my fumbling might disappoint Casanova.”

His eyes shone with admiration. “Venus, you couldn’t fumble if you tried.”

Oh yes, she could, and she had, many times. Apparently, not last night.

He stretched, muscles rippling, and rolled to one side to prop up on his arm.

“You look like a lion lazing after a full meal.”

He walked his fingers to her knee, which triggered a shiver. “You’re not scared, are you?”

“I haven’t been afraid of you since that night you rescued me.” She dropped her gaze to where his scarred hand splayed over the top of her thigh. “When I told you before that I was afraid...” She struggled to find an explanation that wouldn’t make her appear foolish. “I meant that I was scared of the passion I felt for you.”

A surprised arch of his brows was followed by a disbelieving smile. “Why would you be scared of that? It’s a good thing. A gift.”

She didn’t want to go into the details of her mother’s torments and her own fears. Even so, she couldn’t hide from him. Not anymore. “My mother let passion control her. It made her do things, promiscuous things, that ruined her marriage, and she...” Amy took a ragged breath, forcing out the hated declaration. “She took her own life.”

Buck sat up and gathered her in his arms then pressed a kiss on her forehead. “Whatever your mother did doesn’t mean it has to be that way for you. You’re not obliged to carry her demons.”

His words struck a comforting chord in her heart. They were the words of a man who understood exactly how it felt to bear a family curse. He understood because he’d faced something similar. Anger was another form of passion that could be warped and lead to abuse.

“Your father, he hurt you. But, you’re not like that. You’re nothing like that.”

Surprise flashed across his face an instant before he shuttered his emotions. It wrenched her heart to see his features freeze into the mask he used to hide his pain and protect the tender places that could still be hurt.

She reached up to stroke his cheek, traced the lion-colored mustache, and put her fingers to his lips. So soft. The only part of him that was soft—other than his heart. “When you were ill, you said some things. Don’t worry. I’m the only one who heard, and the doctor. Neither of us would betray your secret.”

He affected indifference. “I must’ve said something crazy.”

“I’ve seen the scars.” She rubbed her fingers over his knuckles. “They’re caused by burns from a fire. When you were out of your head with fever, you cried out—”

He clamped his hand over her mouth. “That was a long time ago.”

Why did he feel the need to cover it up? They’d joined together, become one flesh and drawn closer than she’d been with any soul. He should know he could trust her.

She lifted his hand and kissed the pale scars. The scowl drained from his face and the pain she’d seen before surfaced in his eyes. It tore at her heart and she longed to comfort him. “We don’t have to talk about it if you’d rather not. But you don’t have to hide.”

Uncertainty clouded his expression. “Did I say anything else?”

“You talked to Georgia. A woman, I presume?”

His eyes flickered with chagrin before he looked down at the hand that held his. “She was my...stepfather’s niece.”

“Is she dead?”

He kept his gaze downcast. “No. Just not important anymore.”

The mumblings and pleas she’d heard when he’d been delirious made it clear his heart had been broken. Even though it was in his past, the thought of him loving another woman caused a burning knot of jealousy. One day



she might be strong enough to hear the story, but not now. Not while she was in bed with him.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, letting him know it didn't matter. For a while, nothing mattered except showing him how much she loved him.

Afterwards, he helped her dress, deftly assisting with laces, hooks and buttons. He dropped a quick kiss on her neck as she twisted her hair into a knot.

"I can do that for you," he murmured, and took a hairpin from her fingers.

She turned in his arms to retrieve the pin and lifted an eyebrow. "Are you a lady's maid as well as a bodyguard?"

"Told you, I have many talents," he murmured, as he bent to bring his lips to hers. "I can give you a demonstration when we get back." His warm whisper sent a shiver over her skin, awakening images that made her burn with anticipation.

At this rate they would never leave the room, and she'd already pressed her luck by allowing him to stay the night. Her mind veered to a safer topic. "Yesterday, you said something about working for your stepfather at his store. You obviously know about running a business, and you've given thought to this cooperative venture. Why don't you lead it?"

He had already started shaking his head before she could finish. "It's better if the settlers run it. They'll trust one of their own."

"I don't mean for you to do it alone. That man I met yesterday, Sean Murphy, he could help you select other men who could be on the board. Your knowledge about the mercantile business would be invaluable. Once my money is freed up, we can build and open stores in towns along the railroad line, find and train people who can manage them—"

"Hold on, now." He put a finger over her lips. "You're getting ahead of yourself. First, you got to convince your boss to give up the land, and then

you have to get all the settlers to sign up, and then...” A crease appeared between his brows. “What do you mean once your money is freed up?”

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## CHAPTER 20



**B**uck paced the inside of Sean's one-room cabin, his heart pounding in time with the strike of his boots on the dirt floor. He'd come out here to give orders, but what he really needed was for someone to work a miracle and turn back the clock so he could start over.

"It's a mess," he muttered.

In a moment of weakness, he had fouled things up worse than he ever had in his entire life, and that was saying something, because his past was a massive snowball of miscalculations and missteps

"It's a damn mess!" he swore.

Sean leaned back in his chair, behind a table piled with used cups and dishes.

"Sorry, you surprised me before I could pick up for guests." His cousin snagged an earthen jug from the floor. He sloshed homemade whiskey into two of the cups and offered one to Buck. "Want a drink?"

"No, I don't want a drink." He wanted to crawl into that jug and ferment. "I don't know what to do, Sean. I..." He made mistakes, but rarely admitted them. "I got to fix something."

What had possessed him to take Amy to bed? He'd known, despite his fantasies, there was no future in it. But she didn't. She'd chatted on about

how they were going to work together, open stores, make history with this cooperative venture—after the money came in.

Not only would he break her heart, he'd set her up to be bankrupted.

His gut twisted so tight he thought he might throw up. "All right. What I need to do is make sure Amy's railroad wins that race. If it doesn't, she'll lose her fortune. She'll lose *everything*."

"What?" Sean set down his cup with a guffaw. "Not a chance. She's rich as Midas. How could she lose everything just because the Border Tier loses the race?"

Buck gave in to temptation and took a gulp from the tin cup. He coughed as the corn liquor burned a path down his throat. He'd asked himself that same question, had the same mistaken impression. "She bought stock in the railroad—lots of it. Plus, she put thousands into that blasted immigration program and won't get repaid until Mr. Joy's land is sold. Whatever else she has is tied up in businesses, all dependent on that damn railroad making Fort Scott some kind of western Mecca."

The empty cup clanked as he set it down. He started to pace again, unable to calm an attack of nerves that had started right about the time reality smacked him in the face. When the delusion he'd woven—somewhere between the time she'd dragged him into her room and he took her virginity—dissolved in a firestorm of guilt and recrimination.

"If they lose this race, that railroad becomes a little branch line to nowhere. Joy's land won't be worth shit. And that stock, her investments...." He jerked out a chair and sat down, then dropped his head in his hands. "Ah, Mother Mary, forgive me."

"She's not here, Buck. But don't worry, they won't lose the race," Sean said confidently. "That co-operative idea is gaining steam. Some men are even talking about taking out a loan so they can buy land to get in on the deal. Everybody I've talked to sees opportunity in it."

Buck raised his head and grabbed onto a thread of hope. "Can you help me round up more workers? Get your neighbors to pitch in. Make sure this railroad wins the race?"

Sean regarded him with a solemn expression. "You're in love with her."

Misery flooded Buck's heart. God, yes, he was in love with her. He was so sick with it he'd gone mad and bedded Amy. Only the lowest scum would use her affection and steal her innocence.

"I'm a Judas," he muttered. "Damned if I'm not."

He pulled a wad of bills from his pocket, his proverbial thirty pieces of silver, put the money on the table and shoved it toward Sean. "That's the advance you gave me for this job. It's yours. Use it or give it back to Amos. I don't care what you do. I can't be part of this anymore."

His cousin eyed the money but didn't touch it. He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. "Go to her, Buck. Tell her you love her. Come clean. Women are forgiving creatures. It's in their nature. She'll be angry, probably tell you to make yourself scarce, but she'll come around eventually. Especially if she sees you doing everything you can to help her railroad win the race."

"After I sabotaged her every step of the way?" Buck snorted with disbelief. "She'll never forgive me. Nor should she."

"Could be she won't, but you'll never know if you don't try." Sean stared past Buck's shoulder, out the door of his cabin. "I should've tried harder. Don't make the same mistake." He seemed to shake off the strange reverie. "I hope she doesn't change her mind about helping us start that cooperative store."

"Amy's smarter than that. She might hate me when I tell her what I've done, but she won't cut off her nose to spite her face." Buck stared at the dirt floor, seeing the secret smile she'd given him as they'd parted. With an agreement to return later in the day and spend time planning a future that couldn't be.

Even if Amy could get past his work for the Land League, she would never get over his involvement in that raid on Lawrence. She would *despise* him. God, he couldn't bear it.

He raised his head, cringed at the pity flickering in Sean's eyes. His cousin picked up the jug and a splash of whiskey hit the bottom of the empty cup.

Buck stared at it longingly, then pushed it away. "I can't get drunk. Got work to do. I need to check on the Katy's progress. Figure out how fast we need to lay track to stay ahead."

"Why don't you and me go out tomorrow morning? I'll help you find them." Sean corked the jug and set it on the floor. "Meant to tell you earlier, I went to register my claim and saw that banker's name. Bain, isn't it? He's listed as the owner of thousands of prime acres around here and Baxter Springs. That means he's got a fortune staked on this, as well."

Shock blew away the agony torturing Buck's soul. The unexpected news gave him something to focus on other than his own pain. It was another clue in the frustrating puzzle. He knew in his gut Fletch had sicced that Italian musician on Amy. Maybe it had something to do with the land he'd bought. Had he borrowed from her to purchase it? This was a question Buck needed to ask as soon as he got back.

Hell, he couldn't confess his duplicity to Amy. Not yet. Not before he figured out what had to be done about Fletch.



The bell on the door jangled as Amy walked into the small office that housed Amos Sanford's newspaper. She tightened her fingers nervously around the strings of her reticule and surveyed the unoccupied room. Piles of newspapers were stacked in corners waiting to be delivered, probably

filled with articles decrying Mr. Joy and the railroad's latest effort at reconciliation.

She gave it a fifty-fifty chance that Amos Sanford had acted in good faith when he'd sent her a note, which asked her to meet with him to gain *helpful information*. Her first instinct had been to ignore him, but curiosity finally won out. She had to know what he was up to.

Her nostrils flared at the pungent odor of the cheap cigars he favored. She sat on a seat in front of the desk to wait. Ten minutes, then she'd be on her way. There was much to do. The committee she'd formed yesterday would meet after noon to work on the proposal for Mr. Joy. She wanted to stop in and see how they fared, get back to her room by four. The time she and Buck had agreed on.

At the thought of him, her body thrummed with anticipation. The old fear cast its net, but she threw it off, choosing instead to focus on how right it felt to be with him.

Buck felt the same way. She'd seen love on his face and in his eyes. His pride might hold him back from declaring himself. After all, it was clear he was poor. But that didn't matter to her, and it wouldn't be long before they spoke their vows.

That is, after she cried off her engagement to Fletcher. It would take every ounce of finesse she could muster, as this news would certainly upset him. She would tell him how unfair it would be for her to marry him knowing she didn't and could never love him. He would find someone else, a woman who could give him the love he needed and deserved. Regardless of what Buck suspected, Fletcher wasn't a bad man. He would never hurt her.

At the tinkling of a bell, she leapt to her feet.

Amos Sanford strode through the door. "Mrs. Langford. I'm pleased you responded to my invitation." He sketched a slight bow, before hanging his hat and coat on a rack near the door.

“Do you mind if we sit down?” He headed for the chair behind the desk.

“Not at all.” Amy dropped back onto the seat she’d taken earlier, still suspicious of his friendliness. Now that the settlers were excited about starting up a cooperative venture, Sanford probably wanted a position on the committee. Every move he made was calculated to advance his political aspirations for a congressional seat. She didn’t trust him, but the settlers liked him, so she couldn’t very well ban him from participating, much as she might want to.

“I received your note,” she prodded. “Did you want to talk about the cooperative venture?”

His gray beard swayed as he shook his head. “No madam, that is not why I called you here. Though you may reconsider this ill-conceived venture once you hear me out.”

*Not likely.*

She smiled politely.

Sanford propped his elbows on of the desk and formed a steeple with his fingers. A pose that would have done Solomon proud. “What do you know about Mr. O’Connor?”

The hair prickled on the back of her neck. “My bodyguard? Why do you ask?”

“Has he told you about his work for the Land League?”

“What are you talking about?”

“In January, Sean Murphy wrote to his cousin, Buck O’Connor, to ask for his help in our struggles against the railroad. We paid him half in advance and confirmed the deal the same day you hired him. He must’ve seen your offer as the perfect opportunity to achieve his goal. That is, to slow down the railroad by stopping you.”

She leapt up in indignation. “You, sir, are the lowest scoundrel. If you think to thwart this cooperative venture by slandering a man who has twice saved my life at the risk of his own, you had best think again.”



The snake didn't bat an eye. "I will not try talk you out of anything, nor do I slander Mr. O'Connor. I've told you the truth."

"Truth? You wouldn't know the truth if it smacked you in the face." She stepped around a pile of papers, desperate to get out of the cramped little office and away from the fetid air. "I have no doubt you'd stoop so low as to hire underlings to do your dirty work. B, but I won't stay here another minute and listen to your lies."

Sanford's chair creaked again. He stepped around the desk with a malicious smile on his face as he trailed her to the door. "If you don't believe me, ask Mr. Murphy. He has nothing to gain by lying to you. If I recall correctly, he was all for your cooperative society. Ask about what his cousin did during the war. O'Connor was a *bushwhacker*. He used the conflict as an excuse for stealing and killing. Men like that weren't honorable, like us regular soldiers...."

Amy jerked the door open, desperate to get away so she wouldn't have to listen to this filth about the man she loved. It wasn't true. That foul editor was angry with Buck for calling him down publicly. This was his way to take revenge while disrupting her plans. She ran out the door. His vile words followed, like dogs nipping at her heels.

"Not only is he a liar, he's also a thief and *murderer*, to boot."



Amy stood at the window in her hotel room to observe the street below. She rubbed her hands together in an effort to warm her chilled fingers. She'd seen Buck return, right on time. Certainly, if he were keeping secrets he would've fled as soon as soon as he knew they were out. That he'd returned when he said he would was proof of his innocence.

*Curse Amos Sanford.* The scoundrel had likely sent that disturbed performer after her, and now he intended to frighten her further by planting

seeds of doubt about the man protecting her.

As the key rattled in the lock, she rushed to open the door. Buck would know how to handle Amos and his devilish schemes.

“You’re back, thank God.” She threw her arms around him.

“Good to see you, too.” He kissed her then took off his hat and gave her a crooked smile. One that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Trepidation tiptoed up her spine. He’d said he was going to talk to Mr. Murphy about recruiting more members for the cooperative committee. God forbid Sean Murphy was part of Sanford’s schemes. If the man truly were Buck’s cousin, he would’ve told her.

Buck cupped her shoulders. As his gaze roved her face, the uncertainty in his eyes narrowed into concern. “You look pale. What’s wrong?”

Amy placed her hands on his chest to maintain a connection, so she could feel sure that what they had was real and what Amos had told her was the lie. “After you left this morning, I received an invitation to meet with Amos Sanford. He said he had some information I might find useful.”

A frown creased Buck’s brow. “What did he have to say?”

“He told me you’d been hired by the Land League to stop the railroad. To stop me.”

Buck’s expression went flat. The same as when he’d been masking his pain earlier. He dropped his hands from her shoulders.

She shivered at a sudden chill. Why wasn’t he getting angry? He should be furious. Denying it, vowing to stop the fiend. “It’s a lie.”

His mouth thinned into a tight line.

Her heart hammered against the wall of her chest. “Buck? Say something! Tell me it’s a lie!”

“I can’t.”

“You *can’t*?” Amy tried to breathe. Her chest had turned to stone. It couldn’t be true. She couldn’t have been so wrong about him. “But...” Her voice wavered. “You wouldn’t...do that...to me...”

His throat worked like he was trying to find his voice. He held out his hands in a supplicating gesture. “I agreed to help slow things down to force Mr. Joy to negotiate. But I didn’t agree to harm you. I’ve been trying to protect you.”

“Protect me?” It seemed all she could do was parrot what he said, because she couldn’t wrap her mind around what he was confessing. He’d deceived her every step of the way, lured her into confiding in him, given her bad advice, and manipulated her so she would fail—again and again.

Her fingers tingled and tremors shook her body. *Cold*. God, she was so cold. She hugged her arms. Ice encased her heart. The unbearable agony slowly turned into a dull, throbbing ache.

Her betrayer was her bodyguard. The man she loved was a liar. Dear God, how could she have misjudged so disastrously? Buck was *worse* than Fletcher because his deceit had been intentional and intended to harm. He’d been crafty as a fox stealing into a henhouse. Had gained her trust by playing on her emotions, all the while intending to ruin her.

“You deceived me,” she said in a voice devoid of inflection. “You worked against me. You tried to ruin me. Now, you have the gall to stand there and claim you want to protect me. Do you know how *crazy* that sounds?”

He winced at the mocking way she’d echoed his own words. “I know. I deserve that, and more. But please, let me explain.”

When he moved closer, she backed away, desperate to keep distance between them. She couldn’t let him touch her because she got confused when he touched her, and his touch was a lie, just like everything he’d said and done had been a lie.

Her legs bumped against the windowsill.

Alarm flashed across his face. “Amy, the window is open. Don’t back up.”

As if responding to his warning, a breeze lifted the curtain, swirling it around her, which sent a a thought tripping through her mind. “We’re not high enough that the fall would kill me. More likely, it would only cripple me. But you’ve already done a fine job of that.”

Agony bloomed in his eyes. “I know I wronged you. I never meant to hurt you. My cousin, he’s the only family I got left. He wrote, said he needed my help. I didn’t know you. Didn’t expect to find a woman. Didn’t think I’d fall...” His words died and his features twisted in a look of pain.

No, it wasn’t real. He wore a mask. She had to remember that she could never really know the man who lived behind it. He was a deceiver.

“I realized after that first night I couldn’t do you harm.”

His voice sounded rough with what she once would’ve interpreted as strong emotion. Only, a deceiver couldn’t have any true feelings.

“I tried to think of ways I could help Sean, and keep you safe at the same time. I thought I could do both.” His mouth turned down in an expression of disgust. “I know how arrogant and stupid that sounds. I seem to be cursed with those two qualities.”

*Stupid?* He wasn’t stupid. He was cunning. Oh yes, she’d seen the calculating look in his eyes that first night. Sadly, she’d ignored it, had let his brave rescue blind her to the warning.

Her gaze shifted to the bed and shards of pain ravaged her still-beating heart. She’d given herself to him, allowed love to grow, its petals unfurl. This pain was worse than the worst grief she’d ever experienced, worse than death.

“I don’t care about your excuses.” Her voice sounded wooden and hollow, as though it came from a puppet’s lips. “And I don’t want to hear any more of your lies.”

“I didn’t lie.”

Amy's glare was hotter than hellfire. So much so, Buck was tempted to reach up and make sure he hadn't grown horns. There was no doubt in his mind she thought he was the Devil. He might believe it of himself, except Old Scratch wouldn't be troubled by guilt.

"I know I hid things, but I didn't outright lie to you."

Her eyes hardened into black stones. "Deceit. Manipulation. Subterfuge. It's all lies, sir, regardless of how you package it."

Her shot struck true, bringing a fresh wave of pain. He gritted his teeth. Refused to accept the death of every tender moment between them.

"If I'm a liar, then why am I confessing? I could've lied. You wanted me to. Hell, you asked me to. It would've been easier to keep you in the dark."

"Don't twist my words. You had every opportunity to tell me what was going on. At some point you must've known I would've listened to you."

He fought while knowing it was a losing battle. "You wouldn't have trusted me anymore. You would've fired me. And I didn't want to leave until I made sure you were safe."

"Stop trying to convince me you care about anything but your own malignant purposes," she cried. "You didn't want to leave until you'd accomplished your goal. Stopping me. *Ruining* me."

Her words riddled him with wounds. He flexed his fingers, half expecting to feel damp, sticky blood. If she pulled out a gun and shot him, it was no more than he deserved.

"Amy, I never intended to ruin you. Hell, I've been trying to help you ever since that rally. Don't you remember? I challenged you to find a solution to benefit everybody. That's what you want, isn't it?" The rough, pleading tone gave away his distress, but he didn't care. He'd throw pride to the wind if it meant she wouldn't despise him. "I never lied about my feelings for you."

“You never *spoke* of your feelings for me, other than lust. I’ll concede you were honest about that.” Pain laced the anger in her voice. Her eyes filled with a kind of disgust he recognized. She considered him a monster.

He put his hand to the sharp pain in his chest and struggled to breathe. She’d never believe him. Never trust him again. It was too late to tell her that his love for her eclipsed anything he’d ever felt or would feel for anyone. It was too late to tell her that her love had become as necessary as air. And now, he was suffocating.

She presented her back, telling him without words he’d never breach this wall between them. He could batter away, but it would simply collapse and crush him.

“I’ll go now. But I’m not leaving for good until I’m sure you’re safe.” His feet dragged like lead weights even though he felt as empty as a husk.

“Wait.”

He jerked to a stop and turned, his heart leaping up at that one word. A sign she might listen, might give him another chance.

“Mr. Sanford also told me you were a bushwhacker during the war. Did you...did you ride with Quantrill?” Her question extinguished the flicker of hope.

He fought a desperate urge to lie. Instead, he picked up the hammer and drove the last nail into his coffin. “Only once.”

Amy’s closed her eyes. Her face twisted with agony before she collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Buck rushed to her side, dropped to his knees to gather her into his arms.

“No!” She fought him, and tore at his shirt. He held her tight, muffling her cries against his chest—a high keening sound like a suffering animal would make.

Her grief ripped through him and he bled from a thousand cuts.

Merciful saints, he couldn't bear having her think he'd taken her father away from her. He tenderly caressed her cheek and prayed she could sense the love in his touch and hear the truth in his words. "I didn't kill him," he rasped. "I swear it. I didn't kill your father."

"How do you know?" she moaned. "Nearly every man and boy in Lawrence was murdered that day. How could you even remember their faces?"

"Because I didn't kill anybody."

She stilled from her struggles. "You're lying."

He stiffened at the accusation. It was the one thing he most needed her to believe. But she would never accept his word as truth after he'd deceived her in every other way.

Still, he had to try.

"I killed plenty of men during the war, but none there. Not that day. I went to Lawrence for one reason—to find Jim Lane. He led those raids into Missouri. His men killed my stepfather, raped the woman I planned to marry, destroyed our business. They took...everything."

Buck swallowed a thickness in his throat. He couldn't begin to explain the depth of his despair after he'd lost his home, his future, his very identity as a gentleman, as someone of value.

*Justice.* That was what he'd sought when he'd ridden off to do battle. But a harvest of bitterness had yielded only more loss, more pain, and in the process, his heart had shriveled up and he'd become no better than an animal. Until he was forced to face the truth.

He was damned. Hell, he'd been *born* damned.

Desperation gripped him. "Me and Cole Younger spent the better part of three hours searching for Lane. We never found him. When I got back to the main part of town and saw what had happened, I couldn't believe it—" He closed his eyes, choking on the words. God, he could still smell the smoke.

See the twisted, bleeding bodies scattered in the street. Hear the wails of women mingled with the whoops of drunken men.

His voice lowered to a hoarse whisper. “I know I’m cursed for eternity, but I didn’t kill your father, Amy. I wouldn’t lie to you about that. I’d rather die than hurt you.”

She shuddered in his arms. “Then you had best do us both a favor and get on with it.”

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## CHAPTER 21



*May 12, 1870*

*Baxter Springs, Kansas*

A loud whistle sounded, announcing the arrival of one of the brand new locomotives. The engine, gaily trimmed with red, white and blue banners, rolled into the makeshift station at the last town in Kansas before entering Indian Territory. On the platform, a quartet of fiddlers and banjo players struck up an off-key but upbeat rendition of *Song of the Kansas Immigrant*.

As the cars squealed to a stop, Amy craned her neck to see the passengers departing from an open-air car in the rear. Railroad directors, assorted luminaries, no sign of Fletcher.

“Looks like Baxter Springs intends to outdo every other town in putting on a celebration,” said a voice behind her.

Over her shoulder, she spotted Charlie Goodlander. His cheerfulness did nothing to relieve her anxiety. “What do we have to celebrate? We’ve not yet made the border. Nor are we certain we’ll be declared the winner once we get there.”

The reproof fetched a chastened look, which spurred her to remorse. She had no call to be ill mannered. The object of her anger wasn't Charlie. The man who held that honor wasn't here. He'd vanished two weeks ago, right after she told him to get on with the business of dying. Cruel words, but what he'd done to her surpassed cruelty.

Not only had the wretch lied and worked against her, he had ridden with Quantrill.

*Only once.*

So, he said, but once was enough to prove he was a devil. He claimed he hadn't killed anyone that day. But she'd been there. She had seen evil on the faces of the men who'd dealt death indiscriminately to every man or boy they happened across.

She had wracked her brain, yet couldn't recall Buck's face. It didn't mean anything. In her shocked state, how could she remember one face amongst hundreds? The face she would never forget was her father's, twisted with pain, as he lay sprawled in his nightclothes with his life bleeding out onto the street in front of their home.

She shoved her grief into a dark corner of her heart, determined to ignore it until the time came when she could afford to deal with it. Right now, she had to find Fletcher and end their engagement. Something she should've done the moment she realized she couldn't love him. That Fletcher had whitewashed his relationship with her attacker simply reinforced her decision.

In truth, she couldn't bear the thought of marriage, not with anyone. Buck had taken more than her virginity. The thieving wretch had stolen her heart. Now, it was up to her to ensure he didn't steal away with her fortune.

"I don't mean to be rude," she said to Charlie. "But until we have a congratulatory telegram from Washington, I don't see any reason for celebration. We should be focused on completing the line as quickly as possible."

He lifted a shoulder in a good-natured shrug. “Mr. Chanute says we picked up a new crew of workers. They’ve put down two miles of track a day. Laid a mile and a hundred feet in driving rain. At this rate, we’ll cross the border by Saturday. Surely that’s worth celebrating.”

She turned at the loud shouts coming from a crowd that had formed around a man who carried a keg of whiskey on his shoulder. As he wove through the crowd, he filled outstretched cups and even poured the libation into open mouths when a cup wasn’t available.

Charlie raced over to collect his share. He soon reappeared with two glasses.

“Here, try some of this whiskey. It’s good *pisen*, as they say.”

“Poison is right. That homebrew will eat out your insides. You didn’t happen to see Fletcher over there?”

“Haven’t seen your Mr. Bain.”

Fletcher wouldn’t be *her Mr. Bain* much longer, though she saw no need to go into that with Charlie. Certainly not before she’d discussed it with Fletcher. Apparently, he hadn’t yet made it back from Indian Territory. She sniffed the amber liquid and her eyes watered. “Honestly, Charlie, I don’t know how you drink this stuff.”

The crowd thinned, with most of the celebrants following in Pied Piper fashion after the man with the whiskey barrel, as he started down the road leading to the town square.

“Fletcher indicated he’d arrive today.” Amy fiddled with the stings on her bag. She wasn’t really in the mood to talk to him, but she couldn’t let him think they would be wed in a week. “He’s supposed to give a speech at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new depot.”

“Ah, then I’m sure he’ll show up this evening. Mr. Joy is scheduled to arrive at eight, perhaps he’s coming then.” Charlie tipped back his glass, finishing off the contents. “Where’s your bodyguard?”

“I let him go.” She forced an indifferent tone. “I didn’t need him anymore.”

Charlie’s brown eyes reproached, which set off a flutter of indignation in her chest. He couldn’t possibly know the true nature of the man he’d befriended.

She opened her mouth to set him straight but couldn’t form the words. Buck had betrayed her in the worst way, yet, she couldn’t do the same. She couldn’t even manage to hate him, much as she wanted to. She blinked away her tears. What flaw in her character made her long for a man who didn’t deserve her loyalty, much less her love?

Charlie’s gaze softened and a sympathetic smile lifted the drooping mustache. “Why don’t we go into town? They’re roasting a buffalo over at the Pacific Restaurant. I’m getting hungry just thinking about it.”

Amy shouldered her despair and accompanied Charlie to the waiting buggy. A party was the last thing she wanted to attend, but she had to put forth a good effort for the sake of her peers.

After dinner, the large assembly poured out into the square and gathered around a towering bonfire. She took a seat on a log bench to watch a band of Pottawatomie Indians perform dances that involved a great deal of arm flapping and foot pounding.

At the other end of the square, Quapaw warriors did tricks on horseback. Most of the Indian men wore an assortment of stovepipe or slouch hats bedecked with feather. White shirttails hung over breeches and buckskin leggings. A few had on black dress coats, while others sported red Garibaldi jackets trimmed with elaborate embroidery.

Had Buck been here, had he not been a deceiver, but rather the witty lover she longed for, they would have had a grand time at the festive exhibition. As it was, the hours dragged like an anchor pulled through silt.

The town dance that followed proved every bit as excruciating as the Indian display. Sweat broke out on her brow as merry couples blurred into a

weaving mass of colors and shapes. When had it gotten so hot?

She tipped her glass to swipe her tongue at the remaining drops of liquid. Charlie had seen to refills. Fire Rod didn't taste half bad, especially when followed by one of those peppermint candies.

Buck had tasted like peppermint when he'd kissed her that last time. He had a fondness for mint candy. Why did her face feel numb? She had hoped the liquor would dull the pain in her heart. Instead, she hiccuped, and what came out sounded like a sob. She had to get away from the celebrating throng before she dissolved into tears.

Amy leapt to her feet. She staggered away from the huge tent, desperate for fresh air. The sprightly music faded, as she veered in the direction of a dark line of trees. Light from torches set up around the tents didn't quite reach the far side of the field.

She cast a wary look around. The soldiers assigned to guard her for the evening were nowhere in sight. The last time she'd seen them, they'd been kicking up their heels, having a fine time. An acute longing sank its hooks into her. Buck would never have let her out of his sight. He'd always known precisely where she was.

She stumbled, but somehow stayed upright when her toe struck a sod clump, which reminded her of her visit with Mr. Murphy a week ago. She'd stood outside his sod house discussing the cooperative. She wasn't giving up that idea no matter where it came from.

Mr. Murphy had explained to her how Buck had risked his life to come to Kansas to help him because they were the only family each other had left. Family loyalty she understood. But why hadn't Buck trusted her enough to confide in her, once he'd come to know her better? Because allegiance to his cousin outweighed his feelings for her, whatever those might be.

A mischievous wind tugged at her hair and kicked up the crisp scent of alfalfa. The cool air eased the churning in her stomach, which helped to

clear her head. She braced herself against intruding thoughts that refused to be banished.

*Had Buck told the truth about his involvement in the Lawrence massacre?*

Anguish bloomed in her chest. In a sense, his motives for going on that raid troubled her more than his deception. He'd been out to exact revenge. She'd heard about the atrocities stemming from Senator Lane's raids into Missouri. Her father had assured her that his partner, then a general, had done only what was necessary. Was murder and rape necessary? Even so, Buck had chosen to pursue unspeakable violence. Yet, hadn't he been guided onto that path when he was little more than a boy?

Her emotions careened back and forth. She'd swear he wasn't a violent man, yet at one time he had been. Somewhere along the way, something must've changed him. Had Lawrence been the crucible that produced a different person? Or was she simply looking for someone that didn't exist? He'd taken her trust and her love, knowing all along his only intention was to stop her from succeeding. His deceit knew no bounds.

She slowed her steps, looked up into the heavens where darkness stretched out like a black robe bedecked with diamonds. From somewhere fairly close, coyotes yapped and howled. She shivered. Out on her own, she had to be on her guard. Fortunately, she'd tucked a small pistol into her reticule.

"Amy." A familiar drawl drifted out of the black shadows cast by swaying sycamores.

Her heart pounded harder when a shadow lengthened, becoming a man. He removed his hat. Moonlight reflected off his hair, turning it silver. The deceiver had returned.



Buck grabbed Amy's arm before she could flee. He took care not to hurt her, but he wouldn't allow her to escape before he could talk to her. He secured his hat, which he'd taken off so she could recognize him and not be frightened, and pulled her back toward the shadows. It didn't appear those soldiers had followed, but he'd be cautious nonetheless.

Something jabbed into his belly, right above his belt. He sucked in a sharp breath. "When did you start carrying a gun?"

"When I realized there might be a snake in the grass."

He swallowed the urge to laugh. It wasn't funny, but if he didn't hold onto his sense of humor, he would break down and bawl like a baby.

Rather than letting go of her, he eased his hold and ran his fingers up the back of her arms to her shoulders. His need for Amy was like his father's craving for whiskey. A gut-wrenching obsession that would get him killed if he couldn't stay away.

"If you're set on shooting me, I'd prefer you put a bullet through my heart. With a gut wound, I'd linger in pain for days before the infection got me. It's an awful way to die." He paused, recalling her last words to him. "Course, it could be you want me to suffer awhile before I give up the ghost."

"I'm not the one who leaves behind the wounded."

He stiffened at the bitterness in her voice. "You made your point. Go ahead and shoot me or put the damn thing away."

The pressure on his stomach let up. She stepped back, fumbling with her bag. When he reached out to reestablish the connection, she recoiled from his touch like he was diseased.

"Why are you here? What do you want?"

Her sharp questions pierced him. He had good reasons for following her. One not-so-good reason was that he simply couldn't stay away. The last two weeks had been pure hell. Every day, he couldn't get her out of his head, and every night, she visited him in dreams that turned into

nightmares. What did he want? He wanted to hold her. To beg her to forgive him or put him out of his misery.

In the darkness, he could barely make out her form. “I need to warn you.”

“Warn me? What about?”

He moved close enough to catch her fragrance and a fierce longing swamped him. It took every ounce of his willpower not to haul her up against him and kiss her senseless. He would act honorably, by God, even if it killed him. “Your railroad is going the wrong way.”

She tipped her head to one side. Her expression remained hidden in the dark. “What’s this? More lies?”

How the hell could he help her if she refused to believe a word he said?

“Why would I waste my time seeking you out just to lie to you? If I wanted to see you suffer, I’d let your boss figure out on his own that his track is being laid to the wrong marker.”

“What are you talking about?”

Now he had her attention.

“A couple days ago, some Indians showed Mr. Chanute a pile of stones and told him it was the boundary line. Your chief engineer figured he was so close to the border he laid off two crews. I found out those *Indians* were the Katy’s hired thugs dressed up. They showed Chanute an old survey marker, not the border. That’s another five miles south.”

“You were spying on our workers?”

Frustration gnawed at his insides. She would think the worst. And whose fault was that? His deception had destroyed her once-unshakable faith in him and had killed the fragile love he’d coaxed into bloom. “No. I’ve been laying track.”

“For *our* railroad?”

Who the hell did she think he’d be working for? He bit back the sharp retort. “It was after those Indians acted so friendly, I got suspicious. Did a



little investigating and found out the Katy hired Bob Greenwell. He's an old border fighter I knew back during the war. It was him and his boys who tricked Chanute." At her continued silence, Buck's temper boiled up. "You can take a mind to believe me or not. It's your choice."

"Why?" Her voice sounded shaky. "Why are you still around?"

Why indeed? There was no chance he'd earn her forgiveness. Didn't matter. He'd do everything in his power to save her fortune and ensure her safety.

While he'd been busy rounding up workers and slamming down rails, Sean had kept an eye on Amy. She'd gone whole hog on that cooperative idea, and had stayed in Girard to get a committee going. It remained to be seen whether her boss would turn loose of the land they'd need for stores and granaries and such. However, her hard work on behalf of the settlers had won her many new friends in the former Neutral Lands, Sean included. It gave Buck some comfort to know that once he was gone, his cousin would be on Amy's side instead of working against her.

He drew a steadying breath then released it, and raised his hands to entreat her. "I know I've given you no reason to trust me, but...Amy, I'm *trying* to help you."

"Why do you want to help me? You're my enemy."

Her accusation sliced his heart open.

"Sweet Jesus, Amy. I'm not your enemy."

She tipped her chin and the moonlight revealed her disbelief. "You tricked me. You deceived me. You worked against me. Worse, you rode with a pack of rabid dogs that killed my father. If that doesn't qualify us as enemies, I don't know what does."

Her words struck harder than his father's fists. However, her blows were ones he'd earned. He didn't try to block them, held his hands at his sides. "Nothing you say or do will make you my enemy."

"Not even turning you in?"

“No.” He sighed. “Not even that.” He didn’t expect otherwise. Hell, he didn’t deserve mercy because there’d been a time when he’d given none.

“I didn’t kill anybody in Lawrence, but it wasn’t because I was opposed to killing. I was just intent on catching the person I thought most deserved to die. It wasn’t until I saw what they were doing that I realized Quantrill intended to shoot down unarmed men and boys. Made me sick. They were acting worse than animals. Still, I refused to change my ways. I refused to let go of my hatred and bitterness until—” His heart pounded as he admitted his greatest humiliation. “Georgia, she was supposed to be my wife, but...she left me because she said I’d turned into a beast.”

All he could see was the top of Amy’s head because she was staring at his chest. Had she heard him? His shoulders slumped with resignation. There was nothing more he could say. He’d changed in ways she couldn’t imagine since that fateful day in Lawrence. But, as she’d pointed out, it was too late to open up and seek her understanding.

“You’re not a beast.” Her voice drifted up, soft, almost soothing. “But you’re still a liar—to me and to yourself.”

Her indictment landed a punch to the gut. He struggled to catch his breath. He could come up with every excuse in the world for his deception and it wouldn’t matter. His attempts to manipulate the truth, to control people and their effect on him, to avoid anything that smacked of vulnerability, were his downfall. He’d conquered his rage, but his pride and distrust had killed the only chance he had at being loved.

A screech echoed through the woods.

He reacted without a second thought, jerking Amy against him. He circled a protective arm around her with his other hand on his revolver. It was likely just an owl, but best to be cautious. Too many railroad men had been relieved of their earnings by thugs who saw them as easy pickings.

With his senses attuned to their surroundings, he peered into the dark woods then swept his gaze over a wide field where haystacks formed dark

mounds. On the far side, torches twinkled like fireflies. The high scrape of fiddles floated out of an open-sided tent crammed with revelers.

It came to him slowly that Amy hadn't moved out of his embrace. Perhaps only fear kept her there. Yet, her small sign of trust somehow lifted the heavy sorrow he'd been carrying.

He toyed with loose curls at the back of her neck and remembered how he'd run his fingers through the silky tresses while she'd lain naked in his arms. Saints, he *ached* for her, body and soul. He couldn't turn back the clock. All he could do now was to help her win the race, but they were running out of time.

"I'm telling you the truth about that boundary line. I know it's not worth much at this point, but I give you my word I won't mislead you or be anything but completely honest with you.

She made no response.

Regret mingled with frustrated longing. What had he expected, that she would believe him? Believe he was a man of honor?

Her hands splayed across his chest.

With a reluctant sigh, he released her before she could push him away.

She seemed to hesitate before she stepped back. Then again, he might've imagined it because he needed to believe she still wanted him. "Thank you for telling me about that trickery. I'll report this to Mr. Chanute. I'm sure we'll get things worked out. You don't need to stay around any longer."

Her final rejection swept away the last grain of hope. Where the hell would he go? Whatever semblance of a home he'd once had wasn't there anymore. No one waited for him, looking down a long road like the father in that story his mother had read to him as a boy. That sweet woman had been the only person who would've stood out in the hot sun, watching for him to come home. And she'd been gone a long time.

Since his mother's death, the closest he'd come to feeling like he belonged was with Amy. Now, she wanted no part of him. Just like Georgia. Only this was far worse. If losing Georgia had been painful, letting go of Amy was pure torture.

"I'll leave when I'm good and ready," he muttered.

"I'd prefer you leave now."

Despair struck with the precision of Siegel's artillery. In a desperate bid for survival, he dredged up resentment, smearing it over his wounds like a coating of tar. "I'm the least of your worries. You'd best figure out what you're going to do about Fletch. He's up to something. I'm certain he sent that Italian fellow after you, then killed the rascal so he couldn't tell."

Her head moved from side-to-side. "That poor man was deranged and thought he could get to Fletcher through me. Fletcher shot him because he posed a danger."

"Then why would Fletch hide the fact the man owed him money?"

"He was probably embarrassed and didn't want it to reflect badly on him."

Damn it, why was she still defending the bastard? "Your railroad agent's office has documents showing Bain bought upwards of a thousand prime acres around Girard and Baxter Springs. Expensive land. Did you loan him the money to buy it?"

"He told me he bought some land, but he's never asked me for money." She propped her hands on her hips in a gesture of aggravation. "Why do you continue to insist that Fletcher is involved in some kind of wrongdoing?"

Buck huffed in disbelief. It was her insistence on Bain's innocence that didn't make sense. She'd handpicked a husband who fit with her big plans. Pride had closed her mind to the possibility she'd been duped by a con man. "I may not have all the pieces arranged right, but my instincts tell me he ain't what he seems. You need to steer clear of him."

Her head jerked up and there was no mistaking the glare she gave him. “What I choose to do about that relationship is none of your business. I know he didn’t tell me the full truth, but...he’s not a criminal.”

*Like you.* Oh, she hadn’t said it, but she might as well have.

The fire he’d banked burst into flames, exploding through a wall of pent-up frustration. He snaked an arm around her waist and jerked her to him, covering her startled cry with a kiss.

*Lord have mercy.* She tasted like whiskey and candy.

He ground his lips against hers until she opened to him, and then he drank in her sweetness, feasting like a starved man who knew the banquet would soon disappear.



Amy’s head spun like she’d consumed an entire gallon of Fire Rod. Buck kissed her like there was no tomorrow—and there wasn’t. Not for them. Only, she couldn’t seem to make her traitorous body believe it. Her skin quivered. Her breasts ached where they were crushed against his chest. Deep inside, a tingling, insistent need coiled tighter, making that place at the juncture of her thighs throb with anticipation.

*God help her.* She was desperate for him and nothing mattered except the fact that he was here, and he would give her whatever she wanted.

Her arms slipped around his neck of their own volition. Her agonized plea slipped out on a moan. At the sound, he swept her into his arms and carried her behind a dark mound, where he tumbled her on her back into a pile of hay. He dropped down nearly on top of her. Between desperate kisses and whispered entreaties, he reached under her skirts and slipped his hand inside the slit in her drawers.

She gasped at his heated touch, yet couldn’t resist when his questing fingers teased open the petals of her sex. She was already moist with

anticipation.

“I won’t hurt you,” he murmured, leaning over her. “Just need to touch you.”

She gasped when he found the sensitive nub. His fingers delved, while his thumb worked with the accuracy of a sharpshooter. The intense sensations made her hips jerk, lifting her to his hand, while he circled and teased the tiny knot that seemed connected to every nerve in her body.

All rational thought fled under an onslaught of passion, fierce as a summer storm.

“Sweetheart—” His endearment came out in a choked voice. He kissed away tears that slipped from the corners of her eyes. “Ah, darlin’, don’t cry. I won’t hurt you.”

Why did he keep saying that? What he did to her body wasn’t hurtful. It was what he did to her heart. But he was relentless. Battering at her resistance. Shattering her defenses.

Passion tore her from her moorings and swept her out to sea. It tossed her on waves that rose higher and higher. Pleasure ripped through her, wrenching a strangled cry from her lips. A cry for mercy, and for more of what only he could give her.

He swallowed her pleas while kissing her with a ferocious appetite, pushing her release until he’d wrung fulfillment out of every pore. A moment later, he lifted up, unbuckled his gun belt and fumbled with the buttons on his trousers.

Her thoughts were slow, like molasses, in the aftermath of the shattering climax. This mind-numbing passion had been her mother’s undoing, and now the cycle repeated itself. She could no more control her wild hunger for this man than she could stop a stampeding herd of buffalo. He had captured her, enslaved her, and she’d gone willingly.

After he shoved up her skirts and petticoats, he braced himself over her. “Guide me inside you,” he rasped. Without hesitation, she clasped her

fingers around his throbbing length, positioned him, then gasped when he flexed his hips and slid into her body, stretching her, filling her. He was impossibly large, yet she enveloped all of him.

With her cradled in his arms, he began to rock. Slowly at first, then faster. His whole body shook. He groaned her name like he was in agony. The sound wrenched her heart. She reached around him, pulled up his shirt and pushed the trousers down past his thighs so she could stroke his heated skin and let him know she wanted him as badly as he wanted her.

The quivering sensation started, tightened the muscles in the sheath that held him, then fanned out over her body. Obeying some primitive urge, she thrust herself against his hips, driven by the need to assuage an unbearable ache. As her body pulsed, she was vaguely aware he'd lifted her legs with his arms and pinned her in a position that gave him complete control.

The moon shone behind him, casting a nimbus of light around his head. Like a fallen angel, he'd been sent to lead her down the path to hell. Hovering over her, he thrust slow, then fast, shallow, then deep, relentlessly driving her to another heart-stopping climax.

She gasped, as pleasure, sharp as pain, splintered her into a thousand pieces. He released her legs and plunged into her, filled her with hot bursts of his seed.

Amy held onto his trembling arms and stared at the indigo sky until thoughts emerged from the swirling sea of emotion. She had no self-discipline where Buck was concerned. No pride. Nothing but need. She was wanton, just like her mother. If he stayed, she would make this mistake over and over. Whether he intended it or not, she'd be utterly and completely ruined.

"Please..." Tears trickled out of the corners of her eyes and slid down her temples into her hair. "Please go."

"I can't," he gasped. "I need..." His breath blew hot against her ear before he raised his head. His eyes were hidden in shadows. "I need...to

make sure you're safe.”

*Safe?*

Her heart constricted into a tight knot of pain. Never had she doubted he could keep her safe, but who was going to protect her from her bodyguard?

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## CHAPTER 22



“*I* looked for you last night.” Fletcher held open the door to the hotel and followed Amy outside. She headed in the direction of a tent set up in the middle of the Baxter Springs town square where the festivities were scheduled to start up again. “Where were you? Charlie said you’d been at the dance, then you disappeared. I knocked on your door. You didn’t answer.”

Amy rubbed her temple, barely able to register what he was saying. Her head felt like an anvil or possibly the horseshoe. The pounding hadn’t let up, stealing her appetite, as well as her clarity of mind. What had she been thinking to let Charlie ply her with that homemade brew? She wouldn’t have been so easily seduced had her mind not been fogged with drink.

*Oh yes, you would have.*

Perhaps she’d stop listening to her conscience if it was going to turn against her.

“You weren’t ill, were you? Charlie told me you’d imbibed the local whiskey, and I know you’re not used to strong liquor.” Fletcher’s brows gathered in a concerned frown. His solicitude made her feel worse for what she had to do. She could put it off no longer.

“Can we take a walk? I can’t face that tent and all those people just yet.” He tucked her hand over his arm. “Of course, my dear.”

They wandered down Main Street passing by three taverns, the offices of the land agent, numerous lawyers, a doctor and an undertaker—an assortment that made sense only to those who lived in the area. Odd that there were no railroad workers on the streets. They were probably sleeping off last night's celebration.

It had been mid-morning by the time she'd awakened, after an endless night of tossing and turning. She'd fled from Buck when he'd pulled back to adjust his clothing after their unexpected tryst behind the haystack. He'd staggered after her, a few steps behind, buttoning his trousers, apparently realizing she didn't want him at her side.

After she'd gone inside the hotel and locked the door to her room, she'd seen him standing in the street staring up at her window. He must've been trailing her for some time if he knew exactly where she would be.

She shivered from a fever that had nothing to do with an excess of alcohol. Her heart was enslaved, and she had no idea how to free it other than to run away.

With effort, she forced Buck out of her mind and turned her attention to the man striding alongside her. How did one smoothly break an engagement?

"How did your trip turn out?" she asked.

Fletcher's mouth twisted in an expression of disgust. "That blasted Quapaw chief couldn't stay sober long enough to make it through negotiations. Now, Secretary Cox has set himself against us. He sent a telegram stating we are not authorized to enter Indian Territory except through Cherokee lands. I can't believe our contacts in Washington can't manage this better."

*Not authorized to enter...* His words soaked into her muddled brain. The toe of her shoe struck a stone in the road and she pitched forward.

Fletcher's hand shot out to grasp her arm. He steadied her. "Careful, sweeting. Do you need to return to the hotel and rest? You look very pale."

Implications toppled one against the other like a row of dominoes. If they weren't first across the legal border and weren't awarded the exclusive land grants, their railroad couldn't connect to lines going south into cattle country. The Border Tier would fade into history as a minor feeder route. The value of the surrounding land would be diminished, and her investments in the railroad and in businesses along the line would be forfeit.

Dread iced her insides. Dear God, she'd lose her fortune. Her father's dreams would blow away like dandelion seeds on the wind.

"Do you realize what this means?" She turned on Fletcher in her fury. "We're allowing ourselves to become distracted by a premature party while the Katy lays track. And *they* are on the *right* path."

He cupped her shoulders. "Calm down. We're not going to lose the race. The Katy is weeks behind, and they'll never be certified as a first-class railroad. Not with the way they're slamming down rails directly on the prairie."

She wrenched out of his grasp. "They aren't weeks behind. They're not even days behind. And Governor Harvey has made it clear he'll certify the first line to reach the border. The *legitimate* border, which we veered away from."

Fletcher reached for her again. When she moved away, he diverted his hand to tug at the end of his coat sleeve, as if that were his intention all along. "You supported the governor's political campaign. He was a good friend of your father. Surely you can call in a favor and ask him not to certify the Katy, if they manage to cross before we do."

"It's not as easy as that. The governor generally does things because they're politically advantageous. I'm not sure he'd consider granting more favors to Mr. Joy a wise political move, given the grievances of his constituency."

Fletcher licked his lips. "Yes, well, there's no need to panic. Perhaps the governor would grant you a boon as a wedding present."

Amy squared her shoulders. It was time to end this. There was no way to make it painless. Like pulling a tooth, it was best done quickly. "I'm sorry, Fletcher, but I cannot marry you."

The blank look that wiped his face made her wonder whether she'd spoken the words or just thought them. He blinked, then a storm gathered in his eyes. "You've had a trying night and you aren't thinking clearly. Let's discuss this when you're not overset."

"I am not overset. My mind is working fine." Relief washed over her. Soon, this would be behind them, they could get on with their lives. It was the best thing for both of them.

Fletcher didn't look relieved. "This is because of that argument we had, isn't it? Amy, that was a difficult day for both of us. I sent you an apology."

"It's not because of an argument. I can't marry without trust, without love."

"What do you mean?" He frowned. "What have I done to warrant your distrust?"

How could he stand there and put on an innocent act?

"You didn't tell me the man who attacked me had borrowed money from your bank. In fact, you implied you had never seen him before that day you shot him."

Fletcher opened his mouth. At first, nothing came out. "I-I'm sorry," he stammered, before he lunged for her hand. "I should've told you, but...I thought it would reflect badly on my judgment. I had to foreclose when he couldn't make payments on his loan. He'd threatened me. I had no idea he would go after you."

"Why didn't you just tell me? I wouldn't have thought poorly of you because you made a bad loan." She pulled her hand away. Was she so untrustworthy? Both men claiming to care for her seemed to think so. "That's not why I'm crying off. I don't love you. I won't condemn both of us to an unhappy marriage."

“But, my dear...” He took a step closer, his face tightened in an expression she recognized as restrained anger. “You said yourself you were willing to nurture affection. I promise I’ll never hide anything from you again.”

She shuffled her feet to back away. “I’m sorry. I can’t marry you. Believe me, you’ll thank me one day when you’re married to a woman who loves you and has a whole heart to give you.”

His eyes darkened to almost black, which made him look like a wild creature.

Nervous, she glanced around. They’d left the main part of town. Thick woods hemmed them in on either side. “Let’s go back. The speeches will start soon.”

“You *will* marry me.” He grabbed her upper arms.

She twisted to free herself from the surprisingly strong grip. “Let me go,” she commanded, trying not to show her alarm.

Instead, he shook her. “You can’t cry off after leading me on tenterhooks all this time.” His fingers dug into her flesh.

“Stop it! You’re hurting me.”

“I’ll show you hurt,” he ground out through clenched teeth.

He crushed her against him, gripped her hair and yanked her head back, then smothered her startled cry with his mouth. His teeth struck her lip, inflicting pain.

Oh God. Was he going to force himself on her?

The metallic taste of blood mingled with fear. On a surge of panic, she struggled against his painful hold.

Then, he was gone. Flying across the road.

A buckskin coat flashed across her line of vision.

“Buck?” His name came out on a relieved whisper.

Like an avenging angel, he’d stepped out of thin air to rescue her. His icy gaze locked onto her bleeding mouth. Fury twisted his features.

In two steps, he'd grabbed the stunned man, lifted him off the ground by his snowy shirt and slammed a fist into his face.

A bright red stream spurted from Fletcher's nose. He flailed his arms and toppled onto his backside only to be hauled up again by the larger man, who drew a gun, cocked it, then pressed the tip of the barrel to Fletcher's forehead.

His eyes widened in terror.

"No!" Amy dashed to Buck's side and took his arm. As badly as Fletcher had treated her, he didn't deserve to die. Not to mention, the last thing Buck needed was more blood on his hands.

He turned his head to look at her without releasing his fisted hold on the other man's collar. The wintry chill in his eyes made her tremble. Not because she feared him. He was her protector, her rescuer, a guardian sent to watch over her. But at this moment, he looked like a killer.

She forced her voice to remain calm. "Let him go, Buck. This isn't worth your life."

It seemed an eternity before he slowly let down the hammer and holstered his gun. He shoved the frightened man away from him. "If you so much as lay a finger on her, I'll hunt you down, strip the flesh from your worthless carcass, and feed it to the vultures."

Amy shivered at Buck's dispassionate tone. She didn't doubt he would carry through on such a threat. He must've followed them out here. Yet, he hadn't interfered until she'd been threatened. His fury had been ignited by an urge to protect her.

Fletcher drew a handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped at the bright blood still oozing from his nose, and eyes narrowed. "You have no right..."

He hurriedly backed away as Buck surged forward.

She leapt between them and held back the larger man. "Fletcher, you need to leave. Go back to town."

His face scrunched into a frown. "I don't think you ought to—"

“Then don’t think, just go.”

Fletcher’s mouth snapped shut. After a moment, he walked away with a stiff limp. Buck had heaved him through the air as if he weighed no more than a rag doll, even though she’d been struggling to get out of his grip.

She looked up into her savior’s stern features. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He said it softly, like a gentleman would if he’d done her a favor.

A moment ago, Buck had gone after Fletcher like a bear stirred to rage. Now, he held her so tenderly, as though he was well aware of how easily he could hurt her. Which was the real man? Or was he both?

Her enemy was her guardian. The deceiver had kept his word to keep her safe. How she ought to feel about him had no bearing whatsoever on what she felt.

She would be a fool to give in to her desires. That way of thinking had led her to a love tarnished with lies and tainted with an irrevocable past.

“You need to go.” She had to send him away before her resistance crumbled. “Fletcher will make trouble for you.”

“He won’t if he enjoys breathing.”

She tightened her hold on his arms. Who would watch over this stubborn man once she was no longer part of his life? “You don’t need another death on your conscience. Promise me you won’t kill him.”

Buck’s gaze roved her face, the crease deepening between his brows. “I won’t kill him unless I have to.” He pressed her against his chest and laid his cheek on her hair. The familiar scent of his clothes and his solid warmth made her lightheaded with longing, and grief. If he’d been with Quantrill’s raiders, he still had a price on his head. She couldn’t hold onto him even if she wanted to.

After a moment, he cupped her face in his hand and nudged her chin up with the edge of his thumb. The ice in his gaze had melted and his eyes

warmed to the color of a fading summer sky. “I won’t let him hurt you. I won’t let anybody hurt you.”

She trembled at a frisson of fear. Even if she could find the strength to forgive him, those less merciful would hunt him down. She couldn’t allow him to gain another toehold. He would scale the tower and woo her out of her lonely keep, only to be cast to his death on the rocks below. She had to convince him to leave and never return.

“You can’t protect me forever. You’re not my bodyguard anymore.”

“I don’t have to be your bodyguard to protect you.”

She steeled her resolve despite the suffocating tightness in her chest. “Buck, you can’t change the past. No matter how much track you lay. I don’t need an outlaw who’s deluded himself into thinking he’s a white knight.”

His eyes froze over, but not before she saw that her shot had struck true. Her breath hitched on a welter of pain and regret. It was for the best to end this quickly. So why did it feel as though she’d left him with a gut wound?

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## CHAPTER 23



*May 25, 1870*

*Fort Scott, Kansas*

“*M*r. Bain, he come callin’ again.”

Amy glanced up from where she’d been working at her desk. Jacob, who’d come upstairs to inform her, wore an irritated frown. It was the fourth time Fletcher had come by in the past week. There had been at least a dozen missives begging for forgiveness.

“Tell him I’m not seeing visitors today.”

Jacob nodded. He vanished from the doorway, his brisk steps sounded on the stairs. He’d get rid of the pest.

Amy shook her head in disgust. Fletcher couldn’t possibly believe she would still consider him for marriage. At this point, he’d be lucky to retain her business. His badgering, however, was the least of her worries. Her stomach sank when she dropped her gaze to the letter she held. She scanned the lines, hoped they’d somehow read differently.

Mr. Joy had turned down the Cooperative Society’s proposal with a curt note that he’d not be fooled into giving charity to a bogus organization.

*Bogus? The nerve of that man.*

She drummed her pencil on the desk. On top of this, more bad news. The Border Tier, short on workers and behind schedule, furiously zigzagged its way across the border, hoping to beat the MK&T to the legal crossing point in the Neosho Valley. Based on the latest report, the race was all but lost.

She took a deep breath to firm her resolve. There was still time to get a request to the governor, who owed her a favor. If the Katy's line was poorly constructed, he might refuse them certification. This would give the Border Tier time to catch up.

If that didn't work, she would find another way to achieve her goals. Buck was right when he said what she really wanted was to make life better for more people, not just a few rich investors. Mr. Joy might not want to support the Cooperative Society, but that didn't mean she would give up on the idea. It was exactly the kind of thing her father would have leapt on. She'd held back a little cash in reserve. If she was careful, she could make a small investment and interest others in joining.

*First things first.* She would send a letter to the governor with a request that an investigation be made into the construction of the Katy's line before certification proceeded.

She opened a drawer to pull out a piece of paper. At a firm knock, she lifted her head.

Jacob had returned. This time, with an apologetic smile. "Mr. Bain's got the sheriff with him. Says they gotta see you."

"Oh, good heavens." She shoved her chair back and stood up. "What now? And why is the sheriff with him? I'll meet with them in the front parlor."

Jacob dipped his chin in acknowledgement. "Yes'm." He stepped aside as she exited the office. "I'll be here to protect you, Miz Amy. Don't you worry none."

Amy smiled warmly at the burly groomsman. When he wasn't tending horses, he'd stationed himself inside the house. It wouldn't be the first time he'd risked himself to aid her, which was why she hadn't told him, or anyone else, about Fletcher's assault, saying only that she had broken their engagement and her betrothed had taken it poorly. But her two insightful caretakers had figured out enough on their own. One or the other always seemed to be within earshot.

"I'll be fine. Tell Sophie we won't need any refreshments. I plan to get rid of these gentlemen as quickly as possible." She lifted her skirts and hurried down the stairs, taking a right turn through an arched entry into the formal parlor.

Fletcher got up from where he'd been sitting in one of two cushioned chairs by the fireplace. She afforded him barely a glance.

The sheriff stood more slowly. His thin lips stretched into a smile that didn't touch the rest of his face. "Hope we're not disturbing you, ma'am." His officious tone indicated he could care less. "Mr. Bain thought you might know something."

"Know something?" Her heart tripped with unease. "About what?"

"Somebody robbed the bank early this morning. Only Mr. Bain was there. The robber held a gun on him, made him give over all the money in the safe. Thirty thousand dollars."

Shock rooted her to the floor. All her blood in her face drained out of her feet. Her cash was in that bank, nearly every penny. She shifted her horrified gaze to Fletcher.

"I was caught by surprise in my office when I came in early to do some work." He gripped the lapels of his coat tightly. "The fiend had a bandana over his face. The brim of his hat was pulled low over his eyes, but I could see blond hair. And his voice had a distinctive drawl. It was O'Connor. I'm sure of it."

“No!” The denial burst out. Every fiber of her being rebelled. Buck wouldn’t do this. Not here. Not after... There had to be some mistake.

She took a deep breath to calm her riotous nerves before she met the sheriff’s narrowed gaze. “Mr. O’Connor couldn’t have robbed the bank. He hasn’t been in Fort Scott for weeks.”

“Do you know where he is?”

Goosebumps prickled her arms. Even if she knew where Buck was, she would never tell. “He was in Baxter Springs, working with a railroad crew last I saw him. I’m sure he’s gone back to Texas by now.”

Stiff with anger, she swung her attention to Fletcher. Someone with a bone to pick had robbed that bank. He was letting his hatred for Buck blind him to the real culprit. “Were there other witnesses?”

A dull flush suffused Fletcher’s neck. He tipped his chin at an offended angle. “One of our clerks on his way to work saw him as he left the building.”

“That’s right,” the sheriff chimed in. “Mr. Bowen said a tall man with longish blond hair rushed out of the bank. He threw a sack over the back of a horse and raced off down the street. Other folks saw him as well. Nobody got a good look at his face because he still had that scarf pulled up, but they said he was armed to the teeth. Looked like a bushwhacker.”

A sudden chill shook her. Had word of Buck’s past gotten out? Sanford might have spread it around if he’d decided his hired gun had turned on him. It would take a simple check to find Buck’s name amongst the men listed as wanted for the Lawrence massacre. And now a bank robbery would be added to his sins. Should they catch him, the trial—if he got one—would be swift and the outcome certain. He’d hang.

Somehow, she had to get word to him to flee.

“I don’t believe Mr. O’Connor would do this. Even if he were prone to robbing a bank—which he isn’t—he’s intelligent enough not to pick a place he’d be so easily recognized.”

“Unless he didn’t intend to come back.” The sheriff eyed her in a way that made her skin crawl. “Mr. Bain here tells me you fired him. Must’ve had a reason.”

She met the lawman’s flinty gaze. “I no longer required his assistance after the major posted guards. I had no concerns about Mr. O’Connor’s character.”

With a start, she realized this was true. Deep down, she’d always trusted Buck. Even after he’d admitted to duplicity and owned up to his past, a part of her still believed in him. Her eyes slid to her former betrothed and her instincts hummed a warning.

Fletcher’s nostrils flared. Resentment flickered in his eyes.

Why, he was *lying*, the scoundrel. What did he hope to accomplish by blaming this robbery on Buck? Revenge for being humiliated?

Her mind flipped back to something the sheriff had said earlier. “What kind of horse?”

The lawman frowned. “Pardon?”

“What kind of horse did the robber ride?”

The sheriff darted a quick glance at Fletcher. “Didn’t Bowen say it was a bay?”

Her lips curved with satisfaction. “Buck rides a big gray roan.”

“Maybe the bay was meant to throw us off.” Fletcher met her gaze with a black stare. “If he rode that other horse he might as well advertise he was coming.”

“Yet, he walked into the bank with only a scarf covering his face.” She arched an eyebrow.

Fletcher scowled. Apparently, this inconsistency hadn’t occurred to him.

Amy squared her shoulders with renewed confidence. “It appears someone might want you to believe Mr. O’Connor robbed the bank, however I—”

“There ain’t no doubt it’s O’Connor.” The sheriff dismissed her with a wave of his hand. “Mr. Bain here thinks he might try to contact you, seeing he’s sweet on you.”

Amy forced her expression into neutrality. Was this stupid man even aware he’d contradicted himself? If Buck planned on never returning, why would he contact her? Perhaps the sheriff was too lazy to pursue a real investigation. Or he’d made up his mind because he’d gotten wind of Buck’s past. Or, worse, he was in cahoots with Fletcher. The best course at this point was to play along until she figured out what was going on.

“Mr. O’Connor did show an interest in me. I told him I never wanted to see him again.”

The sheriff hooked his thumbs over his gun belt. “Too bad O’Connor didn’t heed your warning. We’ve put out posters. I’ve telegraphed the sheriffs south of here to alert them. We want to catch him before he gets back to whatever hole he crawled out of. In the meantime, we’ll keep an eye on this place.” His lips tipped up in a cold smile. “You understand. We just want to make sure you’re safe.”



Later that night, unable to sleep, Amy pulled on a light robe and tiptoed to the office to finish some work. It’d been a week since the robbery. In that time, Fletcher and his lawman friend had convinced everyone of Buck’s guilt. Everyone except her. Although the evidence was stacked against him, it didn’t fit with what her heart told her.

Her breath hitched. That heart of hers had gotten downright insistent these past few weeks. After being starved for so long, perhaps it decided it would no longer be ignored. She dared not place her faith in the faulty organ, except her judgment had failed, as well.

Where did that leave her? Should she entrust her destiny to an inscrutable God? He'd put an enemy in her path, a scarred man with a wounded soul. A lonely man who needed her love—and forgiveness.

She squeezed back tears, remembering Buck's face after he had delivered her safely back to the hotel in Baxter Springs. The longing in his eyes, the grief and remorse, it was all there for her to see. He didn't even try to hide it.

He'd accepted his culpability in her downfall, in the emotional wreckage left in the wake of his deception, not to mention his damning past. Over the last few weeks, he'd been trying, in his own way, to make up for it. But he couldn't. Not in a million years.

Tears slipped out of the corners of her eyes. "God..." She tried to pray, but couldn't seem to speak the words. Behind her breastbone something cracked open, releasing a torrent of anguish. She put her face into her hands, her shoulders shook as grief and loneliness erupted in great, gasping sobs that seemed to go on and on.

She loved Buck. Nothing would change that. Not his deception. Not his desperate attempts to control everything and everyone around him. Not even his violent past. But loving him wasn't going to bring her peace. She had to *forgive* him.

Even if she never saw him again, never got to tell him, this was what she had to do to be able to move on. "Help me forgive him," she prayed. "You brought him into my life, now you have to help me forgive him."

She gasped at what felt like a tender touch. Warmth poured through her, along with an overwhelming sense of love. The miraculous flood filled her heart. It washed away bitterness, grief, loneliness, and her terrible fears. Peace settled over her, as light as morning dew.

How she wished she could somehow share the experience with Buck. He needed peace even more than she did. She dug into the pocket of her

robe for her handkerchief and wiped her face. God willing, she would never see him again. He would remain safe.

Resigned, she turned her attention back to the task at hand. The problem she had to solve before seeking her rest.

Yesterday afternoon Fletcher had finally delivered the audit she'd requested after she'd threatened to tell everyone she knew he was holding out on her. He'd been furious, but she'd gotten what she wanted.

At first glance, nothing appeared amiss. But after she'd checked more thoroughly, she had noted slight discrepancies between his statement and her records. Just tonight, she'd finished double-checking her entries going back a full year. Her math was spot on. It wasn't a miscalculation or transposed numbers.

*I may not have all the pieces arranged right, but my instincts tell me he ain't what he seems.*

Buck's comment came back to her, along with an awful awareness of what she'd been missing—or ignoring—in her refusal to admit she was wrong about Fletcher's character.

Fletcher had tinkered with the books, probably to cover the fact that he was siphoning off funds.

She mentally arranged the pieces. He'd admitted to making bad loans. Had that resulted in personal losses? That being the case, he'd likely dipped into her funds to finance his purchase of those large tracts of land, betting on a windfall after the railroad became the foremost route into Texas. When it became apparent the Border Tier would lose the race, he must've panicked. He might debate her numbers against his, but he couldn't hide his misdeeds if he couldn't produce the funds. A bank robbery would explain the missing money.

Amy slammed her hand onto the desk. "*Damn him.*"

They had both staked their future on this railroad. But he had sacrificed his integrity.



She got up from her seat and paced in front of the bookshelf. How much of her money had Fletcher stolen and for how long? Had he been playing a shell game, constantly moving funds around until there was nothing left to move? That would explain why he was in such a hurry to gain some degree of control over her finances.

Another piece fell into place. Had he, as Buck suggested, sent that attacker after her to frighten her into marrying him sooner? Now, it made sense.

She stiffened her spine. By God, she would figure out a way to expose him. He wouldn't get away with stealing from her then put the blame on Buck.

Something scraped. A noise from downstairs. Was Sophie up? If so, why hadn't she come by, as was her usual habit?

Amy cocked her head to listen. She could hear nothing other than her own heartbeat. Maybe she had imagined the sound.

There it came again. A bump, like something had fallen.

She slid open a drawer to withdraw her pistol. After lighting a candle, she tiptoed downstairs to the dark first floor. It was probably nothing. Maybe a mouse, or one of the guards Major Roy had posted outside the house. It could be that sneaky sheriff. Lawson seemed convinced Buck would return. He wouldn't be so foolish.

At the bottom of the stairs, she lifted the candlestick, held her breath and entered the parlor. The flickering light cast eerie shadows on the walls. Her gaze swept the room until it stopped at a fluttering curtain. Sophie must have left a window open to relieve the heat.

Next to a side table, a lamp lay on the floor.

Amy released her pent-up breath. The breeze was the culprit.

She set down the candle, bent over to reach for the lamp. *Wait.* The table, it was at the wrong angle.

Goosebumps prickled her skin.

The breeze couldn't have done that.



Buck knew the moment Amy realized she wasn't alone in that room.

As she stood, he wrapped an arm around her, pulled her back against him and covered her mouth.

She went rigid in his arms. He hated frightening her, but he couldn't very well stroll in through the front door.

"It's only me." He took her gun. Damn thing wasn't even cocked. "You won't scream if I let you go, will you?"

She shook her head.

He released her.

She shot out of his arms and spun around. "What are you doing here? Didn't Mr. Murphy give you my message?"

"He did. I thank you for that." Buck studied her face. Her obvious anger fed a tortuous uncertainty that had weighed on him in the days and nights it'd taken to make the return journey. Was she unhappy because he'd ignored her instructions or displeased because he'd dared to show his face again?

The fact she cared enough to warn him to flee had, ironically, spurred the opposite behavior. Probably, he'd read something between those few lines that simply wasn't there. God knew he'd done all he could do for her. Sean had called him every kind of a fool to not heed her warning.

"The sheriff's men are watching the house," she whispered. "I can't believe they didn't see you." Her fingers fluttered up to the looped frogs that secured the silken robe.

Desire knifed through him, followed by a wrenching guilt. He was low for even thinking about bedding her after he'd damn near raped her the night of the celebration.

“I came in through the woods. Stayed off the roads. Didn’t see anybody, except one of your guards. He’s fast asleep by the side entrance.” Buck clenched his jaw in frustration. That he’d found the guard asleep had been fortuitous. Still, it made him furious. No one cared for Amy’s safety more than he did. No one would protect her as diligently. Yet, he couldn’t ensure her security and evade capture at the same time.

Even if Sean produced witnesses who could vouch for his whereabouts the day of the robbery, he still couldn’t remain in Kansas. His ill-conceived decision to seek revenge at all costs had taken away that choice and made it impossible for Amy to love him.

He blinked down at her, misery making his eyes burn and his insides quiver with disgusting weakness. Her tight expression shifted, become gentler. She looked almost relieved to see him. Maybe even a little bit glad?

“There’s a reward out for your capture. You should be far away from here. Why did you come back?” Her voice caressed him. She didn’t sound angry as much as worried.

He fought an unmanly urge to weep. Throughout the war, even long after, he’d stayed alive because he knew when to stand and when to run. But for once, he couldn’t retreat. Love called him to her side. There was no escape.

Unable to resist, he ventured a half step toward her, tortured himself with a closeness that might have been. “I came to warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“Fletcher set me up.” He rushed ahead before she could accuse him of deceit. “You recall that big blond fellow at the bank? Charlie and me saw him in a saloon with Fletcher a few days after he shot that musician. Clay Thornton is his name. With a scarf on his face, he could fool people into thinking he’s me. I don’t have proof, but I’m convinced Fletch stole money from his own bank and covered it up by arranging a robbery. You can’t trust

him, Amy. He's got to be desperate to do something like that. A desperate man will do anything to save himself."

Buck held his breath, awaiting her response.

She studied him for a moment. "Are you here...to kill Fletcher?"

Disappointment threaded through him. Did she really think revenge had driven him to ride all this way, take such a risk? He wasn't a cold-blooded killer. He sure as hell wasn't a white knight, either. Contrary to what she thought, he had no delusions about the color of his armor, much as he longed for her to see him as her hero. Self-loathing turned his stomach. How could a lying, worthless outlaw be anybody's idea of a hero?

He forced his features to remain impassive so she couldn't see how pathetic he'd become. "I won't stand by and let him harm you. But I'm not out for revenge."

Her silence and the anxious look on her face made him wonder whether she believed him, whether she would ever believe him again.

He struggled to erect the old defenses. It was no good. He simply couldn't protect his heart against her anymore. He dropped the mask. "Amy, I know you think I'm the lowest kind of scum, but I didn't rob that—"

"Hush." She pressed her fingers to his lips. "I don't think any such thing. You don't have to convince me of your innocence. I know you didn't do it."

"You do?" His heart hammered. Could she feel him trembling, conquered by her soft touch and the even softer look in her eyes?

Her fingers brushed a light stroke over his mouth before her hand fell away.

Every muscle in his body tensed with desire. He resisted taking her into his arms. His face bristled with stubble and his clothes carried two weeks' worth of dirt.

"I know you're not a criminal." Her eyes grew bright. "Buck, I didn't mean those things I told you before. I only said it to make you leave,

because I knew you'd continue to follow me, to your own detriment. I can't resist you. Even though I know it's crazy to let passion override my common sense."

Dismay swamped his heart. "You're a passionate woman, Amy. It's not bad to be that way. There's not a thing wrong with your common sense. Don't think poorly of yourself. I ambushed you. Got past your defenses. It's what I'm good at."

"Like what happened in Lawrence?" Her question stabbed him in the heart. She still thought he'd lied about his part in that raid.

"I didn't kill your father," he said in an agonized whisper.

Her chest heaved like she was struggling with some internal battle. After a moment, she straightened her shoulders and looked him in the eye. "I believe you. More than that, I forgive you—for everything. I think you need that more than you need me to believe any explanation."

Shock sucked the air right out of him. He got lightheaded before he realized he hadn't taken a breath. His startled mind couldn't wrap itself around what she'd said, but his heart understood. She offered him pardon with no strings attached.

"Amy, I..." his voice trailed off. What the hell could he say? He'd done nothing to earn this, could never even the scales or repay the debt. Her forgiveness was a gift, pure and simple.

The heaviness he'd been carrying dropped away like he'd shed a ton weight. It gave him such a giddy sense of release his knees grew weak. Amy had to be an angel sent to save him, offering grace and shedding a light on the man he'd once hoped to be. He struggled to find words to express what he felt. If he spoke, he'd soon be blubbing.

She touched his sleeve. "You didn't have to come back to tell me about Fletcher. I know what he's up to. He'll be stopped...but not by you. You have to leave." Her voice cracked. "Before you're caught."

Tears spilled from her eyes and slid in diamond drops down her cheeks.

He couldn't take it. He dragged her into his arms and buried his face in her hair, breathed in her sweet scent. "Don't cry, Amy honey. I can't bear it when you cry."

"Oh, Buck." She looped her arms around his neck and hungrily sought his mouth.

His heart galloped like a runaway horse. God help him. He was saved and he was lost. Had he thought he'd been in love before? What he'd felt then didn't begin to describe this soaring of his soul, this breathless exhilaration. It was like dropping into cool water on a hot summer day. Flying on the back of a fast horse. Taking a leap from a high loft into a pile of sweet hay. He couldn't promise her the future, couldn't take her upstairs and pour himself out, but he could kiss her and show her how much he loved her.

He lifted her in his arms, then sat down on the couch to cradle her in his lap.

Shattering glass exploded into the room.

He thrust her to the floor and covered her with his body.

*What the hell?*

Buck scanned the room. A rock lay on the floor. The curtain fluttered in a broken window.

"O'Connor," a deep voice shouted. "We know you're in there. Come out with your hands up. Nobody gets hurt if you cooperate."

Beneath him, Amy squirmed. "Let me up. It's the sheriff."

Buck whipped out a revolver. He hauled her behind the couch. Cursed himself for letting his heart rule his head. By coming here, he'd brought trouble right to her doorstep. "Stay put."

He heard her whispered objection as he crept away.

"Shh." He needed to see how many men were outside, calculate the odds of getting away without drawing fire toward the house. He hid beside the window and peeked outside.

A sea of flickering torches lit the night.

His heart jumped into his throat. The whole damn town had turned out to catch him.

He leaned against the wall. Tasted the familiar tang that came from living on the knife's edge of danger. He'd gotten out of too many scrapes to remember, mostly through audacious exploits only a cocky young fool would attempt. He was no longer young. He was too humbled to be cocky. Mostly, he had someone else to think about. Someone whose life was worth a hundred times his.

Amy peered at him from behind the couch, her face ghostly in the light.

He had to put that candle out so no one could see them and venture a shot. In two strides, he reached the table to snuff the flame, which cast the room into darkness. He dropped to his knees and wrapped an arm around her. "Looks like they brought the welcoming committee."

She turned her face into the crook of his shoulder. "Don't joke. It's not funny."

"We ain't givin' you all night," the sheriff called out. "We got troops out here, all around the house. You can't get away."

Amy tugged at his shirt. "You have to get out of here. I'll show you a way through the lower floor. There's a small window. I think you can squeeze through."

"Miz Amy?" Jacob's voice drifted down from the stairway.

Buck frowned with concern. The last thing he needed was *another* person to worry about. He put his lips to Amy's ear. "Tell him to go back to his room and stay there."

"I'm all right, Jacob," she called out. "You and Sophie stay upstairs."

"Don't know as I can do that."

*Impertinent cuss.* Those men outside wouldn't think twice about shooting him if he got in the way. "Get the hell upstairs, Jacob," Buck bellowed. "I won't let Amy come to harm."

“Better not. I’d have to hurt you if that happened.” Jacob’s slow steps grew more distant. He was obeying orders, but not because he wanted to.

Noise came from the porch. It sounded like an army had fanned out across the front of the house. Buck tensed at a thump on the front door.

“You got two minutes to come out with your hands up. Or we’ll bust down the door.”

That blasted lawman wasn’t long on patience.

Buck sighed out his anxiousness. He breathed in a resigned sense of the inevitable. That lynch mob had circled the house. They’d soon grow brave enough move in and hammer down the door. He couldn’t fire, invite a bloodbath. He also couldn’t run and risk being shot at. Amy could be caught in the crossfire.

He holstered his gun.

“Wait here.” He patted her shoulder and stood to move toward the front hallway. They’d likely shoot him like a rabid dog. He’d do his damndest to make this a peaceful surrender.

“No,” Amy rushed in front of him. Nearly gave him a heart attack.

He grabbed her, hauled her back into the parlor, and thrust her into the place he’d put her before. “I told you to stay here. Let me handle this. I don’t trust they won’t shoot first and ask questions later.”

She held onto his arms. Her eyes glistened with fear. “You can’t go out there. They’ll kill you. The sheriff, I think he’s in this thing with Fletcher. Let me go out. While I talk to them, you can get away.”

Buck swallowed his sadness. “My horse is tethered in the woods. Even if I get out that window, with all those soldiers out there, somebody’s bound to see me. They’ll shoot me in the back before I ever make the trees. Worse, they might get excited and start shooting at the house. I can’t risk it. I got to give myself up.”

At the emphatic shake of her head, he detached her hands from his arms and held them between his. He had to convince her this was the only way.



“They won’t hang me right off.” He hoped. “We’ll have time to rustle up some folks who’ll testify to my whereabouts the day of that robbery.” He gave her a stern look. “But don’t you dare challenge Fletcher on your own. Get somebody to help you. Go to Major Roy. He seems a decent enough fellow.”

Buck started for the door.

She dashed in front of him, dodged his attempts to grab her, darting about like a squirrel.

“Stop that. You’ll get us both killed.” He snagged her gown to reel her in.

She wrapped her arms around him. “I will not let go. You might as well accept it. We go out together or not at all.”

“Damn it, Amy, you’re as hardheaded as a nanny goat.” He unbuckled his gun belt and handed it to her. “All right. Take me out at gunpoint. That way, they won’t feel threatened. After we’re outside, you get away. I mean it. I’ll tan your hide if you throw yourself in front of me.”

“You won’t touch a hair on my head.”

It was aggravating how well she knew him.

She placed the barrel of the revolver to his back, but didn’t cock it. “I’m bringing him out,” she shouted. “For God’s sake, don’t shoot.”

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## CHAPTER 24



Clouds drifted past the moon until its pale light shone on the deserted street. Amy cast a furtive glance over her shoulder before she slipped between the large wooden doors at the front of the bank.

Fletcher's servants hadn't batted an eye when she'd gone by his house with the excuse she needed to retrieve something important she'd left in his study. She just failed to mention it was keys.

He'd gone to a railroad meeting in a neighboring town and wouldn't return home this evening, which would give her time to find the evidence she sought before he discovered what she was up to.

Her hands shook as she held the lantern aloft. The bank looked spooky when it was dark and deserted. She hurried to the back. Her footsteps echoed in the cavernous interior.

She would bet that Fletcher had stashed a second set of records with the accurate accounting. As precise as he was, it would be like him to do that. He would keep track to be sure any discrepancies could be cleaned up later.

At his office, she slipped a second key into the lock, turned it, and heard a satisfying click. She had to move fast. Tempers had flared since Buck's arrest the previous day. She wouldn't put it past that sheriff to let the crowd lynch his prisoner before a trial. Risky as it was to come here, she couldn't

afford to wait. Something had to be done to shift public attention to Fletcher's misdeeds before vigilante mentality took over.

Buck would be furious if he knew she'd put herself in danger. But the sight of him being bound and led away by that horrid sheriff had firmed her resolve. He wouldn't hang for crimes he didn't commit, past or present. He might have given up on himself, but she loved him too much to give him up. She would break every rule, play every chip, sell everything she owned, whatever it took, to win his freedom.

The pungent scent of cigars greeted her in Fletcher's office. The room appeared empty. Her light fell on the ornate desk. If it'd been built to the same specifications as her father's, there would be a hidden compartment on the side.

Her lantern went on the top, along with her reticule. A small pistol she'd tucked inside made a thump. Likely, she wouldn't need it, but she hadn't been willing to leave home without protection.

She squatted to reach the underside of the desk and ran her hand beneath until her fingers touched a latch. Tripping it released a side door disguised by a band of scrollwork. She held her breath as she reached into the compartment.

"Bravo," she whispered, when she found a notebook.

She flipped through the pages, took note of the large debits. Even if Charlie Goodlander couldn't track down the blond man he and Buck had seen, she now had proof of Fletcher's embezzlement.

The door creaked.

She jerked to her feet and thrust the notebook behind her.

Fletcher stood inside the door with a feigned expression of surprise. "I must say, I didn't expect to find you here, my dear. When you didn't show up for the railroad meeting, I became worried. I heard you weren't feeling well, but my servants said you looked spry as usual when you stopped by the house."

She darted a glance at her reticule. If she lunged, she might be able to reach it. Still, she'd never get it open to get to the pistol before he realized what she was about. If they wrestled, she might end up shooting herself.

As he approached with slow steps, the shadowy room seemed to grow smaller. She slid in front of the desk to block his view of her bag. Hopefully, she could retrieve it without him seeing.

"What've you got there?" Fletcher's gaze fastened on the arm she'd tucked behind her back.

"Nothing." She tightened her hold on the notebook. Should she let it drop and go for her gun?

"Why are you here?"

She trembled. She'd worn a loose-fitting dress so she'd be able to move about more easily, but he could catch her before she reached the door. No, her best chance would be to brazen it out and keep him talking until she could figure out how to get away. "The statement you provided didn't agree with my records. There was a slight discrepancy."

"A slight discrepancy?" His brows formed an arch. "I shall speak to my assistant about his sloppy work. Odd, though, that you'd choose this hour to come by to check on a slight discrepancy."

Her breathing quickened with the urge to panic. She tucked the notebook into the folds of her skirt while using her free hand to grope behind her. She still couldn't reach her bag. Her fingers closed around a letter opener near the edge of his desk. Revulsion turned her stomach. Could she bring herself to stab him? Perhaps his arm in order to slow him down.

He wasn't close enough for the element of surprise to work in her favor. She'd get only one chance. She held his eyes, portraying a confidence she didn't feel. "Now that you're here, perhaps you can answer my concerns."

"What concerns?"

"Did you dip into my funds to finance that land purchase?"

He stopped a few feet away. His lips curved in a wry smile. “Let’s just say, I felt comfortable making a financial decision that would be to our collective benefit as a married couple.” His eyes flickered over her. The smoothness of his brow gathered into a frown. “Only, you dragged your feet.”

“So, you decided to hurry me along?”

He gave an unconcerned shrug. “There was no need to hire a bodyguard.”

*Almighty.* He’d all but admitted sending that attacker after her.

She clutched the handle of the letter opener. He was still too far away. If she tried to strike, he might have time to stop her. “Why didn’t you come to me before you made that investment? I would’ve listened to any proposal you had to offer.”

Irritation flickered across his face. “I did. You made it clear—rather adamantly as I recall—that you were opposed to purchasing land on speculation.”

“Then you should’ve honored my wishes.” She debated whether to move close enough to reach him. Her arm wasn’t long enough. “I will forgive and forget if you’ll reimburse whatever you’ve taken. Hopefully, you’ve kept track of this.”

His eyes glittered dangerously. “Ah, my dear. I am not that ignorant gorilla you are so fond of. You aren’t here to haggle over discrepancies, nor are you here to negotiate the return of your money. You’re looking for something, aren’t you? And you’ve used that fine brain of yours to figure out where to find it.”

He reached into his pocket. Her heart fluttered into her throat as he withdrew...

*A handkerchief?* She frowned in confusion.

He had something else in his other hand. Something he pressed into the handkerchief. He took a step closer.

Fear struck with the swiftness of a snake.

To hell with the letter opener. She went for the gun.

He grabbed her arm, spun her around, and tore the bag out of her hands. With his body, he forced her against the desk. His hand snapped around her throat. While he bent her nearly backwards, he used the handkerchief to cover her nose.

A sickly, sweet odor filled her nostrils. It made her head swim. Terrified, she scrabbled for the letter opener, knocking items off the desk in her panicked haste.

“I did this for us,” he growled. “We could have been the toast of the town. The richest and most powerful couple in the state. But you spoiled it. You and that *insufferable* buffoon.” Fletcher’s voice sounded distant, muffled. His fingers crushed her windpipe. Oh God, he would choke her to death.

She clawed at the hand on her throat. Beat him with her fists. But her arms felt heavy like they were strapped with weights. Her heart throbbed in her ears with a drum-like echo. She struggled to breathe. Spots swam in front of her eyes.

*Help me. Buck...*

Fletcher’s grip loosened slightly.

Her starved lungs expanded. She breathed the fouled air. Thoughts melted away. Her eyelids fluttered, then drifted shut as she was cast into oblivion.



Buck paced the width of the small cell. He felt like a powder keg with a lit fuse. It seemed dawn would never come. Not that he’d see much evidence of the sun in this fortress. It was the second time in less than two months

he'd been jailed—a record for a man who had never been caught during the war or in the five years thereafter.

Dammit, he *had* to escape. Make sure Amy was safe before he hightailed it back to Texas. Only problem, he had no idea how to accomplish it. No loyal men stood ready to charge the jail or scheme to sneak him out.

Yesterday, a crowd had gathered. Based on what the guard told him, they'd threatened to break in, haul him outside and string him up. The portly jailor seemed to take pleasure relating how easy it would be to step aside and let justice take its course.

Buck stopped at the barred door and huffed with disgust. These local lawmen had a peculiar definition of justice if they'd ignore repeated attacks on a woman, but send a regiment to arrest a man who could prove he was a hundred miles away at the time of the bank robbery. Of course, he'd have to rustle up witnesses. In the meantime, avoid being torn apart by an angry mob who cared more about his bushwhacking exploits than they did the bank heist.

With an impatient sigh, he tore off his bandana and unbuttoned the top buttons on his shirt. Anything to get relief from the heat.

What the hell was Amy up to? She hadn't been to see him since he'd been taken—a fact that bothered him more than he wanted to admit. Never mind he'd told her to stay away. She'd never listened before, why start now?

Maybe they wouldn't let her see him? That would explain it. Only two visitors had shown up. The sheriff, who he refused to talk to, and a priest he'd politely told to get lost until the time came for last rites. He hoped it wouldn't be soon, although he wouldn't fool himself into thinking he could get out of this stew.

He sank onto the cot and dropped his head in his hands. Amy had told him she'd get word to Sean to round up enough men willing to testify on his

behalf. As for the charges related to the raid on Lawrence, that would mean another trial. He wasn't certain he could escape the noose on that one. No other man had—at least not the ones who'd been arrested.

Reality fell like a winter drizzle, chilling him to the bone. He'd known this day would come, despite his continued attempts to thwart destiny.

He drove his fingers through his hair, anxious and frustratingly impotent. What had he accomplished by coming back to Kansas? He'd wanted to see justice served. What made him think he had that kind of power or wisdom? Hell, he controlled nothing save his own choices, and most of those had ended up being the wrong ones.

If he hadn't come back to Kansas, he wouldn't have met Amy. He never would've known what it felt like to love and be loved. Before he'd ever thought to con her, she had offered him an important job. She'd trusted him, believed in him, wanted him, despite his obvious poverty. That meant she'd seen something worthwhile. Something he had missed all these years.

He closed his eyes, let his mind take him back to the night he'd bedded her.

After he loved her, she returned the favor. Explored his body with her lips and hands. Tentative at first, then increasingly bolder, she brushed kisses over his stomach, trailed her fingers along the inside of his thigh. Touched him. Stroked him into aching hardness, even after he thought he couldn't be roused again. It wasn't just physical desire that held him in thrall. His heart began to hope when she talked about their future. He wanted to give her the world.

With a regretful sigh, he leaned back against the stone. Why hadn't he told her he loved her? He should've said it when she'd gifted him with her innocence. Even after her startling declaration of forgiveness, he hadn't uttered the words.

The truth was—he grimaced—he was a coward. If he spoke it out loud, it would mean exposing himself, even more than when he'd stripped naked



in front of her. And he knew he couldn't bear it if she turned away.

A key rattled in the lock.

The sound jerked Buck out of his reverie. As the hinges screeched, goose bumps prickled down his arms.

A tall, dark-haired woman stepped inside.

He shot to his feet. "Maggie?"

She clutched a key ring to her chest. "I need your help."

Buck approached the door, uneasy. Was this some kind of trick? He'd make a run for it, then a mob would hang him the moment he walked out the door. But why would they send Amy's friend?

He peered out into the empty hallway. "How'd you get in?"

"I slipped past the guards while they were outside smoking." She grabbed his arm, her anxiousness communicated by the tightness of her grip. "Amy's missing."

Buck was out the door before she could finish. No doubt, he'd walked into a trap, but that didn't matter. He would storm hell to save the woman he loved.

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## CHAPTER 25



Hammers clanged in Amy's head. The pain pulled her out of the soft darkness. She dragged her eyes open and stared at the inside of a flannel blanket. No, it was a gray wall.

An awful taste in her mouth made her grimace. Her limbs felt rubbery. It took her a moment to get her arms underneath her so she could sit up.

*Where on earth?*

The stub of a candle flickered in a miner's candlestick, which was wedged into a crevice. Her gaze traveled up grayish-brown rock that formed the wall. The ceiling, also rock, had been braced with uprights, some of which had splintered. Rough-hewn logs canted at different angles provided reinforcement.

Perspiration beaded on her forehead. Her stomach churned. Oh God, she wasn't *on* the earth, she was *beneath* it. And if the crumbling rock and damaged supports were any indication, this was the iron ore mine she and her partner had decided to shut down due to a deadly collapse.

Her stomach roiled, and she scrambled to her knees. The sound of her retching echoed off the rock walls. Afterwards, she sat back on her heels, trembling. Fletcher must have knocked her out with something. *Chloroform*? No wonder her stomach turned over. She'd heard of the

temporary effect from Dr. Hall. Breathing deeply seemed to ease the sick feeling.

Once her stomach had calmed, she surveyed her surroundings. She was in what looked like a room at the juncture of two passageways. The largest drift was partially blocked. From beneath a pile of rocks, a trolley track emerged, crossed the floor and split off into two tunnels, which disappeared into seemingly endless darkness.

The candle flickered. Only an inch remained. Had it started out as a full taper? She had no idea how long she'd been in here.

She swallowed to keep from getting sick again. Pray God, the light would last long enough for her to discover which direction led out. If she wandered around in the dark, she'd likely tumble down a shaft.

The crunch of footsteps sounded before she saw a glimmer of light bob in the darkness down the main tunnel. Her heart pounded with a sense of foreboding.

Fletcher?

If he'd walked into the mine, they couldn't be too far from the entry. The trolley led outside, if she recalled rightly from her earlier visits.

His face and form materialized, as he navigated his way around a pile of boulders that obstructed his path. Like a veteran miner, he carried an oil wick lamp, which dangled from a leather strap wrapped around his wrist. The flame reflected off the brass-lined enclosure. Over one shoulder, he'd slung a thick coil of rope. To look at him, one might think he was going excavating—except for the pistol stuffed into the waistband of his trousers.

Her head pounded so hard it was difficult to think straight. She'd need to figure out how to get his gun. Or if that wasn't possible, distract him so she could make a run for it.

He squatted down and held out a canteen.

She eyed the offering warily.

“It’s only water.” His words sounded hollow and bounced around the walls. “I thought you might be thirsty.”

“You knock me out with chloroform and dump me in a mine and then pretend you’re concerned for my well-being? Pardon me if I don’t trust you aren’t offering me poison.”

He shrugged and set the canteen beside her. “Suit yourself.”

She licked her lips. They were dry and cracked. Her fingers closed around the canteen and she took a small sip of water. Tasted normal. “Why did you bring me here?”

“To give you what you want.”

She shook her head. Still not thinking clearly. “What?”

“Your bodyguard. Lover. Whatever he is. I’ll give him to you. In return, you give me what I want.” The lantern’s light reflected in his eyes, making them gleam like chips of coal. “You’ll run away with him. Go live in Texas or out in the Indian lands. I don’t care as long as you’re gone. In the meantime, as your rightful husband, I’ll lay claim to your abandoned home and investments.”

He couldn’t possibly believe she would just leave and let him get away with stealing her future. For now, she’d play along until she deduced his real agenda. “Clarify a couple of things, please. First, you and I aren’t married. Secondly, Buck is sitting in jail.”

Fletcher plopped down and rested arm over a raised knee like they were at a picnic. Only, he hadn’t brought a gun to the last one they’d attended. “I’ve found a judge who’s willing to swear he presided over our vows. Oh, I procured a license. Of course, I’d prefer for you to sign it so there’s no grounds for forgery. As for the other…”

He casually waved the pistol for emphasis. “I’ve arranged everything. All you have to do is convince O’Connor to take you with him. You may have to sleep with one eye open for a while. He’ll still be a wanted man.

But if he changes his name, you can probably live peacefully in obscurity for the rest of your lives.”

His blithe tone raised goose bumps on her skin. He had no intention of letting her go. She knew too much and would be a threat to him as long as she was alive. He’d lure Buck out here, have someone kill them both then set it up like she’d arranged her lover’s getaway. Knowing Fletcher, he’d also take credit for their capture.

Fear made her heart race. She forced her expression to remain calm while she pondered who else he might’ve involved in his nefarious scheme, besides a crooked judge and that useless sheriff. She had to know his plan to determine how to beat him at his game. “I still don’t understand how Buck is supposed to escape.”

Fletcher beamed like the prize student in a spelling bee. “Your friend Maggie received a note this morning, in your handwriting”—he looked exceptionally proud—“informing her that you bribed the guards to look the other way so she could slip in and release O’Connor. He’s to meet you here, where he’ll find supplies and his horse, and you, of course.”

She bit the inside of her lip to hold in a curse. How dare Fletcher involve a woman who’d never harmed a soul in her life? Maggie was smart enough to realize this was a ruse, but it was possible she would try to free Buck anyway.

“I don’t want Maggie harmed. She doesn’t know anything.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Fletcher’s patronizing tone set her teeth on edge. “I can’t imagine a judge will send her to jail once he realizes she was just a dupe for a scheme you cooked up with your outlaw lover.”

Dear Lord, he wasn’t just desperate. He was evil. Or perhaps he’d misplaced his conscience and had lived without it long enough that he no longer had need of it.

“Sounds like you have it all figured out.” Amy resisted the urge to curl her lip with disgust. Fletcher’s arrogance was his Achilles’ heel. He

imagined he could outsmart everybody, even get away with murder.

She pressed her hands on the rocky floor to brace herself. Her arms trembled. If Buck escaped, he would, without a doubt, come after her. God forbid he'd walk into an ambush. But no, he was smarter than that. She had to focus on staying alive long enough to help him after he arrived.

Fletcher stood and hefted the rope. He tucked the gun into his waistband. "I hate to do this to you, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to tie you up so you don't do something foolish, like try to run."

Trussed like a turkey to await her doom? Not a chance.

Amy got to her feet as though to comply with his request. When he reached out to tie her, she would nab his gun. Without a weapon her chances were nil.

As if he'd read her mind, his hand flashed out. He struck her shoulder, spinning her around, then pushed her face against the wall. Her cheek struck a sharp edge. She cried out in pain. Terror surged, giving her the strength to yank free of his grip.

She twisted around and shoved his chest. He stumbled backwards. Before he could catch his balance, she grabbed a rock and heaved it into his face.

His hands flew up. His startled cry echoed off the walls. Blood flowed between his fingers, He roared like a wounded bear as he staggered towards her.

She dodged the sweep of his arm, snagged the miner's lamp off the floor and ran for the closest tunnel.

A shot rang out. The bullet struck the wall with a shatter that sent a terrified shiver across her skin. She picked up her heels and ran faster.

Rapid steps pounded behind her.

"Amy! Come back here." His voice ricocheted off the rock, which made it difficult to gauge his distance, but it seemed he was breathing down her

neck. “I won’t hurt you. My offer is still good. Once O’Connor gets here, you can both leave.”

*And granny’s goose laid golden eggs.*

Dear God, she had to find another drift. A place to hide where the glowing lantern wouldn’t give her away. The winding tunnel took deeper into the mine and could easily lead to a dead-end.

Panic sped her steps, sending beams of light bouncing off the walls and over a shadowed dip in the floor. Awareness sent her airborne. She leapt over the narrow shaft. As her feet hit solid ground she paused—trembling—to catch her breath.

Random shafts were scattered throughout the mine, most dropped a hundred feet or more. If she kept running willy-nilly, she wouldn’t be so lucky the next time.

Fletcher’s steps had slowed but only slightly. He could surely see her well enough to take another shot. At this rate she couldn’t outrun him, but maybe she could outsmart him.

In desperation she whirled around, heaved the lamp into the shaft—and screamed.

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## CHAPTER 26



Someone was following him. Buck threw a wary glance over his shoulder before he veered down the path toward the burning well. Amy's shortcut to the mine. The surrounding woods would give him a chance to lose the person tailing him. Or, if necessary, set an ambush.

He patted the sweaty neck of the bay Maggie had brought to the jail. Amy had left her mare hitched to a buggy outside her friend's store the night before. She hadn't returned this morning. A note had been left—forged no doubt.

Fletcher had Amy. Buck knew it as sure as he knew his name.

He put his heels to the horse's sides. Fear spurred his sense of urgency.

*Please God, keep her safe.* His skills at prayer were rusty. He'd assumed for some time now the good Lord wouldn't much care what he had to say. But he'd do penance for eternity if it bought him enough time to save Amy.

He jerked another glance over his shoulder. Birds exploded out of the trees behind him some hundred yards or so. With a curse, he guided the horse off the path, behind a cover of dense bushes. Leapt out of the saddle, wrapped the reins around a sapling and ran over to an old oak. He used a low branch to hoist himself into the tree. It took only a few seconds to scoot out on the thick, leafy limb overhanging the trail, where he squatted, and waited.



Hooves sounded, not too distant. The tracker would be under him in just a moment.

*Wait. Wait... Now!*

Buck jumped on the man's back, dragged him from his horse and slammed him onto the ground. He pulled his revolver and cocked it in the startled face of the Bourbon County sheriff.

"You-you shoot me and you'll hang for sure," Lawson stuttered.

"Save your breath. Get up and wrap your arms around that tree."

Buck used the sheriff's rope to make sure the crooked lawman would go nowhere until somebody was sent to fetch him. How Lawson fit into Fletcher's schemes could be figured out later, once Amy was safe.

He mounted up and spurred the mare into a full gallop. It seemed like an eternity before he emerged from the trees.

On the far side of a rounded hill, a tall brick furnace served as a landmark for the entrance to the mine. As he crested the rise, he could see Goliath tethered to a tree at the base of the hill near a line of abandoned carts. The stallion had been saddled and loaded down, as though waiting for him to arrive—just as the note said.

Did old Fletch think he was so stupid he'd fall for this trick?

He turned off the hill into the trees. No point being an easy target. After he'd tethered the horse, he ran towards the mine entrance, at an angle that could bring him in from the side.

What would he do if he were Fletcher? Tie Amy up. Place her near the entrance so she could be seen. Use her as bait to lure the outlaw into the tunnel, then pick him off. A straightforward plan, but with too many contingencies. Contingencies that could be exploited.

Half a dozen planks were scattered about the grounds, perhaps used to bar the entrance after the mine had been closed. Bain must have pried them loose to get inside.

Buck drew his revolver. He leaned back against a timber that framed the entry. At the crunch of gravel, his heart raced and energy coursed through him.

Someone was running towards the entrance. The steps were too heavy and long for a woman.

Buck holstered his gun and picked up a plank. He waited as the steps drew closer. His muscles gathered, then he swung around.

The wood made contact with a loud thump, knocking the man off his feet.

Fletcher sprawled on the ground in dazed confusion.

Buck tossed the plank aside then yanked a pistol out of the banker's hand. Bain's forehead was crusted with dried blood from a jagged cut at his hairline. The plank hadn't caused that injury. Had he attacked Amy and she'd fought him off?

"Sorry sonofabitch." Buck pocketed the pistol before he grabbed the man by his vest and jerked him up. Shooting was too good for this bastard. He pulled out his hunting knife and placed the tip beneath the other man's nose. "You got one second to tell me where to find Amy, or I'll cut off your nose and ears before I throw you down a hole."

Fletcher's eyes filled with a look Buck had seen before. It was the look of a man who saw death fast approaching. "If you kill me, you'll never find her. And you'll take the blame for my murder. Let me go. I'll give you money and you can both leave. She's agreed to go with you."

*She agreed to...what?*

"You must think I just rolled off a hay wagon. Amy wouldn't go to a barn dance with me after what I did to her." Buck pressed the knife tip until a bead of blood appeared. God, he dearly wanted to carve this bastard into little pieces. But he had to find out what Fletcher had done with Amy first. "You got no cards left to play, except one. Take me to Amy and I won't kill you. We'll go back and let the marshal deal with you."

“They’ve got nothing on me.” Fletcher’s voice wavered. “There’s no record, no proof I did anything wrong.”

Buck’s smile wasn’t kind. “Charlie Goodlander went after that fellow who robbed the bank. He dug up enough evidence to show you strong-armed that Italian musician into going after Amy. I sent Maggie to fetch Major Roy and I suspect he’ll be here any time. It’s over, Fletch. Now take me to Amy—if you want to live long enough to stand trial.”

Disbelief flashed across the other man’s face before he sagged with apparent defeat. Buck forced Fletcher to the ground then bound his wrists with a twisted bandana.

“We’ll need light. You’ll find one over there.” Fletcher motioned with his chin to a wooden box. He didn’t have a lantern? Had he left Amy with it or had something happened to her?

Buck sheathed his knife. He opened the lid on the box and picked out an iron candlestick with a long prong on one side. It held a taper, which he lit with a lucifer.

His hands shook. Amy had to be alive. He refused to accept otherwise.

He held up the candle, drew his revolver, then motioned for Bain to go ahead of him. “Lead me to her.”

They descended deeper into the mine. The banker followed the trolley rails, picked his way through crumbling piles of rock. They passed through a room that branched off into two narrow tunnels. Bain took the one to the right.

Buck had to hunch over. If he stood to his full height in the small passage, he’d strike his head on the ceiling.

The man in front of him halted. “She’s there.”

Buck shoved him aside. His hand trembled as he lifted the candle. He stared in horror down a narrow shaft into a black void. Anguish barreled down on him like an avalanche.

*No!* She couldn’t have fallen. She couldn’t be dead.

From behind, someone butted him with enough force to knock him forward.

With a lunge, he threw himself across the opening. His gun flew out of his hand and the candlestick rattled away.

Buck strained to pull himself over the edge. He couldn't see anything.

"You want to find Amy?" Fletcher crowed.

A force slammed Buck's ribs. He grunted at an explosion of pain. When he tried to inch away, his legs slipped further down into the shaft. He couldn't move.

"Go find her." Bain delivered another kick.

In the dark, the blows seemed to come from a gang of men instead of just one.

Buck gasped at the knife-like pain. Had the madman thrown Amy down this hole? Grief mingled with rage so intense he could taste it. He swiped blindly to grab hold of the other man's leg, but with each movement his weight pulled him down toward the emptiness.

Maybe he should just let go. Join her.

No. He had to kill Fletcher first.

He spread his arms, realized the shaft wasn't so large he'd easily fall through. But he couldn't get his feet on anything that would give him enough leverage to get out.

"I'll send you down a hole to hell, you bastard." Bain continued to strike out in the darkness. He apparently hadn't gotten his arms free, but he could use his boots. The blows landed on Buck's face and head. "I tried to get rid of you once. This time I'll see it done."

"No!" A shrill scream cut through the darkness.

Shock held Buck immobile. "Amy?" he croaked.

"Amy!" Fletcher bellowed. His voice echoed eerily, as he moved away to pursue her.

Terror sluiced through Buck. He scrabbled at loose rocks, tearing the flesh from his hands, grabbing at anything he could hold onto.

From somewhere in front of him came the sound of a scuffle.

A shot rang out.

He squinted into the blackness. His heart hammered against his breastbone. Had Bain gotten his hands free? Had he found the gun and shot her?

*No.*

“Goddamn it, no!”

“Buck?” Her voice, fragile and scared, but she was alive.

“Amy.” He gasped with relief.

He felt her hands move over him. She tried to encircle him with her arms. “Oh God,” she moaned. “Don’t fall.”

“Get back. I might pull you down with me.” He braced his hands. Couldn’t get them close enough to his body to gain the force he needed to lift his weight. He concentrated every ounce of strength he had to push himself up.

She grabbed his coat and tugged, then slipped her hands underneath his arms to help hoist himself out of the shaft.

He collapsed, right on top of her, trembling from shock and the pain on a thousand bruises. “Dammit Amy,” he gasped. He rolled away before he crushed her. “Don’t you ever do as you’re told?”

He stilled his breathing to listen for other sounds. “Where’s Fletch?”

She remained silent.

Dismayed, he reached out, fumbled in the dark until he grasped her fingers.

“I think...he’s dead.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “I found your gun. It landed not far from where I was hiding. He...He was coming for me, and I-I shot him.”

“You wait here.” Buck crawled in the direction he’d heard the scuffle. He found Fletcher’s still form. His nostrils flared at the scent of blood and gunpowder. A quick check revealed Amy was right. The banker was no longer a threat.

In the impenetrable darkness, Buck felt his way back to her. He touched her face as a blind man might.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get to you sooner.” She sniffed. “I hid, and by the time I realized you were there, he’d shoved you into that...that hole.” She laced her fingers through his and drew his hand to her lips.

At the gentle gesture, his control snapped. He dragged her into his arms, found her mouth, and pressed his bruised lips against hers in a kiss so desperate and needy he didn’t care about the pain.

“Amy. My God, I thought—” He couldn’t say it. When he thought she’d fallen to her death, he felt as if he’d died, too. Might as well have. He couldn’t live without her.

With a ragged breath, he buried his face in her hair. He trembled. Tears streamed from his eyes. He couldn’t do a damn thing about it.

“I knew you’d come.” Cool fingers brushed across his mouth, touched his damp cheeks. “Oh Buck, I was so afraid I’d lose you.”

“Like I said...” His voice broke. “You won’t get rid of me that easy.” He sat up with a groan and brought her with him. Couldn’t bear to let go.

He would never let go.

## CHAPTER 27



*A*my stumbled out of the darkness into the light. She blinked as its brightness blinded her. The brilliance cleared, a green blur transformed into a hillock.

Buck clasped her hand tightly. He hadn't let go since they'd started out of the mine, leaving behind the man she'd killed. The shock of taking a life hadn't sunk in yet. Deep inside, she knew she'd had no choice but to fire that gun. Fletcher would have killed her.

She inhaled the grass-scented air. The midday sun warmed her shoulders. For a time, it had seemed she would never be warm again. Her frantic heartbeat slowed as her mind finally accepted the fact that they were safe.

Buck continued to pull her along behind him, going in the opposite direction of where his horse was tethered, right there, to a tree. "I sent Maggie after Major Roy. I suspect he'll be along directly."

"What?" She broke his grip and her fear for him resurfaced. "You can't be here when those troops arrive. They'll arrest you."

When he turned, she gasped, horrified. Bruises marred the left side of his face. A scrape on his cheek still seeped blood, as did a cut on his lip.

She looked at his outstretched hand, at the torn flesh on his palm and fingers. *Dear God*. He'd come so close to death. With a trembling hand, she

tenderly tucked damp strands of wheat-colored hair behind his ear. “Your poor face.”

“I’ve looked scarier,” he muttered, in that devil-may-care tone. His expression, however, remained solemn. He’d been as terrified as she was, and as overwhelmed by an avalanche of emotions. Merciful heavens, he’d wept—and not just a few tears.

She threw a fretful glance over her shoulder at the clean curve of the hilltop. As much as she wanted to take him home and see to his hurts, there was no time. “You have to leave. Start now, so they can’t catch you. Go back to Texas until I can—”

He laid a finger on her lips. “I’m not going anywhere. That sheriff, he’s dirty. And they might try to blame you for Bain’s death. We can say I shot him when he came at me with a gun.”

She grabbed hold of his vest, pleading with her eyes. “I’m safe, Buck. There’s plenty of evidence to prove Fletcher’s wrongdoing. But I need time to untangle this mess he made. We need time to let tempers cool. You’re wanted for that raid, even if the robbery charge goes away. You can’t risk it. If you say here, you’ll be jailed, face trial. They’ll hang you.”

He pressed his lips together and exhaled through his nose, a sound of frustration. But it was desperation, not anger, in his eyes. “I won’t leave you alone to deal with this by yourself.”

Emotions burst through the dam of self-control. Her tears flowed unchecked. “Don’t you understand, you stubborn man? I *love* you. That’s why I sent you away before, to keep you safe. Not because I didn’t want you.”

He cupped her shoulders. His throat worked. His lips parted. Still he didn’t speak. But his eyes, those beautiful rain-washed eyes, spoke love as clearly as if he’d said it aloud. “Amy, I...I don’t deserve your love.”

She laid her hand on his chest. “Love isn’t something you earn, Buck. It’s a gift.”



Wasn't that what Sophie had told her? Now, she understood. All the striving, trying to be good enough, had never gotten her what she truly wanted and needed. But here it was, right in front of her. Love, such as she'd never known before.

"I wish we had more time, but we don't. Not now. You'll have to give me a few months to ensure that we can have a future without the past following us."

He gazed into her eyes. A sad smile teased the corner of his mouth. "You own my heart, Venus. Don't know as I can get by without it."

Tears streamed down her face. "Trust me, my love, like I trust you. I'll work out a way for us to be together." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Now kiss me, and promise me you'll go someplace safe. Wait until I send for you."

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## CHAPTER 28



*Three months later*  
*Sherman, Texas*

Cole had an ace up his sleeve.

Buck held his friend's gaze until a smile split the other man's face. With a laugh, Younger threw down his cards. He picked up a cigar, took a draw and puffed smoke into the air. "I never could cheat you."

"That's because you're not a cheat at heart." Buck folded his hand and laid it face down. He pushed aside the remainder of the beer he'd nursed for the past couple hours. "Besides, you ought to know dishonesty doesn't pay. Not in the long run."

He pushed back from the table. "Got to get back to work. You take care of yourself, now."

"You too, old friend." The bald former bushwhacker leaned back in his chair. "Might ease up a little on that drinking." Cole laughed. Apparently, he found his joke funny.

With a wave, Buck strode out the door of the saloon into the heat of a Texas summer.

The crack of hammers and smell of pine filled the air. Workers climbed the dozen frame buildings that had popped up seemingly overnight. This dusty little cow town had been a favorite winter spot for Quantrill and the rangers who'd ridden with him. There were still folks willing to hide men wanted for war crimes. But slowly, it was becoming civilized. Those who couldn't change, or wouldn't, would soon be forced to find sanctuary elsewhere.

Buck sank onto a bench outside the tavern. He'd grown weary of the card game, but he wasn't eager to return to the ranch where Cole had gotten him hired on as a cowhand. The money was good and he'd managed to save a little. Another six months of scrimping and he might even have enough to open a store, if he could work up the enthusiasm.

He leaned against the wall, shifted his hat over his face and tried hard to ignore the near constant ache in his chest. In a little while, he'd head over to the post office and see if a letter had come. He'd made the same trip weekly for the past three months. Only to return empty handed and broken hearted.

*Just give me a little time...*

How long was a little? He wasn't a patient man, never had been. However, he'd promised Amy he would wait until she sent for him. He would wait forever, if that's what it took.

She seemed to think she could make his past disappear.

*Impossible.*

He'd finally stopped arguing. It had taken all his willpower not to drop to his knees and beg her to come with him. She couldn't. Too much of her life was invested in Fort Scott. She had her mind set on making a permanent mark in Kansas. He wanted her to follow her dreams, even if it meant she had to pursue them without him.

God, he loved her, and that love filled up every empty place inside. He'd struggled to say the words. They'd stuck in his throat because he'd been afraid she wouldn't believe them after all the lies. So, he'd written a

long letter. He'd shared the details of his past, with nothing held back. He'd poured out his soul and told her about the man he had been and the man he'd become because of her love.

She hadn't answered—yet.

The thump of footsteps sounded on the sidewalk. “Good day to you, cousin.”

Buck jerked upright. He grabbed his hat as it flew off.

Sean propped a dusty boot on the bench. He grinned like a cat that had gotten into the cream. “You look like you've been sleeping with the cows.”

Buck rubbed the scruffy beard he hadn't bothered to shave. “I have been. What's your excuse?”

His cousin chuckled. “I'm not on my way to see a woman. You'll want to wash up for that little colleen o'yours.”

Buck's heart tripped over its own excitement. “Amy's on her way?”

“Nah.” Sean gave a negligent wave. “She's not coming here.”

Hope crashed through Buck's stomach. “Well, I sure as hell can't go back to Kansas,” he snapped, unable to rein in his anger at being the butt of a sick joke.

“I wouldn't be so sure.” His cousin reached inside his coat and produced an envelope. It had Buck's name on it. And the handwriting...

He stared at the letter another moment before he snatched it out of Sean's hand. “It's from Amy.” His fingers shook as he pulled out two sheets of paper and opened them. He anxiously scanned the flowing script with growing disbelief.

According to her, he was no longer wanted in connection with the raid on Lawrence.

“What the hell?” He raised his eyes in amazement. “How did she get the governor to agree to pardon me?”

Sean lifted a shoulder. “She didn't say. I thought you might know.”

Puzzled, Buck looked back at the letter. *The governor owed me a favor...*

A memory emerged of the day in Baxter Springs when he'd overheard a conversation between Fletcher and Amy. Bain had suggested she use a political favor to get the governor to hold off certifying the Katy Railroad so the Border Tier would win the race by default. But the MK&T had been declared the winner more than two months past.

Buck swallowed the fist-sized lump in his throat. Amy had cashed in her favor on *his* behalf, which meant she'd given up her chance to win the race. She'd given up a fortune...for him.

He could hardly draw a breath. Still, how had she managed to get him cleared of charges related to the massacre? He went back to the letter.

*...I told the governor you hadn't killed anyone that day in Lawrence, and had, in fact, guided several people to safety, according to what I was able to uncover through numerous interviews with survivors. He agreed to grant you a full pardon....*

"Did you get to the part about the town council declaring you a hero?"

Buck leveled a hard look at his cousin. "You read this?"

The cheeky smile reappeared. "She could've mailed it, but she brought it to me. Told me to deliver it personally. Figured you wouldn't mind if I took a wee look. After all, we're family."

Buck shoved his cousin off of the sidewalk, then he finished reading the letter. Amy explained how Bain's crimes had been exposed. The impersonator had owned up to robbing the bank because Fletcher had promised to wipe out his debt. An audit committee, headed up by Charlie Goodlander, discovered the banker had embezzled thousands of dollars, and not just from Amy. Sheriff Lawson was charged with taking bribes after one of his deputies turned on him. He'd run off before he could be arrested, and most everybody figured he wouldn't show his face in Kansas again. Major Roy had filed a report, which said Buck was responsible for alerting him to Fletcher's wrongdoing and rescuing Amy.

He jerked his head up with a frown. “I didn’t rescue her. Hell, *she* rescued me. They ought to give *her* a parade.”

Sean slid his hands into his pockets. “She can spare a few ounces of goodwill.”

“What do you mean?”

“She got the railroad board to agree to override their boss’s decision and donate land to the Kansas Cooperative Society. I guess the investors aren’t too happy with Mr. Joy. They’re trying to make sure us settlers stick around and don’t leave them with thousands of acres they can’t find buyers for.”

Buck flipped to the last page of the letter. Damn, he was proud of Amy’s accomplishments. He still felt like he’d failed her. “If things had worked out different, if I hadn’t interfered, maybe her railroad would’ve won. She wouldn’t have lost her fortune.”

Sean slapped his shoulder. “Stop stewing in your own juices and thank the good Lord she still wants your sorry ass.”

The last lines of the letter leapt out, as if she’d somehow read his mind.

*You wrote that you wished you’d been able to give me my dream. Come home, my darling, and you can.*

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## CHAPTER 29



“*M*iz Amy, there’s a gentleman waitin’ downstairs. Says he got business to discuss.” Sophie stood at the door to the office. Her dark eyes gave no hint of surprise or pleasure.

Amy sighed with disappointment. It couldn’t be the man she expected. The one she’d anxiously awaited since sending Mr. Murphy after him more than three weeks ago.

Her fingers drifted to the silver brooch pinned to her bodice, which had once been attached to Buck’s hat. Before he’d left, he had given it to her. It had belonged to his mother. He’d wanted Amy to have it so she would remember him. She didn’t need anything to remember him, but she treasured the gift because it was a part of him she’d been able to keep with her.

She pushed back her chair. “Do you know who it is?” she called out. When she stepped into the hallway, Sophie had vanished.

Amy started down the stairs. Perhaps it was the man who’d agreed to purchase her interest in the mine. That cash would come in handy when they opened a store in Girard operated by the Kansas Cooperative Society. Buck hadn’t known it at the time, but when he’d come up with that idea, he’d given her a way to fulfill her father’s vision. To provide hardworking people with the means to reap the benefits of their labors.

She turned into the parlor, then jerked to a halt.

A tall man in a gray suit stood at the window with his back to her. Blond hair curled over his high collar. Her heart beat faster. She'd know that lazy stance anywhere.

"Buck!"

He turned, and in two strides, reached her, caught her up in his arms and gave her a succulent kiss. Their tongues twined in a dance reminiscent of an act she'd dreamed about, longed for, anticipated.

Desire melted her bones. Her skin tingled with a passion only he could ignite.

He let her body slide down the front of his until her feet touched the floor. She leaned against him with a sigh. His kisses turned her mind to mush. Although, something felt different...

She pulled back and stared at his face. "Your mustache. You shaved it off."

He'd been devilishly handsome before, but now she could clearly see his lovely mouth, the firm upper lip and fuller lower lip with a slight indent just below where a spot of hair had been before. Heaven help her.

His eyes sparkled, light as silver. "I recall you once told me to visit a barber, so folks wouldn't think you'd hired a ruffian."

She was so overcome at the shock of seeing him and the realization he was truly here, in her arms, she began to cry. "I'm sorry to be such a ninny, crying every time we're together."

"You're not a ninny," he murmured, as he kissed away the tears. "You're my Venus. My angel. My sweet little water spout." He found her lips, brushed them lightly with his own until she gasped for more.

When he straightened, she sighed with frustration. Why had he stopped? She was ready to drag him to bed. Strip him naked. Indulge in the fantasies she'd entertained during his absence.



His expression smoothed into bland neutrality. “I hear you plan to open a mercantile.”

“What?” Why in heaven’s name were they talking about the store?

“Sean told me you put money down to get the cooperative started. Seeing as running a mercantile isn’t exactly your bailiwick, I thought you could use some help. I got a proposition for you. A partnership, if you will.”

“You came back to offer me a *business deal*?”

He reached inside his coat, withdrew a folded paper and handed it to her. “You’ll want to see the terms.”

She quickly scanned the contents. It looked official, with the word *Contract* at the top. But the first line... Why, it was a contract for a *marriage*.

Buck hooked his thumbs behind his lapels like a trader ready to negotiate. “You’re a smart woman of business. Reckoned I ought to do this up all legal and proper.”

What an odd way to propose. But what else would she expect? In true Buck fashion, he resorted to wisecracks about a serious subject.

“Exactly what is your proposal, Mr. O’Connor? Don’t business agreements typically have an exit clause?”

Her retort elicited a brief flash of panic across his face. “No! There’s no exit clause. No return. No way out.”

She rolled up the contract and tapped it against his chest. “That’s my point, mister. I don’t want a way out, nor do I want a business agreement. I want a mutual covenant. An ironclad promise. One that’s guaranteed for a lifetime.”

“More than a lifetime. I’ll love you forever.” His simple, heartfelt declaration quite literally stole her breath.

He dropped to one knee and took her hand. “Marry me, Amy. Be my wife. My partner. You’re already my whole world.”

She smiled through her tears. “I will gladly marry you, Buck O’Connor.”

“Better take another gander at that paper. You aren’t marrying *Buck* O’Connor.”

As he stood, she looked down at the signature. “Benjamin Franklin O’Connor.”

His smile turned wry. “My mother thought if I was named after a man like Ben Franklin, I’d grow up to be somebody special.”

If he doubted it, she would make sure he never did again.

“She was right, you know. Only a man as special as you could’ve survived everything you’ve been through, and still manage to find his way back home.”

He brushed his thumb across her cheek. A simple caress that seemed to stop time and her heart. “It took a special woman to make that possible.”

The adventure continues in *Redbird*, Book 2, in the series *Steam! Romance and Rails*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Welcome to *Steam! Romance and Rails*, a Western historical romance series featuring stories from America's golden age of steam.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the United States entered a time of explosive expansion. The country had just emerged from a devastating war and people needed to have faith in something. That something turned out to be what railroads represented: unlimited opportunity and hope for the future.

The great construction race between the Missouri, Fort Scott & Gulf Railroad Company (nicknamed The Border Tier) and the line that became the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railway (more commonly known as "The Katy") is a story that encapsulates the spirit of these times, along with its challenges and rewards. The race took place primarily in 1870, when both lines were laying track as fast as they could to get to the border of Indian Territory (modern day Oklahoma). The government promised the line that reached the border first would win free land grants and exclusive rights through the corridor into cattle-rich Texas.

When I first started researching, I found surprisingly little written about this fascinating event. Then I uncovered a gem: a 1967 thesis paper written by then-graduate student, H. Craig Miner. Within these typed papers, I found a story as fascinating as any fiction I'd ever read, only it was factual.

Dr. Miner's meticulous research and marvelous way with words made the people in this drama come alive. To name a few: James Joy, the real estate tycoon turned railroad baron; Octave Chanute, a brilliant French-born engineer who built Joy's railroad and went on to help the Wright Brothers learn to fly; Amos Sanford, the fiery editor and leader of the Anti-Joy Land League. The story itself had all the makings of a great epic: crooked politics, underhanded landlords, angry mobs, liars, cheats and killers. It wasn't difficult to craft a tale around these colorful characters.

My challenge was developing primary characters as compelling as the supporting cast. Once again, I dove into the history books. The fiercely independent Kansas women who championed suffrage and equal rights served as models for Amy, and the tough-as-nails but troubled survivors of Missouri's guerrilla war gave me inspiration for Buck.

I'm grateful for Dr. Miner's research and wish I could thank him personally. Sadly, he passed away a year before this book was written. From what I've learned of him, I think he would've been pleased his research was helpful to another author.

Two other gentlemen who provided assistance with research were Don Miller and Fred Campbell with the Fort Scott Historic Preservation Association. Thank you for introducing me to historic Fort Scott and delightful pioneers like Charlie Goodlander and Heiro Wilson. Special thanks to Miss Pat at Lyon's Twin Mansions, the lovely inn that inspired me to write a story set in Fort Scott.

I hope readers enjoy this glimpse into an exciting era in America's history. Although that time is far behind us, it left an indelible mark that helped shape our country into who and what we are today.

*E.E. Burke*

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## AFTERWORD

Dear Reader,

Thank you for joining me on a journey of imagination into the historic past, in the first installment of the series *Steam! Romance and Rails*.

If you enjoyed *Her Bodyguard*, please consider taking a brief moment to post a short review. Honest reviews help other readers discover books they might like, as well as helping authors find new readers.

I wish you many happy hours of reading.

All the best,

*E.E. Burke*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**E.E. Burke** is a bestselling author of historical fiction and romances that combine her unique blend of wit and warmth. Her books have been nominated for numerous national and regional awards, including Booksellers' Best, National Readers' Choice and Kindle Best Book. She was also a finalist in the RWA's prestigious Golden Heart® contest. Over the years, she's been a disc jockey, a journalist and an advertising executive, before finally getting around to living the dream--writing stories readers can get lost in.

Find out more about her books at her website: [www.eeburke.com](http://www.eeburke.com).



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