

*A
Wife
by
Christmas*

Cassie Hutton

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A WIFE BY CHRISTMAS

CALLIE HUTTON



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A WIFE BY CHRISTMAS

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CALLIE HUTTON

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To mom and dad.

I love you and miss you.

I know you're up there cheering me on.

Thanks.

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Chapter 1

Guthrie, OK

November, 1906

Max Colbert glared at the woman perched on the edge of the chair across from him. History teacher Ellie Henderson had been a thorn in his side the size of the Oklahoma sky ever since he'd been appointed principal of Logan County High School three months ago.

She sat there, humming. *Humming!* His gut twisted and he clenched his jaw. Drat the woman for being so unconcerned while he fumed. He needed to draw on his years of experience in dealing with teachers to get his emotions under control. He took a deep breath and leaned forward. "Miss Henderson, your unapproved activities have gone too far. I am going to have to fire you."

Ellie's right eyebrow rose, meeting his glare for glare. "No. You can't."

"Yes, I can, and I am." Blood rushed to his face.

She stood and placed both palms on his desk, and leaned in. "I will tell my Uncle Jesse."

Max pushed his chair back and got to his feet. He moved close enough to see the light dusting of freckles across her nose. "It won't make any difference."

"It will if you plan to be Territorial Superintendent of Schools." They were now almost nose-to-nose.

Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. "I will get that job on my own merit."

"*Not without* Senator Jesse Cochran's endorsement." Her hazel eyes narrowed.

His jaw tightened, his mouth working as if to say something. Then, like a rag doll, he collapsed into his seat and leaned back, eyes closed. "Miss Henderson, you are a pebble in my shoe."

"And you, Mr. Colbert, are a horse's behind."

He opened one eye. She again sat primly on the edge of her seat, adjusting her skirts, the two red dots on her cheeks the only indication of

her anger.

“You may leave now,” he said through gritted teeth.

Ellie bowed her head slightly. “As you wish.” She stood, smoothed back the hair always loose from her bun. With head held high, she sailed from the room, closing the door softly. Her skirt stuck in the door. She re-opened it, yanked the skirt, and banged the door shut.

Max winced at the sound. His left eye twitched.

On the other side of the dark wood and glass office door, Ellie stomped her foot. Things were so peaceful until this year when Mr. Max Colbert took over as principal of Logan County High School. After Mr. Robinson had retired, the School Board had seen fit to fill the spot of principal with the arrogant and difficult Mr. Colbert.

Mr. Robinson had not been at all troubled by Ellie’s after school and weekend activities. If anything, the old gentleman approved of her pursuits, told her on more than one occasion she reminded him of his feisty daughter, Lizzy, who lived with her husband in Dallas. In the next breath, he’d always added, “thank God.”

Things changed at the school after Mr. Colbert’s arrival. All outside undertakings had to be approved in advance. The teachers were constantly subjected to meetings where he sermonized on the proper behavior of educators, and reinforced the dignity of the teaching profession. He’d taped a list of approved and unapproved activities to the wall outside his office door. The unapproved column stretched twice the length of the approved.

Ellie glanced at the paper now, heat rising to her face. Just about every activity of interest to her was on the ‘unapproved’ list. Now *Mr. Colbert* had told her to stop the Thursday after school meetings with some of her students who were putting together Christmas gift baskets for the poor.

While conceding her project to be a noble cause, he said begging contributions from local businesses and delivering baskets to poor neighborhoods did not represent a suitable activity for a lady. And since that lady happened to be one of his teachers, the program would come to a halt immediately. He suggested she turn the effort over to one of the churches. Suggested, ha! Mr. Colbert never suggested, he ordered.

She stormed down the hall to the room where her students waited. Sixteen bright young eyes looked up as she entered the room. “Sorry, everyone. We’ll have to postpone our meeting to next Thursday. Just do

what you can at home this week to finish up the things you're knitting or sewing for the baskets." She nodded at the petite blonde girl with huge blue eyes in the second row. "Yes, Mary."

She stood, fluffing her curls. "Miss Henderson, my papa said Mr. Colbert would stop our Christmas project."

Anger coiled in her stomach and heat rose once again to her face. "No, Mary. I just spoke with Mr. Colbert, and we'll be straightening it all out. Don't worry."

The girl sat and leaned over to the boy next to her. "My papa is never wrong."

"All right boys and girls. You can go on home now, and I'll see you here next week."

After the children filed out, giggling and teasing, Ellie sat with her elbows bent on the desk, head propped on her fists. She glanced up as Rose Golden, the English teacher and her best friend since fifth grade, entered the room. They'd met the first day of school when Guthrie was originally established after the first Oklahoma Land Run in 1889.

"I heard Colbert is shutting down your Christmas project." Rose smiled sympathetically and sat in the student desk in front of Ellie.

"Can you imagine his arrogance?" Ellie puffed out a breath of air. "He says it's 'unladylike' to be asking businesses to contribute to the baskets. I wonder if he thinks it's 'ladylike' to starve to death in the cold."

"What will you do?"

"I'm not giving it up. I have a week until the next meeting with my students. They'll continue to work on their various assignments at home. I'll have to find a way to visit my businesses Saturday without the ogre knowing." She tapped her finger against her chin. "Maybe a disguise."

Rose threw back her head and laughed. "You're not serious."

"Indeed I am. Years ago, my Aunt Tori wore men's clothes to do the Land Run. She didn't want to be taken advantage of because she's a woman."

"But what good would a man's disguise do for you?"

"A young man darting in and out of stores, with a growing satchel of items, won't catch Colbert's attention at all. However, a woman doing the same thing would definitely arouse his suspicions."

Her eyes sparkling, Rose shook her head. “I can’t believe you would run about town dressed in men’s clothes, Ellie.”

She snorted. “Watch me.”

Max locked the school building and headed toward home. The walk helped clear his head after a long day. The early December air felt cool and crisp, most of the trees having shed their summer ensemble. Gusts of air blew small sticks and dried leaves around his feet. He pulled the collar of his coat closer and bent his head into the ever-present Oklahoma wind.

His thoughts, as was common of late, centered on Miss Henderson. A definite pain in the neck and the only teacher he butted heads with. He grimaced. Almost literally, today. If he’d had to pick any teacher who would be the least likely to give him trouble, it would have been her. As the niece of a prominent attorney and Senator, he’d expected a quiet, well-behaved spinster. Instead he’d gotten a hellion. She involved herself in so many unacceptable activities, he couldn’t even keep track.

After a hurried walk, he arrived at a large blue with brown trim clapboard house displaying a red Davis Boarding House plaque swinging back and forth from the porch railing. In the center of Evergreen Street between Eleventh and Twelfth, it had been his home for three years. Max strode up the steps to the porch, past the wicker chairs Mrs. Davis would soon bring in for the winter. Not much use for them anymore since no one would be sitting on them in the evening like in the summertime.

He closed the door against the cold and nodded to the four men sitting in the front parlor waiting for supper to be announced. A quick glance at his watch indicated enough time to wash before Mrs. Davis put supper on the table. As he jogged up the stairs to his room, he raised his head and sniffed. Meatloaf. One of his favorites.

The wavering flames from gas lamps around the room reflected the abundant amount of food on the long dining room table. Boarding house owner Helen Davis presided over her supper table like a mother hen. Five men boarded with her, all of them hard-working and respectable. Max smiled at the way she watched them pass the platter and bowls of salad, meat, vegetables, and hot rolls, and filled their plates. She’d commented more than once that she ran the best boarding house in Guthrie. She never skimmed on food, changed the sheets once a week, and reminded them of the long waiting list for each of their rooms.

Plates piled high, they dug in. Conversation was always light at the supper table. The men shoveled food in while Mrs. Davis regaled them with stories about her day. No one commented, maybe a nod or a grunt every once in a while, which was normal. Max figured one of the reasons she liked boarding men was because she didn't have to compete with chatty women.

About halfway through the meal, Andrew Piedmont placed his fork alongside his knife and cleared his throat. His mustache quivered up and down. "I have an announcement to make."

Five pairs of eyes watched him expectantly.

"I'm getting married." A bright red flush rose from the top of his stiff collar to his hairline.

Mrs. Davis clutched her throat. "Oh, how wonderful, Mr. Piedmont." Tears shimmered at the edge of her eyelids.

The four men nodded in his direction and continued to eat.

"Isn't that grand?" Mrs. Davis looked around the table, smiling.

Max snorted. Married. The man must be crazy to want to tie himself to a woman. That would bring him a lifetime of misery. Nagging, complaining, wanting things, all sorts of trouble. Not him. At thirty years of age, he already had clear-cut goals, and he intended to meet them without the encumbrance of a wife. Every time he felt the itch, he'd visit a very discreet widow in Oklahoma City, spend the night, and come home the next day after a hearty breakfast and minus a bit of money. No complications or problems. Everything nice and tidy. Just the way he intended his life would be.

"Who is the lucky lady?" Mrs. Davis blotted her eyes with the corner of her apron.

"Miss Maribel Brown." The blush re-surfaced.

"Oh, the librarian. I'm so happy for you. And when is the joyful event?" The woman was determined to drag all the details out of poor Piedmont. The man appeared to be choking on his meatloaf. Max shook his head in sympathy.

"Two weeks from Saturday." Piedmont seemed close to a stroke, having spoken more words tonight than Max had heard him speak in the past year.

"Oh my goodness." Mrs. Davis's hand fluttered to her throat once again. "While I'm thrilled with your news, now I'll have to find a new boarder for

your room. I must consult my list right after supper.”

The rest of the meal proceeded with Mrs. Davis quizzing Piedmont until the man finally wiped the sweat from his forehead and excused himself, leaving half his apple pie.

Max retired to the front parlor and read the day’s newspaper. Since Mrs. Davis didn’t allow smoking in her home, he also spent some time on the porch with his pipe. Shortly after nine o’clock, he said good night to the other boarders and headed upstairs to his room.

He looked around as he entered. A tidy room, just the way he liked it. His specially made, comfortable bed, sat in the middle of the room, a large red and white patchwork quilt draped over it. The small maple desk from his childhood home took up one corner, with a milk glass lamp sitting on it. A stack of papers, neatly piled in the center of his desk, stood alongside two sharpened pencils, next to a pen sticking out of an inkwell.

Max removed his jacket, tie and collar, brushed the jacket and placed the tie and collar on the tall dresser. As he removed each item of clothing, he inspected, brushed, and hung it up or deposited it in the basket for Mrs. Davis to launder. He shrugged into his nightshirt and, after placing his shoes neatly under the bed, flipped the quilt back and climbed in. He read his book, and after an hour, placed it precisely on the edge of the night table, extinguished the light, and settled his head on the fluffy pillow.

And immediately thought of Ellie Henderson. The woman was the curse of his life. Most likely a punishment for some misdeed in his youth. She always had chalk on her fingers, and stray curls forever fell out of her bun. The desk in her classroom was piled haphazardly with stacks of papers, half-eaten apples, and God knew what else. How she found anything at all in that mess remained a mystery to him.

More than once he’d caught her running—*running*—down the hall to her class, skirts flying behind her, delightful breasts bouncing. *What?* Where did that come from? Miss Henderson did not have breasts. Well, she did actually, but they were not his to notice. They were not his at all. He rolled over and punched his pillow.

Miss Henderson. What in heaven’s name was he to do about her? Although she’d sent her students home after he’d spoken with her today, he knew she would not stop the Christmas project. She never did anything he’d ordered her to do. In fact, she seemed to enjoy provoking him.

He smiled when he thought of her sticking her nose right into his face. A true beauty with those huge hazel eyes and turned up nose. Skin like fine china. He jerked when he realized how the lower part of his body reacted to his thoughts. Best not to travel down that road. Let some other man take her on. It would truly be a sad day for whatever man stood in front of a preacher with Miss Henderson.

Max sat up abruptly, his heart pounding with excitement. Marry! That's how he could get rid of her. He flung the quilt off, jumped up and paced. Because of her connection to the man who could give him the appointment he'd worked so hard for, he couldn't fire her. Although he'd certainly tried.

But—if she was married, she'd give up her job. All married women did. He rubbed his hands together in anticipation as he paced, then stopped, his shoulders slumped. Who in his right mind would marry the woman? And with all her infernal activities with the Women's Rights group and students, she rarely spent time around men.

He climbed back into bed and settled in. It had been a great idea, but not a practical one. Max sighed, crossed his arms over his middle, and closed his eyes. They popped back open again. Of course! He would find her a husband. Why, he considered it his duty as a citizen of Guthrie, and the principal of the high school, to see that some poor sucker became responsible for her. Some sorry soul who didn't really know her very well, who would be duped by that beautiful face and appealing body.

His mind raced. He mentally ticked off the men in the boarding house, his friends at the Bachelor's Club, the male teachers—no, that wouldn't work. The other teachers already knew her. Avoided her like the plague. Then his barber, preacher, doctor, lawyer—the list was endless. Every unmarried man in Guthrie should be given the opportunity to consider taking Ellie Henderson to wife.

He hadn't been this happy since he'd been given the Principal of the High School job. To think of his days being Miss Henderson-free. No blood pressure skittering up and down all day. No stomach churning every time she entered his office. No watching her race into the building, late for her class, hair falling down, arms wrapped around books with papers sticking out. No projects that involved unladylike, un-teacher like behavior.

Tomorrow, first thing, he would make a list and begin his campaign. He would need to get a copy of Miss Henderson's appointment book. As much

as he hated the idea, he'd have to sneak into her classroom, shuffle through the mess on her desk, hope nothing bit him, and copy her activities for the next few weeks. Then he would know where to show up and introduce her to his victims—err, his friends. Things were looking up.

Relaxed for the first time in months, he punched his pillow again, and drifted off to sleep in minutes.

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Chapter 2

Ellie shoved her loose brown curls under the man's cap she'd borrowed from her brother Michael, along with trousers and a shirt. A bit too large, but a belt held the trousers up, and a short jacket covered the rest of the outfit quite well. Luckily, he'd believed her story about needing the clothes for a Christmas pageant. It didn't seem likely he'd approve of her venture into town either. Men! What a pain in the neck they were. Always telling you what to do, what constituted proper behavior. Once women got the right to vote, things would change.

She studied herself in the mirror and moved her head side to side. Not bad. If she ran into Mr. Colbert, she doubted he would know her, unless he looked right into her face. She was safe. The list of businesses she planned to visit tucked securely in her pants pocket, she picked up a woolen coat, a pillow slip to put her treasures in, and left her room.

Mrs. Beamer kept herself busy in the back of the house, so Ellie managed to get out without having to explain to her landlady why she dressed as a man. She loved the independence of living away from her family in her own place. Even though she had a small room and a curfew, it still represented home. She'd decorated it to her liking, paid for it with her own earnings. No need for her to depend on some man to provide a roof over her head. Ellie Henderson took care of herself.

She took the short walk to town, breathing in the cold crisp air. Now that Thanksgiving had passed, stores were ready for Christmas sales. The drugstore had Christmas lights in the window, the first she'd seen this year. She stopped in, said hello to Mr. Jackson, and accepted the box of chocolates he offered for the Christmas baskets.

"Why are you dressed like that?" The chemist peered at her over his spectacles as he filled a small clear bottle with liquid from a large brown one.

"Easier to get around. I can get to more places without the restrictions of a skirt."

Jackson shook his head. "I don't understand women nowadays. In my day a woman stayed in her home and took care of her family. She didn't go traipsing around town dressed like her brother."

Grateful for the box of chocolate, but annoyed with the lecture, Ellie said her thanks and hurried to the next stop on the list.

A small bell attached to the door tinkled as Ellie entered Millie's Fine Dress Shop. Several women flipped through pattern books, others fingered dresses hanging from hooks around the room. A large window let in the bright sunlight across the wooden floor, highlighting dust motes in the air.

A few women glanced in her direction, their faces pinched with disapproval at her attire.

"Ellie Henderson, look at you." Millie Ramsey smiled as she took in Ellie's outfit. "Why are you dressed like that?"

"It's a disguise."

Millie walked around her, tapping her mouth with her index finger, her eyes bright with laughter. "Who are you hiding from?"

Ellie leaned in, and looked around. "Mr. Colbert."

She raised her eyebrows. "Mr. Colbert, the Principal?"

"The very one." She threw her bag full of treasures over her shoulder. "He shut down my Christmas project, but I have no intention of giving it up. In case he's wandering around town today, I decided to wear this outfit." She waved her hand toward her clothes.

"You do like to cause trouble." Millie walked to the counter and took out a package. "Here's the ribbons and lace I promised for your baskets."

"Thanks so much. I'm sure the lucky ladies who get these will be thrilled." She stuffed the package in her bag. "Will you be at the Women's Rights meeting Tuesday night?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." Millie turned as a customer called to her from across the room. "Gotta go. See you Tuesday."

Ellie pulled her collar closer and headed back into the cold. Getting from shop to shop took more time since the Saturday Christmas shoppers had arrived. Her bag filled as she stopped at the grocers, mercantile, and milliner. Around noon, even with the sunlight warming the air, Ellie still felt chilled enough to stop for a bowl of soup at the coffee shop.

Mr. and Mrs. Bonner had built The Café years ago when Ellie was a young girl living next door to them. No longer running the business, they'd

sold it to Richard Devlin, a middle-aged, pudgy man who had trained with one of the top chefs in New York City. He'd remodeled The Café, and changed the menu to dishes no one recognized. After three weeks of no customers, he brought back Mrs. Bonner's menu of plain cooking and had been busy ever since.

Ellie took a seat and glanced at the menu. The Café did a very good business with all the extra shoppers. Most of the tables were occupied, and the recently added long counter with stools completely full.

The special of the day was chicken noodle soup. She ordered a bowl, along with a cup of tea, and then blew into her hands to warm them. Several people stopped by and said hello, leaving her wondering about the effectiveness of her disguise.

"Ellie, you did it, after all." Rose stood next to her, several bags in her hand. She dropped the packages and took the seat across from her. After sliding her foot from her ankle boot, she rubbed the soreness. "I've been shopping for two hours, and I'm exhausted."

Ellie grimaced. "I don't know how effective of a disguise this is. I've been waved at by any number of people today."

Rose leaned back in her seat and studied Ellie. "Face to face, yes, you're recognizable, but I would think from a distance, or from the back, you could fool most people. But then, you're only interested in fooling one person, and he may not even be in town today." She took her other shoe off and began rubbing. "Aren't you concerned the businesses you're soliciting will tell Mr. Colbert?"

Ellie nodded her thanks at the waitress who brought her soup and tea. "I hope not. I sort of mentioned it was a surprise, so they shouldn't tell anyone about my visit. There's only three more places left on my list, and then I can go home. My feet are pretty worn out, too."

The waitress placed a glass of water in front of Rose and pulled out her pad and pencil.

"I'll have an egg salad sandwich, please. And a cup of tea." Rose shrugged out of her coat and took a sip of water.

"What great plan do you have in that interesting brain of yours to continue with this project right under Colbert's nose?"

Ellie sighed. "Right now there is no great plan. I'm hoping by our meeting next Thursday I'll be inspired." She finished her lunch and pushed

back her chair. “Well, I’m off again. I have to get to the barbershop before he closes at one o’clock.”

Rose’s eyebrows shot up. “What are you getting from the barber shop?”

“A shaving cup and brush.” She smiled as she shoved the loose hair back under her cap. “I’ll take everything and anything.”

“Good luck. I’ll see you Monday.”

After securing the bundle under her arm, Ellie headed to the door.

The Christmas spirit hovered in the air. Most stores had added strings of holly and other seasonal decorations to their window displays. Colorful signs advertised gift items and toys. Salvation Army bell ringers stood in front of the livery, playing Christmas carols. Ellie dropped a coin in the red kettle. The group had done so much for the survivors of the San Francisco earthquake earlier in the year.

Ellie dodged between and around shoppers as she headed in the direction of the barbershop. A tall man, loaded down with packages, followed a stout woman who shouted orders over her shoulder. Ellie moved to go around him at the same moment he shifted his packages, smacking her in the eye with his elbow.

“Ouch!” Ellie’s hand flew to her face.

“Sorry.” He puffed, and kept going.

Tears filled her eye, and dripped down her cheek. She moved to the side, and set her bag against the meat market building. She unbuttoned her coat and pulled a handkerchief from the front pocket of her pants. With gentle fingertips, she pushed on her cheekbone. It hurt. As soon as she picked up the brush and cup from the barber, she’d go home. If she could put some ice on it right away, she might avoid a black eye. Wouldn’t that go over well with Mr. Colbert!

A black flash caught her attention. A scraggly dog flew by, a chunk of meat clenched tightly in his jaw. His coat matted and filthy with red dirt, he dodged shoppers in his way. “Come back here, you mutt.” Mr. Eichelberger charged past from his store’s entrance, a white apron smeared with blood wrapped around his middle, his fist raised. Ellie watched as the animal ran in confused circles, the butcher on his heels.

Ellie raced forward, got down on one knee and called to the animal. He turned back to her, his eyes darting from side to side. After hesitating for a second, he headed for the street. A horse stepped back as he ran under him,

barely missing the dog's head. Buggy drivers and automobiles wove in and out as the dog continued to run in circles, clearly terrified. Ellie ran faster. The poor little thing would be killed under a horse's hoof or a motorcar wheel. A man came out of the barbershop. She shouted at him. "Catch the dog."

Startled, he turned, his jaw hanging down, but didn't move, so Ellie sprinted past him. She reached for the dog, who skittered away and sped around a building, then off into the fields. Unable to stop her momentum, she slipped in a mud puddle, and landed face first into the water trough in front of the saloon.

Ice cold smelly water surrounded her. Her mouth opened in surprise, and she swallowed a large gulp of water. She came up sputtering when two strong hands pulled her up by her shoulders. Her feet still in the water, she closed her eyes, bent over, and coughed, trying to drag air into her lungs. A strong hand slapped her on the back as she wheezed. Finally her lungs were able to fill with air.

Ellie glanced down at herself. "Damn, I'm soaked." She laughed and shook her hands. Her hat had fallen off, and sopping curls tumbled into her eyes and around her shoulders. She turned to thank her rescuer, and peeked between strands of wet hair directly into the surprised, dark blue eyes of Max Colbert. *Oh dear.*

"Miss Henderson!" Max choked out. The woman stood before him, dripping wet, in trousers—*trousers!* Her unbuttoned coat displayed the man's shirt she wore, plastered to her chest, the peaks of her cold, wet nipples prominent against the wet fabric. Soaked pants outlined her legs, as if she were naked.

She continued to laugh, and pushed the hair out of her eyes. The movement of her arms caused her breasts to shift, the rosy nipples pointing directly at him. Max yanked her jacket closed and buttoned it up.

His jaw tightened as he took her hand and helped her out of the trough. She covered her mouth with her other hand, trying to stifle her laughter.

"Miss Henderson, I don't see any humor in this whatsoever. You are an upstanding citizen of this town, a member of a prominent family, and a teacher. *A teacher!*" He took her by the elbow and moved her forward. "I can't believe you would appear in public dressed in trousers."

Ellie pulled away from him. “I have to go back to the meat store and get my bag.”

Max took her elbow again and walked her in the direction of the bag, resting against the large glass store window where she’d left it. Her shoes squished with every step she took, and she continued to shake herself like a dog. A trail of water followed them. She retrieved her package and turned, her lips blue, her body shaking with the cold. “Thank you v-v-very much, Mr. C-C-Colbert. I guess I will s-s-see you Monday.”

He continued to stare at her wide-eyed. “Miss Henderson, I have no intention of allowing you to continue wandering around town dressed in soaking wet trousers. You’ll catch your death of cold and miss school. I will escort you home.” He stopped and stared at her. “Where is it you live?”

She pulled her hair to the side and squeezed. Max jumped back when the water hit his highly polished boots. “The b-b-boarding house on Elm and S-s-seventh.”

“Very well. My house is closer. I’ll drive you home in my automobile.” He grabbed her elbow again, and Ellie stumbled along, taking two steps to his every one.

“M-m-r. Colb-b-bert, you’re dr-r-raging me.” She yanked her arm.

He slowed his steps and glanced sideways at her while they walked. “A boarding house? I thought your family lived right outside of town?”

She nodded her head furiously. “Y-y-es they do, b-b-but I prefer to live on my own-n-n.”

He took her elbow again and hurried her along. At this rate, she’d be frozen before they got to his house. “And your family allows this?”

Ellie pulled her arm from his grasp again. “They d-d-don’t have to *allow* anything, Mr. C-c-colbert. I am a woman g-gr-grown, with my own j-j-job. There’s no need for m-m-me to live with my f-f-family.”

His gaze raked her up and down. “Indeed. It appears to me you need supervision.” They continued to walk. “Why is it you’re not married, anyway?” He bristled.

Her back stiffened. “I don’t n-n-need a husband, nor do I w-w-want one.”

They crossed the street, and continued down Evergreen, Ellie still running to keep up with his long strides. “Nonsense. Every woman wants a husband.”

She sniffed her answer.

“Here we are.” He stopped in front of his house. “If you wait here, I’ll bring my automobile around.” He ran up the steps and entered the boarding house. Mrs. Davis turned from where she’d watched them out the window and looked at him expectantly. “Who’s your lady friend?”

“She’s not my lady friend. God help me if she were.” He ripped out the words impatiently.

“The poor woman is all wet. You shouldn’t leave her outside, Mr. Colbert, she’s shivering, poor dear. Bring her inside and I’ll give her some tea.”

“Thank you very much, Mrs. Davis, but I’ll be driving her home as soon as I get my driving gloves. She can warm herself and drink tea in her own house.” He stalked past her, got his leather driving gloves from his room, and went out the back door where his Oldsmobile stood.

Ellie’s body shook uncontrollably with shivers when he pulled the automobile in front of the house. Guilt settled in his stomach. Should he have brought her into the house for Mrs. Davis to mother? No, better to get her away from him. The thought of her soft body inside her wet clothes, probably covered with goose bumps that he could run his hands over, warming her, drove him crazy. The outline of her long trim legs was still emblazoned in his memory. The woman had no shame. Parading herself around town dressed in those clothes. Her uncle should be horsewhipped for allowing that.

Before he could help her in, Ellie jumped into the automobile and settled herself. She glanced at him and grinned, her arms wrapped tightly around her. “I hope I don’t get your motorcar all w-w-wet and muddy.”

Max reached into the back seat and took two wool blankets from a small pile and dropped them in her lap. “Take off your wet jacket and wrap yourself up. He pulled a pair of goggles from the glove box and snapped them around his head. “Try not to move around.”

A three mile ride brought them to Ellie’s boarding house. She stayed huddled in the blankets, curling herself into a ball in an attempt to create warmth. Neither one spoke as they traveled the distance.

As they pulled up to Ellie’s house, a middle-aged woman stood in the open front door. “Ellie, dear, what happened? Are you all right?” She

started down the steps. Ellie groaned and opened the door of the automobile.

“Miss Henderson, please wait for me to assist you from the motorcar. Hoping in and out like that is most unladylike.” Max turned the engine off and hurried to her side. He tapped her gently on the shoulders. “Your bag, Miss Henderson?”

Ellie sighed and took it out of his hands as he gripped her elbow and started up the stairs with her.

“You d-d-don’t have to do th-th-this,” she muttered.

“Behave yourself.” He shot back.

She yanked her elbow from his grasp. “Don’t t-t-tell me what to d-d-do.”

“Someone has to.” He turned and smiled, tipping his hat at the woman. “Good afternoon, ma’am.”

“Good afternoon. Are you a friend of Miss Henderson’s?”

Max winced. “No. I am Miss Henderson’s supervisor. Max Colbert, Principal of Logan County High School.”

She held her hand out. “It’s lovely to meet you, Mr. Colbert. I’m Mrs. Beamer. Miss Henderson is one of my boarders.”

“Lucky you.”

Ellie rolled her eyes and nodded at Max. “Th-th-thank you for the ride home, Mr. Colbert.”

Mrs. Beamer tsked as she reached for Ellie. “Oh dear, look at you. You’re wet and cold. Come into the house and sit by the fire.”

“You’re welcome.” Max nodded stiffly and barreled down the stairs.

He entered the Oldsmobile, and shook his head. It appeared he needed to get Miss Henderson married and fast. Running around town in trousers, chasing after vermin infested animals, falling into water troughs.

And looking like a lady of easy virtue in that soaking wet outfit. Then laughing! Yes, the sooner he put his plan into action and got Miss Henderson off the streets of Guthrie, and in some sap’s kitchen...*and bed*. He swallowed. He must not think of her that way. She represented trouble, a disaster waiting to happen.

Tomorrow at church he would select one of his friends to meet Miss Henderson. According to the notes he made from her appointment book, she had a Women’s Rights meeting Tuesday evening. There would probably

be some man at church who could be convinced to embrace the women's crazy ideas long enough to get Miss Henderson off his hands.

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Chapter 3

Ellie peered in the small mirror in her bedroom and her shoulders slumped. Monday morning, and she still had a black eye. The man who'd elbowed her in town Saturday had hit her harder than she'd realized. What would Mr. Colbert say when she arrived at school looking like a barroom brawler?

She would just have to avoid him as best she could. The watch pinned to her shirtwaist confirmed she would be late once again. After gathering up books and papers, she ran down the stairs and burst out the front door. Her stomach growled. No breakfast again.

The five block walk to the school went quickly, but not fast enough. *Damn.* Seven minutes late. She pulled on the heavy door, and then glanced through the glass into the office where Mr. Colbert wrote at his desk. Ducking down, she scurried past his door and hurried to her classroom.

Her students were indifferent all morning. After she'd explained away the black eye to their satisfaction, they moved reluctantly on to the day's work. Every time the classroom door opened, she jerked, expecting to see Mr. Colbert glaring at her from the doorway.

Finally, the lunch bell clanged at the front office and the students grabbed lunch pails and raced out of the room. Ellie followed on their heels, her stomach still growling. She snuck a look in the teacher's lunchroom. Mr. Colbert was not there.

The empty classroom that served as a teacher's room stood at the very end of the building. Since storage space in the school was at a premium, excess furniture had been piled in one corner. Shelves with pencils, chalk, and textbooks took up an entire wall, although the shelves were scantily stocked. Someone had donated the long wooden table and two benches that sat in the middle of the floor. Yellow shades covered the large windows, and no one had bothered with curtains.

Once Ellie got her pail unpacked, the door opened and she held her breath until Rose peeked around the corner. She stared at Ellie open

mouthed as she took a seat on the bench alongside her. “What happened to your eye?”

“My eye ran into some man’s elbow.” She took a swig of cold, sweet tea out of the jar from her lunch pail, washing down the bite of chicken sandwich Mrs. Beamer had made for her.

“Goodness, it looks painful.” Rose grimaced as she took out a sandwich and an apple. “When did this happen?”

“Saturday. Right before I saw you, but it didn’t blacken until later that night.” Ellie continued to eat.

“What did Mr. Colbert say?”

Ellie swallowed. “Luckily, I haven’t seen him yet. Marion told me he went to a meeting in Oklahoma City this morning, but I thought he may be back by now. Let’s keep our fingers crossed.”

Before Ellie could relate the story to Rose about falling into the water trough, two other teachers joined them. Once again she shared the story of her black eye, saving the water trough episode for Rose’s ears only.

Thankfully, Mr. Colbert didn’t join the teachers for lunch, which he rarely did anyway, but there was always the chance. If she could only dodge him for a couple more days, there would be no need to have to view the censure in his eyes again.

Her thoughts turned to him as the other teachers chattered around her. She had never in her life found a man who interested her in a way that made her question her vow to never marry. Until now. Why in heaven’s name would Max Colbert, arrogant, self-righteous, and narrow minded, make her heart beat faster? When she looked into those deep blue eyes, above a well-shaped nose, and sensuous lips, her stomach did funny little things. Things that made her squirm.

She’d been very aware of his strength when he gripped her shoulders and pulled her out of the water. And she may be a spinster, but at twenty-eight years, she’d known his thoughts when he glared at her soaking wet clothes. The only way to describe his eyes was smoldering. She was surprised her clothes hadn’t dried on the spot under the heat of his glare. But Max Colbert stood for all the things she and her fellow suffragettes were fighting against. Male arrogance and superiority. It would behoove her to remember that and stay as far away from him as possible.

Max braked in front of Dennis Hoover's home. Hoover lived in a small apartment building on the corner of Fifth and Lexington, several miles from the Guthrie Library where the Women's Rights members met. He checked his watch. The meeting wouldn't start for another ten minutes.

"Thanks for coming, Dennis. I appreciate the company."

The pudgy man with spectacles and thinning hair tugged at his collar. "I don't mind, Max. Like I said, it isn't as though I had anything better to do tonight. I just don't understand why you want to go to this here meeting. You don't seem like the women's rights type."

"One of my teachers is involved with the group. I want to see if it's an activity befitting a lady." *And possibly handing her off to you.*

They stood at the door to the meeting room. Much to Max's surprise there were a few other men sprinkled throughout the audience. He grunted. Probably dragged there by their wives. He scanned the room until he spotted Miss Henderson. She spoke to another woman, her back facing him, but he'd recognize that messy bun of brown curls anywhere. Also, the slender shoulders and back. And the way her waist dipped in, and her bottom charmingly outlined by her slim skirt. Sweat beaded his forehead and he mentally shook himself.

"This way." He stepped in front of Dennis and led the way to two empty seats next to Miss Henderson. He motioned for Dennis to sit next to her, and he took the seat after. Max cleared his throat. "Miss Henderson."

She turned, her smile faltering. Her eyes widened. Her mouth opened as if to say something, closed abruptly, then opened again. "Mr. Colbert?"

"What the devil happened to your eye?" He leaned across Dennis to examine the yellow and purple skin.

"An accident." She touched her eye briefly. "What are you doing here?"

He glared at her. "What sort of accident could a lady have that would involve a black eye?"

"A *man* hit me in the eye with his elbow."

Max jumped from his seat. "Who? Who hit you? I demand to know who struck you, Miss Henderson."

Dennis and Miss Henderson stared at him, eyes wide, mouths open. She turned and looked at the audience they had attracted. "Mr. Colbert, please, sit down, you're causing a scene."

He sat and adjusted his tie and coat. She might put him off, but he would get to the bottom of this. After a few deep breaths, he turned to her again. “Miss Henderson?”

“Yes, Mr. Colbert.”

“I would like to introduce you to Mr. Dennis Hoover, an acquaintance of mine. Dennis, “he nodded in the man’s direction—“this is Miss Ellie Henderson, one of the teachers at Logan County High School.”

Dennis blushed a bright red and put out his hand. “How do you do, Miss Henderson?”

She ignored his hand. “I’m fine, thank you, Mr. Hoover.” She leaned across him and looked Max in the eye. “Why are you here, Mr. Colbert?”

“Is this not an open meeting?”

She bristled. “Of course it’s open, but we prefer supporters.”

Dennis eased his chair back as Max and Ellie shot remarks at each other, his head moving back and forth. Within minutes, the woman at the podium smacked the gavel and announced the beginning of the meeting.

Max sat back and continued to fume. A black eye! Whoever gave her that injury would answer to him. Since Miss Henderson’s uncle had been derelict in his duty toward his niece, he would have to take up the slack. An accident! He turned toward her again, and leaned over Dennis. “I expect a full report on that *accident* on my desk first thing tomorrow morning. Names, Miss Henderson, I expect names.”

“Are you crazy? I told you it was an accident. It happened Saturday with all the crowds Christmas shopping. I have no idea who the man was.” She bit back furiously.

“Saturday? You mean the day you ran around town dressed as a man?”

Two women in front of them turned and frowned. Ellie mumbled, “sorry,” and sat back, chewing her lip, her face flushed. After a couple minutes, she leaned over Dennis again and whispered furiously. “I’m sure Christmas is not one of your favorite holidays anyway, since you like to play Scrooge.”

“What do you mean, play Scrooge?” he whispered back.

“You shut down my Christmas project. We’re helping the poor have a nice Christmas.”

Dennis glanced around the room, his gaze settling on the exit. He tugged at his collar.

“And I was correct to shut it down. You ended up soaking wet in the center of town wearing trousers! I hope you realize I know that bag you carried were items donated from the stores, even though I ordered you not to do it.”

“Ordered! How dare you!”

“Ellie?” The woman at the podium looked in her direction, while everyone else had turned in their seats. Ellie sat back in her seat again and faced the woman. “Yes, Dorothy?”

“I said, are you ready to give us the financial report?” She eyed Max and Ellie curiously.

Ellie stood, smoothing her skirts. A flurry of papers slid from her lap. “I am. I’m sorry. I have it right here.” She grabbed the papers from the floor and edged past Dennis. She glowered at Max, and stiffened her back. “Excuse me, sir.” Max stood to let her pass, and whispered in her ear. “You should be aware this is not over.”

“I have no idea what you mean by *this*, but whatever you’re talking about is definitely over,” she shot back. The papers slipped from her fingers to the floor.

They both squatted to retrieve them. “I expect to meet with you tomorrow morning first thing for a report on your foray into town Saturday, and how one of my teachers, a woman of good family, a woman who. . .”

“I don’t see what right you have to demand that I account to you for time spent away from school. And furthermore. . .”

“Ellie?” The woman at the podium frowned and stretched to see them. “Is everything all right down there?”

“Yes. Fine.” Ellie rose, patted her hair, pushed past Max, the papers in disarray, and stalked to the head of the room. She smiled at the crowd and shuffled papers for a few minutes. Finally, she tugged on her sleeves, cleared her throat, and began the report.

Dennis leaned over. “Do you think we should leave? Your teacher doesn’t seem too happy to see us.”

“Nonsense. She’s really a lovely woman. When the meeting’s over, we’ll talk to her a bit, and you’ll see.” He really had to rein in his temper. How she got her black eye, and how she dressed when not in school shouldn’t concern him. But seeing the purple and yellow bruise on her

beautiful face felt like a shot to his gut. If she were his responsibility, there would be hell to pay for whoever injured her.

The financial report droned on, and then when finished, Ellie took a seat behind the podium. Several other women got up and gave reports and the meeting ended with a speaker on the movement to gain the vote for women.

When the presenter finally wound up her remarks to enthusiastic applause, Max stood and stretched. He'd watched Ellie the whole time, her face glowing with fervor. As he and Dennis moved forward to the door, he kept his eye on her and maneuvered Dennis in that direction. She glanced at the two of them. He smiled at her, she frowned back. He needed to put her in a pleasant mood so Dennis would begin to think of her in a friendlier manner.

"Miss Henderson. Mr. Hoover and I are stopping at the coffee shop for a piece of pie. Would you care to join us?" Dennis turned toward him, eyebrows raised.

"I don't think so, Mr. Colbert. I have a curfew at the boarding house. Mrs. Beamer locks the door precisely at ten o'clock."

"No matter. I have my Oldsmobile with me. Mr. Hoover and I will be happy to see you home afterwards. It's barely nine o'clock. We have plenty of time." He avoided looking at her eye to keep his temper in check.

"I don't think so, but thank you anyway." She turned.

Max took a deep breath. Stubborn woman. "Then I insist on driving you home." At least Miss Henderson and Dennis could sit in the back and converse on the way.

Ellie sighed. "All right. Let me get my coat."

Max glanced at Dennis, who smiled brightly. In fact, he smiled quite a bit, and watched her hips sway as she walked across the room. An uncomfortable feeling settled in his stomach. He didn't really know Dennis that well, now that he thought about it. He'd played tennis with him a few times, shared a meal and drinks at their club. He'd always seemed a little hesitant with the women. Why was he all of a sudden eyeing Miss Henderson's alluring bottom? Was he a lecher? Did he pick the wrong man to marry her?

As they entered the automobile, he mentally crossed Dennis off the list. Since he no longer considered him suitable, he put him in the back seat and gave Miss Henderson the seat next to him in the front.

“How did you enjoy the meeting, Mr. Colbert?” She adjusted her skirt, giving him a glimpse of well-turned ankles. He tugged at his collar, rotated his neck.

“Mostly nonsense.” He steered the automobile into the combined traffic of horses and buggies and other motorcars.

Ellie raised her eyebrows. “Indeed. Why would you say that?”

He did not miss her flare of temper. “Women will never get the vote. And if they do, they’ll vote the way their husbands tell them to.” He settled himself in his seat, staring straight ahead.

“Stop this automobile!” Ellie shouted.

Max pushed hard on the brake and turned to her. “What?”

“I refuse to ride in an automobile with a man who has such backward ideas. Let me out.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I can’t let you out here. It’s dark, you’re a woman.” He started forward again.

“A woman!” She sputtered. “Stop this vehicle at once and let me out!”

Again he came to an abrupt stop. Someone behind him sounded a horn, and a buggy driver swore in his direction as he circled around.

Ellie opened the door and hopped out. “My boarding house is only two blocks from here. I will walk. Good night, Mr. Colbert.” She slammed the door and started off, then returned and nodded in the direction of the back seat. “Mr. Hoover. It was a pleasure.”

Max turned to Dennis in the back seat, pushing his goggles to his forehead. “What did I say? Isn’t she a woman?”

Chapter 4

The following Sunday, Ellie entered the First Methodist Church, Bible in hand. Usually Rose accompanied her, but this morning her friend remained home to nurse a cold, and decided not to attend.

A sense of peace descended on her as the heavy oak door swished closed. Familiar smells only a church held assailed her nostrils. Candles flickered in the sanctuary, casting a glow over the area. Women from the church had spent all day Saturday decorating the church and the hall, since today the congregation would enjoy their Christmas Luncheon.

Ellie strolled down the center aisle. She stopped to chat with friends and admire new babies. Helen Spencer, waving at her from the third row, caught her attention. Ellie signaled back and hurried toward her.

“Did you drop off your pot luck casserole?” Helen shifted to allow Ellie to slide in next to her.

“Yes, it was nice of Mrs. Beamer to let me use her kitchen. She’s very fussy about it.”

“What did you bring?” Helen asked.

Ellie leaned over to whisper, “I’m not a great cook, but I remembered my Aunt Tori made this potato and ham thing. I got the recipe from her last week, and I’m pretty sure I got it right.”

“I made a tuna fish casserole. Mother tried to make it for me, but I shooed her out of the kitchen. Honestly, I don’t know how I’ll ever learn to cook if she’s always standing over my shoulder.”

“I don’t care if I ever learn to cook.” Ellie chuckled.

“Unless you had someone special to cook for.” Helen winked at her as they stood when the Pastor entered the sanctuary. Ellie turned when nudged from the side as Mr. Colbert and another man moved into their pew. Her eyes narrowed as Mr. Colbert smiled at her and then nodded to Helen.

Helen’s eyebrows rose and she glanced at Ellie. They both faced forward and joined in the hymn the congregation had already begun. *What is this man up to?* Although she saw Mr. Colbert at church just about every Sunday, he usually sat near the back and mostly ignored her.

After the disaster at the Women's Rights meeting, he'd avoided her, and she him. She'd conducted her meeting with the Christmas Basket group of students on Thursday, and he'd ignored that as well. Now here he sat in her pew, singing from his hymnal, all relaxed, like he stood next to her every Sunday.

She peeked at him from under her eyelashes. He was certainly easy on the eyes. Tall, broad shouldered, with long legs. His neatly combed pitch-black hair made her fingers itch to mess it up. Although early in the morning, she could already see he would need another shave before supper. She casually leaned over an inch and sniffed. Bay rum and something spicy.

He glanced at her, his piercing blue eyes meeting hers. A slight smile edged his lips, and she almost swallowed her tongue. An arrogant, supercilious Max Colbert she could deal with. Not this Max Colbert who smiled and made her insides go all squishy. She cleared her throat and sat as the preacher began the service.

Whatever sermon Pastor Graves delivered went completely over Ellie's head. She fidgeted and squirmed in her seat so much Helen cast her a questioning look. Then she held herself stiffly to keep from leaning against Mr. Colbert's jacket, and rubbing her cheek against the soft wool. What in heaven's name was wrong with her? This man was the bane of her existence. Her enemy. He stood for all the things she fought against. She heaved a sigh of relief when the service ended.

"You will be joining the rest of the congregation for our Annual Christmas Party, will you not, Miss Henderson?" Max looked down at her from his impressive height.

"Of course," she snapped, still annoyed with herself for her reaction to his presence.

Max stepped out of the pew, and moved back to allow her and Helen to exit. The four strolled along with the rest of the crowd, greeting the Pastor as they left the church.

"If you will excuse me, Mr. Colbert, I need to go to the church kitchen and help set up for the luncheon." She clamped on Helen's arm and tugged her forward.

"Wait, Miss Henderson. I would like you to meet Mr. Clay Forest." He turned to the man standing alongside him. The rotund man wiped sweat from his forehead, and reeked of cigar smoke. His face held the flush of a

regular user of hard spirits. “This is Miss Ellie Henderson, a teacher at Logan County High School.”

“How do you do, Miss Henderson?” The man stuck his hand out. Ellie took it and gave it a brief shake. She nodded in Helen’s direction. “This is Miss Helen Spencer.” She took a deep breath. “Helen, I’m sure you already know Mr. Colbert.”

“Indeed I do. How are you, Mr. Colbert?”

“Just fine, thank you, Miss Spencer.”

Mr. Forest stepped forward and took Helen’s hand. “I am delighted to meet you, Helen.”

Helen stiffened at the use of her first name.

“And you must call me Clay,” he added, extending his arm to Helen to escort her.

Ellie had a moment of panic when it appeared Mr. Colbert planned to escort her. She tugged again at Helen’s arm. “Sorry, we’re needed in the kitchen. You gentlemen can go on in to the hall.” Without a backward glance, she hurried Helen away.

Once they reached the kitchen, Helen turned to Ellie. “What is going on?”

Ellie sighed and grabbed an apron from one of the hooks in the kitchen. “I have no idea. Would you believe Mr. Colbert showed up at the Women’s Rights meeting last week?”

“Mr. Colbert? At the Women’s Rights meeting? Surely you’re joking.” Helen had her head stuck in the icebox, pulling out bowls and dishes.

Ellie took them from her hands and placed them on a tray. “I am not kidding. And the funny thing is, he showed up there with some other man I’d never met before.”

Several other women arrived, chatting noisily, putting an end to their conversation. Mr. Colbert certainly acted strange lately. Not that coming to church made him odd, but sitting right next to her certainly did. She’d never seen him with another person at church before. All of a sudden there he was, smiling at her and dragging along a friend.

She stopped loading trays. Her jaw dropped and she stiffened. Mr. Colbert was spying on her! That could be the only explanation. The snake thought to get something on her so he could go to the Board and demand she be let go. Of all the vile, mean, underhanded things. She would show

him. If he looked for Ellie Henderson to make mistakes, he would be sorely disappointed.

He's already found you in a water trough with trousers on. All right, so he caught her with one mistake. From now on, she would be on her guard. She tightened her lips. Oh, that man!

Max and Clay entered the gaily decorated hall and snagged two seats. The Sunday school children had drawn Christmas pictures that were tacked to the walls. A small pine tree stood at the foot of the stage with ornaments and candles. Below it, a life sized crèche rested on a bed of hay. The tables were adorned with red and green tablecloths. Obviously, the women of the church had gone to a lot of trouble to make the church Christmas Party a success.

Max leaned toward Clay. "We'll want to keep the two seats across from us open for Miss Henderson and Miss Spencer. It would be nice if they joined us."

"That Helen is a looker." Clay smacked his lips.

Max shot him a look. How the devil could Clay think Miss Spencer a looker when she stood next to Miss Henderson? Why Miss Henderson was a beauty. Shining brown curls, beautiful large hazel eyes, and a slender, delicate frame. A quite nicely filled out frame. "Personally I think Miss Henderson is a fine-looking woman."

Clay glanced briefly at him. "She's okay, too, but that Helen, wow."

Max shifted in his seat. This was not going the way he'd hoped. He'd expected Clay to be enamored with Miss Henderson. He would have to work harder.

The doors from the kitchen opened and several women carried trays to the tables set up in the front and placed bowls and platters, napkins and silverware on the table.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will now form a line to the left of the serving table. The ladies behind the table will be happy to assist you." A stout older woman, still wearing her purple and pink church hat, made the announcement in a booming voice. The other women moved to various places behind the table, directing the crowd, and piling food onto plates.

Max and Clay moved down the line, plates in hand. They approached Miss Henderson, who smiled at the person in front of them as she placed a

spoonful of something on her plate. “Which dish did you contribute, Miss Henderson?”

Ellie jerked her head in his direction, and her smile faltered. “This one, Mr. Colbert. It’s a ham and potato casserole my aunt makes all the time.” She pointed her spoon at the dish in front of her.

Max nudged Clay. “Doesn’t this look great, Clay? I’ll bet Miss Henderson is a wonderful cook.”

“Where’s Helen’s dish?” Clay looked up and down the row, ignoring Max’s comment.

Ellie rolled her eyes. “Miss Spencer and her tuna fish casserole are further down.” She motioned her head as she placed a serving of her casserole on the two men’s plates.

“I don’t see her.” Clay stretched his neck. “Oh, there she is. She’s just coming out from the kitchen.”

Max’s jaw tightened, and he elbowed Clay. “Move along, Clay. People are waiting.” He turned to Miss Henderson. “Mr. Forest and I would be pleased if you would join us for dinner at our table. We’ve saved a space for you.”

Miss Henderson narrowed her eyes as if she suspected him of something evil. He shrugged. Women were difficult to understand, but especially this one.

“And Helen, too,” Clay emphasized, as Max nudged him along.

Everyone finally seated, the Pastor offered a blessing. Soon the clink of silverware, noisy conversation, and laughter filled the air. Max took a bite of Miss Henderson’s casserole and lost his breath. The woman must have put a barrel of salt in the dish.

“Ugh. This is awful.” Clay spit a mouthful of the potato and ham casserole into his napkin.

“Clay!” Max said, wide-eyed, and took a large gulp of water.

“Well, it is awful. Did you have any yet? Whoever made this should be arrested for imitating a cook.” Several people turned at his comments.

Max glanced at Miss Henderson, who sat with her fork halfway to her mouth, her face flushed.

“Actually, Mr. Forest, I made it. Is something wrong?”

“No, not at all, Miss Henderson.” Max took another bite and whimpered.

Miss Henderson placed a small forkful of it on her tongue and grimaced. "I think I added too much salt."

"I'll say." Clay snorted. "You better stay far away from stoves." He threw his head back and laughed.

Miss Henderson put her fork down. Max's gut tightened. Her face leached of color, her cute little chin trembled, and her eyes filled with tears. *Damnation.*

"Excuse me." She pushed her chair back and fled through the kitchen door.

"What's the matter with you?" Max turned to Clay.

"What? The woman's a lousy cook. She probably already knows it." He continued to shovel food in his mouth. "I'll tell you, though, Helen's tuna fish casserole is wonderful." Clay patted Miss Spencer's hand. Tight-lipped, she pulled it back.

Max threw his napkin down and strode to the kitchen. Miss Henderson stood at the sink, her back to him, dabbing her eye with the corner of her apron.

"Miss Henderson?" He walked slowly toward her.

She turned and took a deep breath. "Yes, Mr. Colbert." Her eyes and nose were red. Curls were loosened from her bun and hung around her face.

"Are you all right?" His stomach twisted as he stood in front of her.

She cleared her throat. "Yes, I'm fine. I thought I'd refill the water pitchers."

"They are full."

"Well, we probably need more tea."

"No, there's plenty of tea out there." He tucked a curl behind her ear. "I'm sorry for what Mr. Forest said."

"Why? It's true. The casserole tasted horrible. I'm no cook, probably never will be." She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "I tried. I don't understand what I did wrong. Tori makes it all the time, and I followed her recipe." Her chin trembled, her eyes begged to understand. "What happened?" She burst into tears and covered her face with her hands.

Max had the urge to race from the kitchen, leave the building, and never return. Women's tears brought him to his knees. He could handle anything but that. He clumsily patted her shoulder, and before he knew how or why, she was in his arms, grasping his jacket lapels, sobbing all over his starched

shirt. He wrapped his arms around her back, and rested his chin on her head. “Ah, don’t cry, Miss Henderson...Ellie. Mr. Forest is a rude man and doesn’t deserve your tears.”

She pulled back and fixed her gaze on him, and his heart sped up. The scent of rose water and sugar surrounded her. Her lips, puffy from biting them, drew his gaze. Her breasts were warm and soft against his chest as they rose and fell with her breathing. Ellie Henderson was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

“Mr. Colbert?” Ellie said as he bent toward her.

“Max,” he answered as his mouth descended on hers. He moved his hands to the back of her head to take the kiss deeper. At first Ellie stiffened, then her body relaxed into him as he continued his assault on her luscious mouth. He slid his tongue along her lips, and she opened. Max lowered one hand to her waist and tugged her closer. Her palms skimmed his chest to his shoulders, where she clung to him.

This felt so right. Ellie Henderson fit his body as if made for it. Soft, warm, curved in all the right places. Too bad he would be marrying her off to someone else. Someone who would kiss her like this, remove her clothes, lay her down, make love to her. He groaned.

“Ellie?”

Max and Ellie sprang apart like two youths caught behind the wood shed at the sound of Helen’s voice. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” Ellie said breathlessly, as she fussed with her bun and straightened her dress. “Fine. I was just, ah, just, ah, looking for some more napkins.” She raced to the cabinet against the far wall and opened it. She took out a stack of cake plates and marched from the kitchen.

Max stood slack-jawed as he watched her leave with plates instead of napkins. He turned to Miss Spencer, straightening his tie. “Miss Henderson seemed a bit upset by Mr. Forest’s remarks, so I thought I would comfort her.”

Miss Spencer nodded, her face a bright red. “Then I’ll just go on out and help Ellie with the coffee and tea.” She backed toward the door and escaped.

Max blew out a breath. What in heaven’s name had he done? He closed his eyes, and his shoulders slumped. He rubbed his temples with a thumb and forefinger, and chastised himself. This plan to get Miss Henderson—

Ellie—married, was backfiring. He would *not* be attracted to her. She was trouble, and his life did not allow for a woman. His needs were well taken care of, by someone who didn't interfere with his well-ordered existence.

Life with Ellie Henderson would be disastrous. The unfortunate man who tied himself to her would be forever rescuing her from one catastrophe or another. Unless the poor soul starved to death first.

Obviously, Clay Forest was totally unacceptable. The man had no manners, and didn't appreciate Miss Henderson at all. When he got home this afternoon, he would cross him off the list and go to the next name.

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Chapter 5

Two days later, Ellie eyed the classroom door at the sound of a soft knock. John Ridley poked his head in. "Can I talk to you, Miss Henderson?" One of her younger students, John was a quiet boy, who Ellie suspected came from an abusive home. He'd often showed results of whippings, and she'd heard in town Mrs. Ridley had sported black eyes on occasion and one time a broken arm. The boy stood in front of her, twisting his worn brown woolen cap.

"Sure, John, have a seat." She nodded at the student desk in front of her.

The boy slid onto the seat, and continued to fumble with his cap.

Ellie rested her elbows on the desk and smiled. "Why are you here so late?"

"I just came from Mr. Colbert's office." He took a deep breath, and his young voice trembled. "I'm in big trouble, Miss Henderson."

The poor boy looked terrified. "What happened?"

He licked his lips. "You remember the envelope you keep in your desk with money in it?"

"Yes." Ellie had been collecting money from the students to buy food items to add to the Christmas baskets. At last count she had five dollars and forty-two cents.

John slumped. "I did a bad thing."

"What is it? What did you do that got you into trouble?"

He peeked at her from under the hair that fell on his forehead. "I took the envelope with the money in it."

Ellie frowned, opened her desk drawer, and pushed papers aside. "You're right. It's gone." She studied him for a moment. "Well, just give it back to me, and there won't be any problem."

"I can't." He winced and lowered his head.

She lifted his chin. "Did you already spend it?"

John shook his head. "Mr. Colbert has it."

Ellie's stomach dropped. "How did he get it?"

“I hurried past his office and it fell out of my pocket. He asked me where I got it, and I told him.”

“Go on.”

“He said he would speak to my pa, and maybe even go to the police,” he finished in a rush, his face bright red.

Ellie sat back and blew out a breath. “Why did you take the money, John? It doesn’t seem like something you would do.”

He began twisting his hat again. “My ma’s in a bad way, Miss Henderson. Pa finally let her go to the doc last week, and he said she has some kinda cancer thing and she ain’t gonna live a whole lot longer.”

She touched the boy’s hand. “I’m so sorry, John. Is there anything I can do?”

He shook his head. “The reason I took the money was so I could buy her a Christmas present. Just so she’d have something nice for once, before she, you know...” His voice grew thick with tears he attempted to hold back. “And if my pa finds out, he’ll take it out on ma, and she can’t take no more beatins’.” A tear slid down the boy’s face.

He swiped at his face and continued. “I would’ve paid it back. I got me a job at the livery, and Mr. Hennessey’s payin’ me enough. I wanted to git the present right away, just in case...” His voice drifted off.

What a conundrum. Stealing could not be condoned, but with all the child’s problems, he could use a little bit of understanding and sympathy. Ellie stood, crossed her arms, and looked down at the boy. “You do know what you did was wrong, even though for a good reason?”

John nodded. “I ain’t never gonna do nothin’ like that again, Miss Henderson. I promise.” His small dirty thumb drew a cross on his chest.

Her heart thumped. What he did could be considered a crime, but then again, it should be a crime for a man to beat his wife and children. While certainly frowned upon, there still wasn’t any law to prevent it, or to lock up Mr. Ridley when he did. Yet, if he’d raised a hand to her, he’d been in jail. Wives were still considered the property of their husbands, and the unfairness of it rankled.

“I’ll speak with Mr. Colbert and see if I can get him to return the money to me, and skip speaking with the police, or your pa.”

He stood, a slight smile on his face, a look of relief in his eyes. “Thanks so much, I’d appreciate it.”

Ellie put her arm around his shoulders and tugged him close. "I can't guarantee anything, but I'll try. Now run on home, I'll see you tomorrow."

He flashed a full smile and left the room.

She sat for a while after John left. Mr. Colbert was a rigid man. The trials of a young boy with a mean father would not touch him. Max saw everything in either black or white. Right and wrong. If she went to him with John's story, he would subject her to a sermon on the Ten Commandments, and he probably would find a way to work in Women's Rights. Despite that, she'd have to at least try to speak with him, and soon. He could decide at any time to visit Mr. Ridley.

After packing up her books and papers, she walked to the end of the hallway and entered Mr. Colbert's office. His secretary, Rita, stood at the file cabinet leafing through papers.

"Is Mr. Colbert in?"

The secretary spun around, grasping her throat. "Oh, Miss Henderson, you gave me a start. I didn't hear you come in."

"Sorry."

"No, Mr. Colbert has gone home for the day."

Ellie pressed her index finger to her lips. "What time will he be in tomorrow? Can I make an appointment to see him?"

Rita walked to her desk and flipped pages on a large black book. "He has a meeting in the morning outside of school." She frowned. "This is new. It looks like he wrote in a visit to see Mr. Ridley at the blacksmith's after the meeting." She glanced at her. "I guess that's where he works." After closing the book, she smiled. "I'm not sure about that meeting since he made it himself, so I can't really say what time he'll be back here."

Ellie's stomach clenched. She had to get to him before he saw John's father. "That's all right, Rita, I'll see him some other time. Thanks. Have a good evening."

"You, too," she answered and returned to the file cabinet.

Ellie left the schoolhouse and walked home. Cool, crisp air made for a brisk stroll in the late afternoon sunshine. She passed two young boys throwing a stick for a dog, and a group of little girls playing with their dolls. It saddened her that John Ridley had to live with such a horrible man. Imagine beating a woman dying of cancer! He should be horsewhipped himself.

Unfortunately, no idea on how to keep Mr. Colbert from seeing John's father had come to mind by the time she reached the blue and white Victorian house on Meridian Street where she rented a room. Mrs. Beamer greeted her as she stepped into the hall. Ellie hung her coat and unwound her scarf, still deep in thought. She headed down the hall to her first floor bedroom.

"Supper in ten minutes, Ellie," Mrs. Beamer called as she walked past her and back to the kitchen. Smelled like chicken tonight. Her landlady certainly knew how to cook. She should have asked Mrs. Beamer to help her with the ham and potato dish disaster.

Her stomach fluttered and a flush rose to her face when she remembered the kiss Mr. Colbert—Max—had given her. Goodness! She fanned her face with her hand. What had ever possessed her to allow such liberties? What must he think of her? A harlot, most likely. She'd never felt all those wonderful sensations before. If anything, it left her curious as to what would come next if they'd been somewhere else. Somewhere all alone.

She shook her head. It would behoove her to remember Max Colbert embodied the type of ideas she despised. Nothing had changed between them. She still believed he looked for a way to have her fired.

After a quick wash with the pitcher of water in her room, Ellie smoothed her hair back and left to join the other women at the table.

Later that evening, Ellie and Rose strolled arm in arm on their way home from another Women's Rights meeting. After exchanging hugs and promises to see each other in the morning, they parted ways, and Ellie continued to the boarding house. Once she reached Eleventh Street, she made a detour and headed toward Evergreen. Within minutes, she stood in front of Mr. Colbert's boarding house.

She should walk right up that porch, ring the doorbell and ask to speak with him. She cringed. Women knocking on the door of a bachelor boarding house at night would be labeled 'fast' and with a ruined reputation, Mr. Colbert would have grounds to fire her.

There had to be another way. However, time grew short. Quietly, hoping no boards on the porch would creak, she climbed the stairs, knelt down, and peeked in the window of the front parlor. Five men occupied a couch and two chairs, a few reading the newspaper, two others in a deep discussion. Mr. Colbert was one of the newspaper-readers. She sat back on her heels

and sighed. If only she could get the envelope with the money back, he'd have no proof to show Mr. Ridley tomorrow.

Carefully, she went back down the stairs. She pulled her coat collar closer and shoved her hands in her pockets. Defeated, she slowly continued her walk home when she glanced to the side of the boarding house. The scant moonlight cast a light on a wooden ladder lying on the ground against the house. *No, don't even think about it. You can't do that.*

Yes, she could. If she climbed into Mr. Colbert's room and found the envelope, he'd have nothing to show Mr. Ridley tomorrow. It wasn't really stealing, she told her conscience. It belonged to her. She would merely be recovering her own property. Before her conscience could come up with a better argument, she hurried to the ladder and lifted it. Heavy. For sure, she couldn't drag it far.

Which bedroom would be his? She snuck around the house, studying the second floor. The room to her right had a small light burning, and the only windows with both shades pulled down, precisely halfway. Both of them. She smiled. There couldn't be two men in one boarding house with such a penchant for orderliness. It had to be his. If it turned out it not to be, she would go through the other bedrooms until she found Mr. Colbert's.

Sweat broke out on her forehead. She must be crazy. She would be sneaking around the bedrooms of bachelors. Good Lord, what was she thinking? Her body racked with shivers. She rubbed her palms over her upper arms and continued on home. Two minutes later, John Ridley's sad face floated into her mind. He would be beaten. His poor dying mother would be beaten.

She had to do it.

The ladder weighed a ton. She winced when a small piece of wood embedded itself in her palm. She managed to get the ladder up and held her breath when she leaned it against the house. Someone may have heard the thump it made. Her stomach knotted. When no one raced out the front door yelling for the police, she started to breathe again. Inhaling deeply, she started up, one step at a time. *Don't look down.*

As she reached the top, she shoved the window open, and stood still to listen for someone shouting at her. No sound except the thundering of her heart. She took two steps more and leaned over the windowsill. As she pushed her body forward, her foot hit the side of the ladder, and it crashed

against the house, banging into the column on the porch before landing with a whoosh on an overgrown mulberry hedge. Panicked, she slid the rest of the way in, falling hard on her shoulder with a thump.

Mrs. Davis jerked as she placed the tray of cookies and tea on the mahogany table in the parlor. “What was that noise?”

Five men looked toward the window. “Wind must be kicking up,” Andrew said, returning to his newspaper.

“No, that wasn’t wind. I distinctly heard a noise upstairs.” She turned to Max. “It sounded like something fell in your room. It came from the front east corner.”

He’d been concentrating on a story about newly discovered political corruption, and didn’t hear anything. “Are you sure, Mrs. Davis? I can’t think of anything in my room that would fall over.”

“Yes, I’m sure. Or it could be a burglar upstairs. It makes me nervous to think someone may be in the house.”

Women. Always rattled about something. He’d have no peace until he went upstairs and checked. With a deep sigh, he placed the newspaper aside and left the comfortable leather chair. “I’ll check.” He headed up the stairs.

He entered the room and immediately sensed something different. The window. It was wide open, and he hadn’t had a reason to raise it in weeks. Another thing caught his attention. Someone or something was breathing. And breathing hard. And whimpering. He moved to the lamp on his dresser, raised the wick to provide more light. A soft glow surrounded the image of... “Miss Henderson!”

“Afraid so.” She sat propped against the wall, legs sprawled, wincing as she held her shoulder.

“What in all that’s holy are you doing in my room?” All the air left his lungs and he sat on the bed, facing her. “Did you just climb through that window?”

She nodded.

“Mr. Colbert, is everything all right upstairs?” Mrs. Davis called from the bottom of the staircase.

He raced to the door. “Yes, Mrs. Davis. Nothing to be concerned about. You were right, something fell over in my room.”

“Well that’s good news. Are you coming down for your tea?”

“No. Thanks anyway, I’m feeling a bit tired. I think I’ll turn in early. Good night.” He shut the door and returned to the bed.

“There are so many questions jumping around my brain, I don’t know which one to ask first.”

“I understand.” She shifted. “Could you please help me up? I seem to have hurt my shoulder.”

“Of course.” He reached down, and helped her sit on the bed. Realizing what he’d done, he hopped off the bed as if it would burst into flames.

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Why are you in my bedroom?”

“That question seems like the best place to start.” She winced as she moved her body to face him. “You have something of mine that I came to get.”

Max stared at her wide-eyed. “I don’t have anything of yours, and if I did, why not get it from me tomorrow at school?” He walked to the window, looked down, grimaced, and then shut it.

Her gaze followed his movements. “Because by the time you get to school tomorrow, it will be too late.”

“Perhaps you better explain.” He grabbed a chair from in front of his desk, turned it around and straddled it. As far away from the bed as he could get.

Ellie went through the story of John Ridley and his unfortunate family. When she finished, she placed her hands in her lap and slumped.

“Why didn’t you come to me and tell me the story at school?”

“You were already gone by then, and besides, I didn’t think you’d give it back to me.”

He sat back, his mouth open. “Why? What sort of man do you think I am that I wouldn’t feel sympathy for the boy’s plight?”

“I don’t know what sort of man you are at all, Mr. Colbert.” She stood and rubbed her shoulder. “But now I need to get home. It’s almost past curfew time.”

He watched her carefully. “How do you plan to do that?”

“What do you mean?”

“It seems your mode of entry is now lying in the mulberry bush.” He motioned toward the window.

“Can’t I just leave out the front door?”

“And how am I to explain to my landlady, who is now in the parlor enjoying her cup of tea and cookies, how you came to be in my bedroom? Not only is your reputation at risk, Miss Henderson, but so is mine. You’re one of my teachers.”

She blushed a bright red, and sat back down on the bed. “Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.”

“What are we going to do?” She kept rubbing her shoulder and blinking.

Good heavens, tears again? The last time she cried in his presence he did something totally foolish. Best to get her out of his house and back to the safety of her own.

“Simple. We’ll have to go back out the window.”

“But there’s no ladder.” She blinked furiously and wrung her hands. “I’ll lose my room if I don’t get home by ten o’clock. Then I’ll have to move back with my family, and Uncle Jesse will demand to know why, and when he finds out, he’ll send me to a convent, like he’s always threatened.”

At least the man had *some* sense, and knowledge of what direction his niece headed. “I’ll climb out the window and drop to the ground. Then you’ll climb out after me, let go of the window, and I’ll catch you.”

Ellie stared at him for a minute. “Never mind, I’d rather go to a convent.” She headed for the door.

“Stop.”

She remained at the door, her hand on the knob. “You’ll kill yourself, dropping out of the window like that.”

“No, I’m a man. Many a times in my youth I crawled in and out windows. I’ll be fine.”

A bright smile lit up her face as she turned. “You? You climbed out windows?” She shook her head. “I never would have guessed. You sure don’t seem the type.”

“There are a lot of things about me you wouldn’t guess.” His voice lowered, his heart sped up. Why did this woman plague him so? Here she stood in his bedroom, two feet from the large, comfortable bed, her hair and clothes in disarray. He’d already tasted her, knew her feel, her scent. Blood rushed to his groin. He mentally shook himself.

“Come here.” He reached his hand out.

Trance-like, she took his hand and moved in front of him. If he kissed her now, it wouldn’t end until they were both naked and sweating. A very

bad idea. For so many reasons. Funny how he couldn't think of even one right now.

"Mr. Colbert, I need to get home."

"Right." He blinked several times, then turned to the window and looked at the ground. "It's not too far. Once I'm on my feet, you climb out, and when I tell you, let go of the sill and I'll catch you."

She swallowed and nodded.

He sat on the windowsill, slid his legs over, and with some maneuvering, ended up hanging from the ledge by his hands. Then dropped. He hit the ground, knees bent, and went down on his rear. He stood, brushed off his pants, and called to her in a loud whisper. "Okay, your turn, just do what I did."

She stuck her head out and whispered back. "Are you crazy? I can't do what you did. It's like you were a monkey."

"You have no choice. Do it, or you'll miss your curfew."

Awkwardly, she put her knees on the windowsill, turned, and ended up leaning on the sill with both elbows, her legs hanging above his head.

"All right, drop," he whispered.

"No."

"Yes."

She twisted her neck and regarded him. "Stop looking up my skirts."

"What!"

"Shh! I said, stop looking up my skirts."

"I'm not looking up your skirts."

"Yes, you are. I'm hanging here in my skirts, and you're looking up at me."

"I have to look up if I'm going to catch you."

"Close your eyes."

"Don't be ridiculous. If I close my eyes, I'll miss catching you." He barely finished his sentence when she let go, arms flaying. Her bottom hit him in the chest, and they both went down in a heap. She sat on his neck.

"Get up, you're choking me." He gasped.

She rolled over just as the front door of the house opened. "Who's out there?" Mrs. Davis stood on the porch, broom in one hand, a heavy black skillet in the other.

“It’s just me, Mrs. Davis. I decided to take a walk before bed.” He straightened his clothes and walked toward her.

“Mr. Colbert? I didn’t even see you leave the house.”

“You were busy with your tea. I’ll be in shortly.”

“All right. Good night again.”

Once the door closed. Ellie joined him, picking leaves out of her hair, dusting off her dress. Her bun trailed down her back, half in, half out. A smudge of dirt smeared her chin, and her eyes were bright with laughter. The woman was missing something in the brain. How could she possibly find this situation funny?

“Come, I’ll drive you home.” He put his hand out.

Ellie’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh. The envelope. I forgot to get it.”

Max put his hand to her lower back and escorted her to the Oldsmobile. “It was never in my room to begin with. It’s in the top drawer of my desk at school.”

Chapter 6

“Your hair is messed up.” Ellie eyed him as he took her elbow and they walked to the automobile.

Max frowned and smoothed it back.

“You’re never messed up. You’re always perfect.”

He smiled at her. “I’m far from perfect, Ellie.”

She regarded him. Not just the messed up hair. He seemed different. Rather than lecturing her, he’d helped her solve a problem. Maybe. “Are you still planning on seeing Mr. Ridley?”

They reached the automobile. Max helped her in, slid in behind the steering wheel, and turned to her. “Stealing is a serious matter.” He raised his hand when she began to protest. “Let me finish. Even though he has a good reason for what he did, he still needs to be disciplined.”

Max put his goggles on and cranked the engine. “I won’t speak with the boy’s father. I will, however, visit with John again and assign him some chores to do around the school.”

“He just got a job with the livery.”

“No matter. We can work around that.” He glanced in her direction as they bounced along the rutted road. “He has to be punished.”

Ellie stewed on that as they rode. She enjoyed riding in an automobile. Uncle Jesse had one and he even let her drive it once. Her gaze drifted to Max’s serious face. No doubt, he’d never let her drive his automobile. Probably something that wouldn’t appear on his ‘approved’ list of activities for female teachers.

He stopped in front of her boarding house, turned off the engine and glanced at his timepiece. As she reached toward the handle, he snapped his goggles off and touched her arm. “You have another ten minutes. I’d like to talk to you about something.”

She settled back in the seat and faced him. No matter that he’d tried to smooth his hair, it still hung over his forehead, giving him a softer look. Would he kiss her again? Did she want him too? He’d raised her curiosity on what happened between a man and a woman. She knew the bare bones

of it, but no one ever told her about the exciting and pleasurable feelings that would consume her. Every time she asked her sister, Rachel, she simply blushed and told her she would find out when the time came. Everyone still thought of her as the baby of the family.

“You are continuing to collect items for Christmas baskets, aren’t you?”

She glanced at her lap and picked invisible lint from her coat.

“Ellie. Look at me.” His voice rolled off her in soft waves, not the harsh tone she’d been used to. What was going on here?

She forced herself to meet his gaze. “I couldn’t stop. I’m sorry, but my students were so excited about doing the baskets, and we have a long list of families who will be thrilled to get one of them.” Her voice rose with excitement. “We have food, sweets, warm gloves and scarves, and for the families with children, we’ve managed to collect small toys.”

Max pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m not comfortable with you going into strange houses to deliver baskets. I’m going to ask you a question, and I want an honest answer.”

She tilted her head and waited.

“If your uncle knew what you planned to do, would he approve?”

She opened her mouth to respond, and then stopped. That was something she’d never thought about. *Would* he approve of her going into strange houses in questionable neighborhoods? A vision of Jesse’s tight-lipped glare after he’d caught her at several escapades gave her pause. “No. He probably wouldn’t.” Her shoulders slumped.

“Then I’ll go with you.”

“Excuse me?” She swore he’d offered to go with her.

“When the time comes to make your deliveries, I will drive you.” He shifted in his seat and cleared his throat. “Now I’ll walk you to your door.”

Ellie continued to stare at him as he left the automobile, walked around the front, and opened her door. He put his hand out. She took it and her hand tingled, the sensation racing up her arm. Her heart did double time as she fixed her gaze on his face. He smiled at her. *Smiled!*

Tonight she’d snuck into his bedroom, made it necessary for him to crawl out his own window like a thief, fell on him when she dropped from the ledge, and messed up his hair. Instead of the disdain she’d expected, he drove her home, offered to go with her to deliver her baskets, and then smiled.

They walked slowly up the steps. “Thanks, Mr. Colbert.”

“I think it’s time you called me Max. At least while not in school.” He gave her a lopsided grin. Her stomach clenched.

“Good night.” She hurried through the door.

Max returned to his motorcar and headed for home. Sweat beaded his forehead. This situation troubled him. The plan was to find someone to marry Miss Henderson to get her out of his hair, but every time he ran into her, it got harder to remember. Oh, she was trouble all right. No doubt about that, but her presence slowly peeled away the layers of protection he’d placed around himself.

He’d witnessed first-hand what his father had gone through with his fool-headed mother. As much as he loved her, like Ellie Henderson, his mother skipped from one crazy project to another. An upstanding businessman and respected member of the Chicago community, Joseph Colbert had rescued his wife from more than one debacle. Growing up, Max had always felt sorry for his father until the day he told him, with a besotted look on his face, that he loved his wife, not in spite of her peculiar ways, but because of them.

Not him. He had his life well planned, with no room for the lunacy of a wife. They cried, complained, and did all sorts of things to embarrass their husbands. Ellie. Practically a duplicate of his crazy mother.

It was time to present her with another prospective husband.

Max stood at the door and watched as the last students left the building. The dry spell had broken, and clouds dumped buckets of much needed water on Guthrie. It doused houses and people, and ran in the streets in rivulets, creating red mud everywhere. Two boys pushed each other until they were both rolling around in the muck, laughing.

Max winced. “Get up out of that mud and go on home. Your mothers will take a switch to you.” He closed the door and headed down the hallway to Ellie’s classroom.

Her lovely bottom rose in the air as she crawled under her desk. An unintended grin crossed his face. “Miss Henderson?”

“Oh.” She banged her head on the desk as she jumped. She backed out, rubbing her head, wreaking havoc with her hair. Face flushed, she climbed to her feet and smoothed her blouse, leaving a trail of blue ink across one breast. “I was looking for my good pen that rolled under the desk.” She held

up a black fountain pen, chewed around the edge. Dark blue ink dripped from it onto papers on her desk.

“Ellie.” He nodded in the direction of the pen.

She placed the pen on the desk, and he watched the ink slowly run to the edge and drip onto the floor.

He shook his head in disbelief. “I’ve come to invite you to a Christmas Concert.” He held up two tickets. “It’s tomorrow night at the Guthrie Music Hall.”

“You want to go with me?” Her eyes were wide with surprise.

“Yes. It starts at seven-thirty. I will pick you up at seven o’clock at your boarding house.”

“Wait a minute. I may be busy tomorrow night.”

He raised one eyebrow. “Another Women’s Rights meeting?”

“Well no, it’s tonight.”

“Then are you busy tomorrow night?”

“Not exactly. I mean, I had some work to finish on my Christmas baskets.”

“Good. Then it’s settled. I’ll see you then.” He turned on his heel and left the room, the scent of rose water teasing his nostrils.

Ellie left her bedroom and walked down the hallway after Mrs. Beamer had tapped on her door and announced that ‘her’ Mr. Colbert had arrived and waited in the parlor.

He stood next to a gentleman of undetermined age. He was pudgy and soft, and reminded her of a stuffed bunny rabbit. His skin was stark white, his nose pink, and his eyes a pale color she couldn’t name. It may have been her imagination, but his unusually long ears seemed to move by themselves. He had a few lengthy whiskers growing on his upper lip. Not enough to be called a moustache, but nevertheless, there they were.

“Ellie, I would like you to meet Homer Snodgrass.” He turned to the man. “This is Miss Ellie Henderson, one of the teachers in Logan County High School.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Henderson. Mr. Colbert has certainly spoken highly of you.” He smiled. His teeth protruded in the front. Definitely a rabbit.

“Very nice to meet you, too, Mr. Snodgrass.” She glanced at Max with one eyebrow raised.

“Well, shall we go?” he said, avoiding her eyes and handing Ellie her coat.

“Have a good time.” Mrs. Beamer waved at them from the door.

Max escorted her and Mr. Snodgrass into the back seat of his motorcar. “Here’s a blanket to stay warm on the ride to the concert hall.” Then he slid behind the steering wheel, fastened his goggles, and cranked the engine.

Max always seemed to have a friend with him—but never the same one. His circle of acquaintances must be huge. She never would have guessed Max Colbert didn’t like to attend public events by himself, but there didn’t seem to be any other explanation. He must need the confidence of another man. Strange.

She relaxed as she settled against the soft leather seat. Even though Max had bullied her into going tonight, she was glad she’d accepted. Several of her friends had already attended the concert and spoke highly of it.

“Miss Henderson, may I say you remind me so much of my dear departed Agnes.” Mr. Snodgrass’s nose twitched.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Your wife?”

“No. My Basset Hound. A true beauty.” He patted her hand.

“Dear God,” Max mumbled from the front seat.

“Yes, a beauty and very affectionate. Spent every night in my bed with me.”

A choking sound came from Max. “Homer, why don’t you tell Miss Henderson about your rock collection?” He turned to glance at Ellie who was biting her lip to keep from laughing. “Mr. Snodgrass has a beautiful collection of rocks from all over the territory.”

The man’s face lit up. “Yes, I do. You should see my collection, Miss Henderson. Every time my dear Agnes and I went for a walk, I would pick up a new rock. She was wonderful at sniffing out the most interesting ones. I remember one time...”

Ellie ignored the rest while he droned on about Agnes and his rocks. Where in heaven’s name did Max find these men? Somehow she couldn’t see him being friends with any of them. It’s almost as if he snatched them from the street and dragged them along for company. Could Max be that uncomfortable in a crowd? She sighed. He was certainly an enigma.

Christmas holly and bright lights decorated the outside of the concert hall. The cold air and festive surroundings put her in the right mood. People

spilled from buggies and automobiles, wrapped in furs and jewels, laughing and chatting. She felt somewhat underdressed with her dark blue wool coat and hat, but the red and green bells she'd fashioned into earrings gave her appearance a holiday look, even if Max winced when he first noticed them.

Christmas drew near. With only another ten days, she needed to finish her baskets and get them delivered. Even though that's what she should have been doing tonight, attending the concert thrilled her.

Max presented three tickets to the usher, and he led them to their seats. Very close to the front, an excellent view of the stage. Mr. Snodgrass went in first, then Ellie, followed by Max, who looked a bit agitated. They settled in their seats and studied the programs.

The orchestra tuned their instruments behind the red and gold velvet curtain. She looked around and inhaled deeply. Pine and apples.

"Miss Henderson?" Homer patted her hand again.

She turned in his direction.

"Agnes would have loved this concert." He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye with his index finger. His pink nose had turned bright red.

Max shifted in his seat, clutching his program so tightly his knuckles turned white.

"Yes, she thoroughly enjoyed music. I play the piano, and whenever I'd settled on the bench to play a few tunes, she would lie down right alongside me and sing along."

"Indeed?" Ellie gasped.

"Yes. I always thought her voice more alto, but whenever Mr. Atkins next door would come over to ask me to play a little softer, he said he found her tone to be a mystery."

Max squirmed, adjusted his tie, pulled at his collar, his face now beet red. He turned to Mr. Snodgrass, about to speak, when the lights went out and the curtain rose.

The concert was wonderful, and Ellie enjoyed every moment of it. Familiar Christmas songs were interspersed with well-known classical pieces. The audience sat mesmerized as one tune after another drew warm applause.

Max sent Mr. Snodgrass to fetch two hot apple ciders during the intermission. He seemed to relax more once the man left.

“Don’t you want apple cider?” Ellie asked Max as Mr. Snodgrass returned and handed her the glass.

“Cider would never suffice tonight,” he bit out.

The second half of the concert sped by. The orchestra continued to play many of Ellie’s favorite Christmas songs. Several times Mr. Snodgrass would hum along, and wipe his eyes with his handkerchief. Max tapped his foot, crossed and uncrossed his arms, shifted in his seat, and at one point glared at Mr. Snodgrass.

Ellie sighed as the curtain came down and the lights came up. They headed down the aisle to the exit. “I just loved the music. Thank you so much for inviting me.” Ellie smiled brightly at Max as they inched along. Mr. Snodgrass blew his nose with a loud honking noise.

This time, Max escorted Ellie to the front seat of the Oldsmobile and left Mr. Snodgrass alone in the back. He rambled on about his dear departed Agnes until Max pulled up in front of his house.

“Well, good night, Homer.” Max motioned toward the man’s house with his chin.

“Oh. I thought you said we were going for pie and coffee after the concert.” He frowned as Max shot around the motorcar to let him out.

“Too late. Miss Henderson has a curfew.”

“It’s only nine o’clock.” Homer held his watch to the gaslight outside his house as Max tugged on his arm.

“Early curfew. See you soon, good night.” Max slammed the door, and then hurried to the driver’s side. He skipped the goggles and pulled away, leaving Mr. Snodgrass staring after the automobile.

Ellie burst out laughing. Max’s jaw worked, his lips twitched, and finally he joined her. “Would you like to go for coffee and pie?”

“I think I have enough time. Mrs. Beamer said she wouldn’t lock the door until ten-thirty tonight since I attended the concert with such a fine, upstanding gentleman.” She smirked.

His watch showed twenty-five minutes past ten when Max and Ellie returned to the front of the boarding house. He’d spent the ride back from The Café telling her stories of his youth. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t reconcile this Max with the boy he’d described. Somewhere along the line, he’d lost his sense of adventure and turned into a stodgy old man. And she told him so.

“Stodgy? How many stodgy men have a beautiful woman tumble out a window at his feet?” His eyes grew dark, and his smile vanished as he stared into her face.

“Beautiful?” she whispered.

“Very.”

He slid across the short distance between them and cupped her face with strong, calloused hands. He must do more than shuffle papers with those hands. Her breath hitched and her lower parts fluttered as his head descended toward her.

“Miss Henderson, it’s ten-thirty,” Mrs. Beamer called from the porch, holding a lamp high above her head.

Chapter 7

The week before Christmas, Ellie's thirteen-year-old cousin, Priscilla Cochran, raced toward her as Ellie opened the Cochran's front door. With pigtails flying, the young girl threw herself into her arms, almost knocking her over.

"Goodness, Pris, it hasn't been that long since I saw you." Ellie laughed.

"I know, but you look so different when we're not in school." The young girl dragged her by the hand into the parlor.

"Come here and give me a hug, girl." Uncle Jesse opened his arms and Ellie walked into them, giving him a hug. He and her Aunt Tori had practically raised her. She'd been only eleven when her father died, leaving the care of Ellie and her two brothers and sister to Tori, barely twenty-two herself. They'd had some rough times in the beginning, but eventually Tori and Jesse married and they all settled into the big house outside of town.

She loved the smell of this house. It signified home. Tori loved to bake, and the air always filled with the aroma of Uncle Jesse's favorite dried apple pie, and freshly baked bread. A fire burned brightly in the parlor fireplace, adding to the cozy familiar childhood memories.

Tori bustled in, wiping her hands on a stained apron. "Ellie! So good to see you. You've stayed away too long." She pulled her into a maternal hug.

Ellie closed her eyes and inhaled Tori's scent. Always cinnamon and rose water. "Heavens, I was here for Thanksgiving."

"Three weeks ago!" Tori turned to her daughter. "Pris, take Ellie's coat to the closet, please." She hooked her arm through Ellie's and led her to the vast kitchen at the back of the house. "How is your Christmas Basket project going?"

Jesse followed them down the hallway. "Hey, wait a minute, don't I get to visit with our niece?"

"Sure, you can even peel potatoes while you're here." Tori smirked.

He grabbed his wife around her middle from behind. He whispered something in her ear that made Tori blush bright red. "Jesse, stop it." She

giggled, then turned and pushed at his chest. He pulled her close and gave her an enthusiastic kiss.

Priscilla rolled her eyes. “Come on, stop it.”

Ellie laughed at Jesse’s antics. Sometimes she thought the reason she didn’t feel a draw toward marriage was because no man could measure up to her uncle. If only Max Colbert could spend time here with this family, he’d loosen up. He’s see what it’s like to be playful, but still very much a man. Jesse’s wife and children adored him, even though Priscilla had reached the age where fathers were simply a necessary evil.

The doorbell rang and Priscilla hopped up. “I’ll get it.”

Tori had handed Jesse a knife and sat him down in front of a pile of potatoes, across from where Ellie peeled carrots. “See how your aunt orders me around?” He grinned.

Voices coming from the front door grew louder as they neared the kitchen. Jesse looked up from his work and stood. “Well, hello and welcome.”

Ellie turned toward the door and dropped the knife. Like an apparition, Max Colbert filled the doorway, holding a bottle of wine and a bouquet of flowers.

She blinked several times. “What...what are you doing here?”

“And hello to you, too, Ellie.” He grinned.

Max stepped into the room, then handed the wine to Jesse and the flowers to Tori.

“Thank you, they’re lovely.” Tori blushed.

Jesse placed the wine on the counter and washed his hands. “Welcome to our home. I’m glad you could make it.” He dried his hands on Tori’s apron and shook hands with Max. “This is my wonderful wife and helpmate, Tori.” He tossed his arm around her shoulders and hugged her close.

Jesse pointed to his youngest daughter. “I know you see my lovely daughter Priscilla every day, as well as Ellie.” He turned to her. “I invited Max for dinner so I could get to know him better. Right now he’s the top candidate for the Superintendent of Schools job.”

Ellie continued to stare at Max, the knife forgotten on the table. She’d just wished he could spend some time here to see how her uncle related to his family, and here he stood.

Jesse leaned across the table and put his index finger on her chin. “Ellie, close your mouth.”

She snapped her mouth closed, and head down, continued to peel carrots. Jesse gave Tori a brief kiss on the lips. “Darlin,’ I’d love to help you out here in the kitchen, but I think it’s time for *man* talk.” He winked at her and turned to Max. “It’s important to keep the ladies happy. Shall we go?” He led him down the hallway and soon the sound of his office door closing put an end to the male voices.

Her mind spun like a child’s top. Max had smiled and grinned. He’d brought flowers for Tori. But the most amazing change was his attire. He wore dark blue casual trousers and a long-sleeve pale blue cotton knit shirt. She’d never seen him without a stiff collar, tie, and jacket.

The blue of the shirt set off the startling blue of his eyes. She’d also never noticed how his eyes crinkled at the edges when he smiled. A gut-clenching smile. Her heart did the double time thumping again, and her palms grew slippery holding the knife. Ridiculous. Max Colbert was the enemy. Better to remember it, and order her heart to beat normally. It paid no attention.

The table had been cleared of the dinner dishes, with only coffee cups and three of Tori’s pies left in the center of the table. Tori cut generous slices and passed them around. Jesse and Max had their heads together in deep conversation, and Ellie couldn’t keep her eyes off them.

Two strong men. One, the man she’d adored most of her life, and the other one she’d thought of as the enemy. After watching him all afternoon, she found it hard to remember that. He was funny, thoughtful, and relaxed. He listened intently when one of the children discussed something, giving them his undivided attention. He’d flattered Tori and showed respect to Jesse. And whenever he looked at her, her stomach dropped to her feet, and her mouth dried up.

“Mama, may I be excused?” Benjamin, the youngest at eleven, already had his pie stuffed in his mouth and ready to bolt from the chair.

“Yes. Be sure to start your homework right away.” She nodded at Priscilla, Paul, and Henry. “All of you may be excused. And I want homework finished within an hour.”

“Darlin’, where’s your pie?” Jesse looked at Tori’s empty place and dug into his pie.

“I’m not having any. I need to lose some of these pounds.” She sighed and looked pensively at the partial pies left on the table.

“No, you don’t. You go ahead and have some of that pie. I like those extra pounds. I’ve been telling you that for years.” He turned to Max. “She could never understand I like having enough woman to hold onto.”

Tori pulled one of the pies closer, and cut a small piece. “Maybe just a little.” She sighed. “It’s just not fair. Jesse eats like a horse, and never gains a pound.”

Jesse finished his pie and pushed back his chair, stretching his long legs under the table. “Tell me, Max, what makes you think you’d be a good Superintendent of Schools?”

Max straightened in his seat, put down his fork, and wiped his mouth with the napkin on his lap. “Well, Senator…” He stopped when Jesse held up a hand.

“Let’s stop this ‘Senator’ stuff, we’re already passed that.”

“Right.” Max attempted to adjust a tie not there. “I have a lot of good ideas on educating our children for the new century. Our students have to be ready to take over a world that changes constantly. It’s not the same work place of twenty or thirty years ago.”

Jesse inclined his head. “What about higher education?”

Max nodded. “That is something I feel we definitely have to encourage our boys to think about. They’ll need all the education they can get.”

Ellie met Jesse’s gaze across the table.

“What about the girls?” Jesse crossed his arms over his chest, his eyes sharp and assessing.

“Girls?”

“Yes, girls. Like my Priscilla, who’s at the top of her class? Or for that matter, my wife who graduated from the Teachers College, as did Ellie.” He nodded in their direction.

Max paused. Then leaned forward. “I’ll be honest with you, sir. I never thought much about girls going to college before now. And I’ll admit my plans to encourage promising students to think about college was focused on the boys.”

Jesse shook his head at Ellie, who chomped at the bit to jump into the conversation. “Let him finish, Ellie. He’s being honest, and I like that.”

Max ran his fingers through his hair. “You’re right. Any plan to encourage bright students should encompass the girls as well. I will certainly have to re-think my whole plan.”

“The fact that you’re willing to reconsider makes a big difference.” Jesse turned to Ellie. “What’s your opinion on how Max runs the school and relates to the teachers.”

Ellie glanced quickly at Max across the table. Only a couple weeks ago she would have given Uncle Jesse a mouthful, even with Max present. He’d been stuffy, overbearing, narrow-minded, and pompous. He had rules and regulations for everything, and wanted to control the lives of his teachers—especially the women—outside of school. Although that hadn’t really changed, he didn’t seem quite so overbearing lately. He’d agreed to let her continue with the Christmas Baskets project and even offered to drive her on the deliveries. He’d changed his mind about speaking with Mr. Ridley, and comforted her at the church Christmas party.

“There are some things I think could be changed to make life a little easier at school. But for the most part we have a well-run, efficient school. The students seem to like him, and while he may not always make popular decisions, the teachers respect him.” As she spoke, she realized how true her words were. She respected Max Colbert. Didn’t always agree with him, but he was fair and even on occasion compassionate. What had he done to her?

Jesse turned his gaze on Max. “Whoever is selected as Superintendent of Schools will have very little personal time, especially in the beginning. He would need to travel all over the Territory, and be involved in the petition for statehood, which we expect to be granted next year. That, again, will require travel and extensive hours.”

“That isn’t a problem, sir.”

“What about a wife, a family? Don’t you have plans for that? Most young men look forward to having a family one day.”

“No, not me. I prefer to stay single.”

Jesse glanced between Max and Ellie. Then he pushed his chair back. “The Board will have my decision before the end of the year. I’m really glad you joined us tonight.”

Max nodded and stood, then glanced at Ellie. “Can I escort you home?”

“Yes, thank you, it is getting late, and I still have papers to grade.”

Tori took her arm and they chatted as they strolled to the front closet where Jesse fetched their coats and helped them on. He hugged Ellie and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Don’t be such a stranger.”

“I’ll be back in a few days for Christmas. Think you can wait that long?” She batted her eyelashes at him.

Jesse chuckled, then turned to Max and extended his hand. “Thanks again for coming.”

Max thanked Tori for the wonderful meal, and they left and headed to the motorcar parked in front of the large white porch.

Ellie stared out the window on the ride home. Max remained quiet, thoughtful. She snuck a look at him. His hair had fallen over his forehead again. From when he ran his fingers through it at the table. He really wanted this superintendent job. “Why?”

Pulled from his thoughts, he looked at her. “What?”

“Why? Why do you want the superintendent job so much?”

“It’s part of my plan.”

“Plan?”

Max pulled the automobile over to the side of the road and shut the engine off. Ran his fingers through his hair again. “While still in high school I laid out a plan for my life. What I wanted to accomplish, and at what age I would reach each goal. This is the next step.”

Ellie grinned. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

He stiffened. “Of course. I want a well-planned, well laid-out life.”

“And so far you’ve followed your plan?”

“Definitely. I don’t like surprises.”

Ellie shook her head. “Poor Max.”

He frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

She leaned back and studied him. “Did you go to St. Louis for the Word’s Fair two years ago by any chance?”

“Of course. The whole theme of the Fair centered on Education.”

She shot him a look. “Did you see anything else besides the Palace of Education and Social Economy?”

“Don’t be absurd, Ellie. Naturally I visited all the excellent Palaces. There was a lot of educational information there.”

She flashed a smile. “And how much time did you spend at The Pike?”

“Where?”

Ellie raised her finger. “Aha! Just as I suspected. You didn’t even go there, did you?”

“No. Only amusements, rides, things I had no interest in.”

She shook her head. “Poor Max.”

“This is a ridiculous conversation.” He cranked the engine and they continued on.

Her whole family had gone to the Fair. They’d spent over ten days there and didn’t see everything. It was an amazing display of culture, inventions, and what the future would hold. As educators, she and Tori loved the Educational Palace, but everyone in her group had a terrific time at The Pike. Belly dancing, a roller coaster, a Parisian Fashion show, displays of wild animals. Acrobats and clowns walked the midway. And the best treat for them all had been an ice cream cone, something none of them had ever had before.

And Max had avoided that part of the Fair. He pulled up a half block from her house. “Why are we stopping here?”

“Do you think I made a good enough impression on your uncle?”

Even in the dark she could see the flush on his face. Max unsure of himself? If he didn’t look so pathetic, she would’ve laughed. “Yes. I think you did fine. I’m sure when the time comes Uncle Jesse will give you serious consideration.”

“By the way, thank you for putting in a good word for me.”

She looked directly into those blue eyes. The butterflies started up again. “I spoke the truth. Although we have our differences, I think you’re doing a great job as principal, and I think you’d make an excellent Superintendent of Schools.”

His shoulders slumped with relief. He tucked a curl behind her ear. “There are times I wish I didn’t have a life plan.”

“Really?” She raised her eyebrows. “When?” she whispered as he moved closer.

“Now.” He bent his head, his kiss slow and thoughtful. All the air left her body. When she slumped, he pulled her closer and deepened the kiss. Lights exploded behind her eyelids, and tingles shot from her stomach to her woman’s core.

He cupped her face in his hands, and ran his tongue over her lips, nudging them apart. He explored her mouth, touching, tasting. She moaned

at the sensations rippling through her. Almost of their own accord, her hands slid up his chest to wrap around his neck. If this went on much longer, she would surely faint.

She inhaled his bay rum scent, the mint on his breath. When he shifted, his muscles rippled under her hands. He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "You're not in my plan. But God help me, I want you." She closed her eyes as he kissed her ear, running his tongue around the shell, moving down, kissing the skin on her chin, her neck.

"So soft, so desirable, you're making me crazy," he mumbled. His fingers slid into her hair as he massaged her scalp and hairpins went flying in all directions. Once more he assaulted her mouth, his kiss sending new spirals of ecstasy through her. Her clothes felt restricting, her nipples sensitive where they pressed against his shirt.

Finally, he pulled away. They were both panting. He slid back to his place, gripped the steering wheel, and laid his forehead against it. Ellie slumped against the seat, attempting to fill her lungs. Once he brought his breathing under control, he looked at her. "I should apologize, but I can't. I also can't let this go any further." He shook his head and cranked the engine.

Ellie closed her eyes. That was it? He couldn't let it go further? She inhaled a deep breath. Taking this further appealed quite a bit to her right now. Her vote should count, too.

When they reached her house, she didn't wait for him to come to a complete stop. Her hand flipped the door handle and she exited. Not looking back, she ran up the steps to the porch. Quickly, she tucked her hair in the collar of her coat and entered the house.

The parlor stood empty. Everyone had retired early. She hung her coat on the hook by the door and walked slowly down the hallway to her room. Ellie Henderson didn't fit into Max Colbert 'plans.' Fine, because he didn't fit into hers either. It would be good to remember that.

After washing and changing into her nightgown, she braided her hair and climbed into bed. Were she a truly modern woman, she would suggest to Max they keep their life plans and move onto the next step in intimacy anyway. There were ways to prevent pregnancy. She didn't have to fit into his life's plans.

She tucked her hands behind her head and stared at the dark ceiling. Her body felt restless, incomplete. No longer did she wonder about the sensations of lovemaking. Would any man make her feel like this with his kisses? Or did Max possess something special?

The next step intrigued her. She could do this, being a modern woman. Then the image of the dinner table tonight flashed before her, with Jesse encouraging Tori to have her pie, loving her with the extra pounds. The way he looked at his children as they ate dinner.

Maybe her life plans could change.

Too bad the man she would change those plans for had plans of his own.

Max sat in his automobile after he'd turned the engine off. He leaned back on the leather seat and tapped his fingertips on the steering wheel. The Superintendent's job remained in his grasp. He could feel it. Jesse had discussed the job itself at length when they'd met in his office before dinner.

Admittedly, he faltered a bit when Jesse questioned him at the dinner table, and then asked Ellie for her opinion right there in front of him. He'd heard the Senator liked to rattle his candidates. His reputation as a tough lawyer and politician was well-deserved.

Max closed his eyes. Ellie. Never had a woman affected him like that. He seemed to have no control around her. She epitomized everything he would never want in a wife. Not that he had any plans for one, but if he did—Ellie Henderson would be at the bottom of his list. Maybe.

If only he didn't find her so desirable. When he'd kissed her, their lips fit exactly together, like they were made to connect. Her smell, taste, and feel seemed so right, so perfect. But she was a disaster waiting to happen. He needed to remember that.

Chapter 8

Ellie used her fingernails to scrape away frost on the parlor window so she could watch the street. She expected Max any minute to drive her to the homes on the long list of people getting Christmas Baskets. The air had turned colder overnight. She could see the breath of those who hurried by, collars pulled up, necks tucked in against the cold.

She shivered, running her palms over her upper arms against the chill. Mrs. Beamer kept the front parlor fireplace cold during the day to conserve wood. She only lit the fire right before supper so the women could sit there in the evening. Ellie hurried back to her room and pulled a wool sweater over her dress. The doorbell rang.

“Are you sure you want to do this today? It’s freezing out there.” Max entered the house, rubbing his gloved hands together.

“Yes, I can’t wait any longer. It’s only three days until Christmas.” She reached for her coat, and Max took it from her and helped her into it. Ellie pulled on a hat and wrapped a scarf around her neck. “The baskets are stacked in my bedroom.” She pointed down the hall as she adjusted her gloves.

“How many do we have?” he asked as he grabbed a couple baskets and headed toward the door.

“Seventeen.”

After three trips, the back seat of the Oldsmobile overflowed with holiday cheer. No longer cold after all the work, Ellie unwrapped her scarf and settled into the seat.

“Let me see your list.” Max held his hand out, and studied the paper. “All right, I think we can drive in a complete circle and get them all delivered in a few hours.” He motioned Ellie closer and handed her a pencil.

With their heads together, Max had her place a number alongside each address based on its location. Ellie’s heart sped up again at their nearness. The last few days in school, he’d avoided her, which she’d told herself was for the best. She had her life plan, and he had his. So, okay, maybe she’d re-

thought her life plan a little bit. But it didn't have to include him. Although time spent with Max had been the motivation to take another look at her direction to begin with.

Soon he pulled back, and with everything in order, they started off. They first stopped at Mrs. Olsen, a widow with no children. Her neighbors and church helped out with food and clothing. Mrs. Olsen made doilies and lace tablecloths she sold in the general store for a small amount of money. Ellie had made sure her basket held some treats, which she knew the woman rarely had, and would certainly enjoy.

"I sense you're enjoying this, but we can't have tea and cookies at every house we stop at, or we'll be doing this until midnight." Max cranked the engine after their second stop at the McNeil's house.

"Some of the older people need the company as much as the basket."

After about three hours, they'd made half the stops. Max pulled to the side of the road in front of a barbershop. "I think we could use some lunch. Let's try that restaurant." He pointed to a building across the street, advertising sandwiches and coffee on the large glass window.

Ellie peeked her nose out from the blanket she'd wrapped around herself. "That sounds good to me. I'm really cold. I hope they have a fire going."

Max laughed. "Your nose is bright red."

"So's yours," she countered.

The heat from the blazing pot-bellied stove warmed the entire room. Ellie pulled off her gloves and warmed her hands at the stove while Max secured a table. Soon they were seated close to the stove, enjoying a bowl of beef vegetable soup and fresh bread.

"How is it your aunt Tori is a wonderful cook, and you never picked up on it?" Max grinned at her between mouthfuls of soup.

Ellie grimaced. "I knew you would eventually bring that up. My sister Rachel was the one interested in cooking and baking. In fact, when we first came to Oklahoma, Tori made the baked goods for The Café, and Rachel helped her. I, on the other hand, found climbing trees and wading in the creek for frogs much more appealing.

"And now you climb ladders instead." He chuckled.

They finished their meal, and Max took care of the check.

"I should pay my portion of the bill," Ellie said, fumbling in her purse.

Max glared at her. "I would never allow a woman to pay for anything when she accompanies me."

She narrowed her eyes. "I'm a working woman, and I pay my own way."

"Not with me."

They glared at each other for a few moments. "Shall we go?" Max extended his arm. Ellie sailed past him, ignoring his arm, and left the restaurant.

"Here it is, stop." Ellie glanced from the paper she held, to the front door of a small house.

Max pulled his goggles off and stretched. "I've lost track. Whose house is this now?" It had been a long afternoon. He glanced in the back seat. Only one basket left. His stomach clamored for a hearty meal followed by relaxing in the parlor with his newspaper.

"This is the Ridley house." Ellie chose a small, wrapped parcel from the back and opened the door.

"What about the basket?"

"I'm not leaving a basket here. Mr. Ridley would never accept charity. This is a small gift for Mrs. Ridley. A book I thought John could read to her." Her chin trembled and her eyes filled as she said the last part.

Max's insides shifted. For all her bluster, underneath Ellie Henderson remained as soft as a marshmallow. But then, he'd seen her softer side before. One minute she was determined as a donkey, bucking heads with him, and the next minute she made him soften inside. Just like his mother.

They climbed the stairs of the white and blue clapboard house. An overgrown, and dead garden, lay in waste, visible evidence of Mrs. Ridley's illness. Ellie pressed the doorbell and they waited.

Mr. Ridley answered the door. A medium built man, with thinning hair and a wide middle. His features bore the look of a bully. He wore a pair of denim pants and a red checked flannel shirt. His pudgy fingers snapped his suspenders. "Yeah."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Ridley. I'm Ellie Henderson, and this is Max Colbert from Logan County High School. We would like to visit with your wife for a moment, if we may."

"Why?"

Ellie held up the package. "I have a small gift for her."

“We don’t want none of your charity.” He slammed the door.

Ellie turned to Max, her eyes wide.

Anger shot through him at the man’s rudeness. Now he was doubly glad he’d hadn’t spoken to him about John’s indiscretion. He knocked on the door with this fist.

After a minute, Ridley opened it. “What?” he shouted.

“Mr. Ridley, Miss Henderson has something for your wife, and I would appreciate it very much if you would allow her to visit with Mrs. Ridley for a minute.”

“I said we don’t want your charity. Now git off my porch.” He leaned forward, his head thrust out, hands fisted at his sides.

Max paused for a moment. “This is not charity. This is a prize your son won at school.”

“I thought she said a gift for my wife.” He spit a stream of tobacco from the side of his mouth, and nodded toward Ellie.

“John won this for his excellent work at school, and Miss Henderson thought to wrap it up and present it to your wife.” When Ridley hesitated, Max pressed on. “I’m sure it would make her very happy to know how well John is doing in school.”

The man reached his hand out and snatched the package from Ellie. “I’ll see that she gits it. Now git goin’.” He slammed the door, rattling the doorjamb.

Max clenched his jaw and raised his hand to knock again. This time, he’d likely punch the man in the nose.

“No. Let it go.” Ellie grabbed his arm. “I don’t want to make things worse for the poor woman.”

“That man should be put in jail.” He took hold of Ellie’s elbow and they headed back to the automobile.

“One of the things our Women’s Rights group is working toward is passing a law to have it a crime for a man to beat his wife.”

“Isn’t it?” He regarded her, eyebrows raised.

“No. He could assault me and be put in jail, but if he beats his wife, the police ignore it.”

“Outrageous.”

“I agree.” Ellie peered at the sky, and pulled the blanket tighter around her. “Looks like it might snow.”

“Once this last basket is dropped off, we’ll head for home.” Max turned to her. “How much further is this one?”

Ellie consulted her notes. “About two or three miles.”

“The sun will be all the way down soon. I hope we make it back to town before then. I can’t very well drive this motorcar in the dark out here in the countryside on unreliable roads.” No sooner had the words left his mouth than the automobile rolled to a stop.

“What happened?” Ellie asked.

“I must have run out of gasoline. There’s a spare can strapped to the running board on your side. I’ll refill the tank and we’ll be on our way.”

“Ah, Max?” Ellie’s spoke in a weak and tremulous whisper.

He went around the automobile and gaped at the running board. “Where the devil is the can of gasoline?”

“Max.” She spoke a bit louder.

“What?”

“We don’t have it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I took the can off when we were loading the baskets because I had to keep climbing over it. I put it alongside the road and forgot to tell you.” Pale faced, Ellie fumbled with the button on her coat.

He stared at her, hands on hips, eyes wide. “Ellie, I’m not sure I heard you correctly, so I’m going to ask you to say that one more time.”

“I took it off the running board this morning...”

Max held up his hand. “Stop.” He slumped and his chin hit his chest. “I did hear you correctly the first time,” he mumbled to his coat.

“Are you mad?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Now why would I be mad? We’re here in the wilderness,”—he waved his hand around—“with no gasoline, with darkness descending. It’s freezing out, and it may snow. And I’m starving and tired.” He glared at her.

Ellie stiffened. “I’m sorry, but I had no idea it was important. For all I knew, it could have been water in case we got thirsty.”

“You should have asked me before you took it off.” He spoke between gritted teeth.

“You were too busy shouting orders at me like some kind of general,” she retorted sharply.

They stared at each other across a chasm of cold silence. Max blew out a huge breath of air. "All right, let's not argue. What's done is done." He climbed back into the automobile.

"What will we do?" She pulled the blanket tighter.

"We passed an abandoned farmhouse a short time ago. We can walk there and spend the night, and in the morning, we'll find another farm where we can borrow a horse."

Ellie pulled away, her eyes wide. "I can't spend the night with you! My reputation will be ruined. I'll lose my room. I'll have to move back in with Uncle Jesse and Tori."

"No one will know."

"Mrs. Beamer will know. She'll tell Uncle Jesse. Oh, this is a mess!" She twisted her hands in her lap.

"I will speak with Mrs. Beamer and your uncle, if necessary. But now we need to find shelter. It's getting colder by the minute." He grabbed the last basket from the back seat and the two blankets he kept there, and then helped her out of the motorcar. Max put his arm around her and pulled her close to keep them both warmer.

Snow began to fall as they approached the small farmhouse after a half hour of walking. Ellie's teeth chattered, and he felt like an icicle. Darkness had descended, making him grateful they hadn't stumbled into any small animal holes.

He shoved the warped wooden door open to reveal a one room house. Whoever abandoned the place had left their belongings behind. A rickety table and two chairs sat in the middle of the room. A bed had been shoved against the wall, a thin blanket bunched at the foot. The fireplace hadn't been cleaned out, but a small stack of wood stood near it.

"What kind of food do you have in that basket?" Max shoveled ashes from the fireplace into a barrel standing against the wall.

"This one has smoked sausage, cheese, and an apple pie."

He grinned. "Dinner."

She nodded, her arms wrapped around her.

"I'll have a fire going in a minute." He stacked the wood, then hunkered down and struck a match.

Ellie walked closer. "Do you always carry matches?"

“Yes.” He regarded her red nose and cheeks. Wrapped up in the blanket she’d dragged along, she looked like an elf. “Aren’t you glad I do?”

“Y-y-yes.”

Ellie glanced around the room. “Where will we sleep?”

“In the bed.” He nodded in the direction of the far wall.

“There’s only one bed.”

“I know.”

“We can’t sleep in the same bed.”

He blew once more on the fire, and turned to her from his position on the floor. “You have any better ideas, Miss Henderson?”

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Chapter 9

Ellie's cheeks grew bright red. "You could sleep on the floor."

She looked scared to death. He tugged her down alongside him. "This may be the only wood we have to burn. I'll take a look around the outside of the house in a minute to see if there's more, but we have to sleep together to share our body warmth."

She groaned and dropped her head in her hands. "This is so embarrassing."

Max cleared his throat. "I'm afraid it gets worse."

"Why?" She peeked at him from between her fingers.

"We'll both have to take off as many clothes as is proper, in order for us to share body warmth."

Her head snapped up. "Proper is fully dressed!"

He tucked a curl behind her ear. "If we don't, there's a good chance we could freeze to death overnight."

Tears flooded her eyes, and she shook her head.

"I'm going to check for more wood. Why don't you empty that basket out and we'll have something to eat. That will warm us, too."

Max stood and poked at the fire before leaving the house to check around outside, and the few feet beyond that he could see. Snow fell harder, and a thorough search hadn't turned up any more wood. He stomped his feet beside the door before going in.

The fire burned brightly. Ellie sat huddled, the food from the basket spread in front of her. The blond highlights in her soft brown hair captured the light of the fire. He sucked in air at the picture she made. Delicate features, with a sprinkling of freckles, long smooth neck, and although covered in a blanket to her chin, he knew the curves underneath were all woman.

"No more wood." Max nodded to the small pile. "This will only last a few hours."

"Will we freeze to death?" She looked up at him as her lips trembled, either with cold or fear. Probably both.

“No. I won’t let that happen.”

Max found a few pieces of silverware and some cracked plates in the kitchen. Ellie cut the sausage and cheese that she divided between the two plates. A large piece of apple pie for each of them followed.

“Where did the pie come from?”

“Maybe I made it.” Ellie sniffed.

Max stared at her with raised eyebrows.

“All right, if you must know, Tori baked a bunch of them for my baskets.”

He chuckled and took the last bite of his pie.

After the meal, Ellie packed the remains in the basket while he dragged the mattress closer to the fire. “Do you need to go outside?”

Her face turned crimson. “Yes.”

“I didn’t see a privy, but there are some bushes not too far away. You go ahead, I’ll go when you’re back.”

She hastened out, hurrying back in no time. After Max took his turn, he secured the door as best he could and eyed her. “You’ll need to take everything off except your undergarments.”

Slowly, her gaze on the floor, she removed her coat, shirtwaist, and skirt.

He lowered his voice. “The petticoats and corset have to go, too.”

She groaned and slipped them off, covering herself with shaky hands. “I’m freezing.”

Max had removed his pants and shirt and sat on the mattress in just his union suit. “Come here.” He reached out his hand.

Ellie sat alongside him. He slid them both down, pulled her close, and between the two of them, they arranged the two blankets they’d brought and bundled the small one already on the bed into a makeshift pillow. Max reached to the side, and pulled their coats over them also.

“Goodness, I’m warmer already.” Ellie snuggled closer to him, her head on his chest.

This would be a very long night. Having her next to him, now warm and cuddly, wreaked havoc with his blood flow. Her softness and rose water scent assailed his senses, increasing his physical discomfort.

“Is something wrong?” She looked up at him.

“No, why?” his voice sounded low-pitched and gravelly to his ears.

“You seem stiff or something. Am I taking up too much room?”

Unable to speak, he just shook his head, pulled her closer. *Bad idea when the distinct feel of her nipples pressed into his side.*

After a few minutes, he shifted and looked down at her. “I have to be honest with you. You’re driving me crazy.”

Her eyes grew wide. “Why?”

He ran his hand up and down her arm. “You can’t tell me you don’t feel the attraction between us.”

“I-I don’t know what you mean.” The little catch in her voice raised his temperature another notch. He wanted to introduce her to the pleasures of lovemaking.

“Let me show you.” His fingers circled the edge of her chemise, loosening the pink ribbon just slightly. The pulse at her throat throbbed, a match to the rhythm of his own. Ellie’s soft hazel eyes watched him. She licked her lips. He slid his hand to the back of her neck where silky hair met her soft skin, and loosened the bun. “You have beautiful hair. I have to see it down.”

Max tugged the curls forward, then crushed them in his fingers as his mouth hungrily covered hers. He slanted his head to deepen the kiss, sliding his tongue along her lips until she opened for him. She grasped his forearms and made soft mewling sounds as he explored her mouth. His blood boiled from the taste of her.

Not breaking the kiss, he brought his hands up to her shoulders and slowly slid the chemise down to bare her breasts, past her ribcage, to settle at her waist.

He pulled back and studied the mouth-drying beauty exposed to him, caressing her cheek with his knuckles. “Ellie, you’re so beautiful. Just as I imagined.” Her lips were swollen from his kiss and the aroused peaks of her perfect breasts begged his attention. Slowly his hands came up and cupped them, his thumbs moving back and forth across the pink tips. Ellie leaned her head back, and her breaths turned to gasps.

Max cuddled her close, kissed her throat, and the sensitive skin behind her ear. “I want you,” he whispered. “If this is something you don’t want, please tell me now. I swear to God, I’ll turn my back and not bother you for the rest of the night. But if we go any further, I’ll have a difficult time letting you go.”

“I’m scared.” Her voice trembled as she raised cold fingers to his face. “I never felt like this before. I don’t know what to do.”

“Ah, sweetheart, I know what to do. But I want to be very sure you understand where this is headed.” When she didn’t protest, he kissed her once more, his hands releasing the string on her drawers. He pushed them down, along with the chemise and blankets. Her skin glowed in the firelight. Raised on one elbow, he leaned above her, his gaze raking over her seductively. She smiled slightly and bit her lip when he ran his hands over her body, then reached for him, pulling their mouths together in an explosion of heat.

His hand glided over her ribcage, down to her belly, and lower to the curls that covered her sex. Ellie stiffened. He pulled his mouth away and circled the soft shell of her ear with his tongue. “Don’t be afraid, I would never hurt you.”

“It won’t hurt?”

He smiled at her. Her trusting eyes, tinged with a hint of fear. “Since you’re untouched, it will hurt, but briefly. I will go slowly because I want you to enjoy this. That’s important to me.”

Max quickly divested himself of his union suit and stretched out alongside her. Ellie’s eyes widened at the sight of his erection.

“See what you do to me?” Her frightened face melted his heart. She might be a strong woman, but truly an innocent one. His fingers returned to her woman’s core, circling the small nub, releasing the fluid that would ease his way. Two fingers slid in, then a third, stretching her, getting her ready for him.

Ellie moaned, shifted, and turned toward him. Her nails dug into the muscles of his shoulders, her response escalating his own.

Max brought his mouth to her breasts and suckled. Ellie moaned and held his head, running her fingers through his hair. He flicked the rosy nipple with his tongue, circled it. “So perfect.” Her soft skin, scented with rose water, glowed with a sheen of sweat. If he didn’t have her soon, he would burst into flames.

She slid her hand down his back, working his flexing muscles with her fingers. He eased her thighs apart and moved atop her, all the while whispering words of encouragement. He pushed the damp hair back from her forehead and kissed her gently. Slowly he slid into her tight channel.

Ellie continued to run her hands across his back, not going any further than his waist. He pushed harder and felt the resistance. “Honey, this will hurt, but only for a moment.” Before she could stiffen, he surged forward, breaking through the barrier. Ellie attempted to scoot back, but he massaged her shoulders, murmuring in her ear, kissing her neck. He kept himself still until he felt her muscles ease. Then he slowly began to slide in and out.

His heart sped up. She felt so warm, tight and wet. He groaned, his thrusts becoming stronger as she adjusted to his rhythm and met him with her hips. Her innocent enthusiasm stoked the fire in his blood until he was consumed by need. With one final thrust, his body stiffened and he poured himself into her. He rested his head on her forehead, both of them panting. He looked into her eyes, wide and brimming with tears. “Are you okay?”

“Is that all?” One lone tear trickled down her flushed cheek. “I still feel so restless.”

Max wiped the tear with his thumb and returned his fingers to her sex. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, it shouldn’t have been that way for you, but I’ve wanted you for so long, I got carried away. Now, close your eyes and relax.” He smiled as her lips parted on a whisper of pleasure. After only a few minutes, Ellie stiffened and her body bucked, a soft ‘oh’ escaped between her lips. Max kissed her and held her tight to his body until the shudders stopped.

Wrapped naked in each other’s arms, they fell into a deep sleep.

Ellie awoke to early dawn light filtering in from the small window across from where she lay. Warmth and comfort flowed over her skin, except for the stick poking her in the back. Her memory returned in a rush. Heat flashed to her face and she pulled away from the spoon-like position she and Max lay in.

“We should probably get dressed and leave.” His warm thick voice whispered in her ear.

She nodded furiously, scooting further away from his warmth.

“I’ll get dressed first, and go outside so you can dress.” He kissed her briefly behind her ear and rose. His clothes rustled as he put them on, and soon the sound of the door opening and closing jolted her into action.

How could she ever face him? No matter, she had to get up, get dressed, and say nothing. She frantically pulled on her clothes, leaving off the corset

she couldn't fasten herself. Usually one of the other women in her house would help her. One day she would burn the damn thing anyway.

Max returned from outside and slowly approached, pulling her into his arms. "How are you this morning?"

She looked beyond his shoulder, chewing her bottom lip. "Fine."

He cupped her chin, and turned her head to face him. "Are you sure?"

Ellie searched his eyes, her shoulders slumped. "Y-y-yes." She burst into tears.

He blew out a deep breath. "I was afraid of this." He put his large hand on her head, and nestled her onto his chest. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She shook her head.

After a few minutes, he handed her a handkerchief from his pocket. "Why don't you make a visit outside, and I'll pack up in here. The sun will be up soon, and we need to get you home."

The walk to the next farmhouse took only twenty minutes. A layer of snow enveloped the ground, which Ellie would have enjoyed any other time. Glistening snow covering the branches of the trees had turned the entire countryside into a work of art.

The farmer had a can of gasoline he loaned to Max, and after he trudged back to his motorcar and returned for her at the farmhouse, they were able to drive home. Ellie kept silent the entire trip, and she guessed Max was grateful not to have to deal with her tears again, because he said nothing either.

Thoughts raced around her mind. She glanced at him several times on the trip home. He appeared relaxed, and even had a slight smile on his face. On the other hand, she had knots in her stomach, her eyes burned, and the beginning of a major headache loomed.

The biggest concern was her lack of remorse. No doubt Max considered her tears stemmed from guilt. Not so. When he'd cupped her chin and turned her to look directly at him, it hit her like a board between the eyes. She had fallen madly, completely, and forever, in love with Max Colbert. Her archenemy, and the man who'd told Uncle Jesse he intended to remain single, that he had no desire for a wife and family. The memory of those words cut deep into her heart.

Before the sun fully rose in the sky, they were in front of her boarding house. "What am I going to tell Mrs. Beamer?" She chewed on her thumb

nail and glanced furtively at the house.

“You have a first floor bedroom. We’re going to hoist you through the window.”

Ellie cast him a glance, eyes narrowed.

He grinned. “What? You’ve done it before. On a ladder, no less.”

They quietly crept along the side of the house until they stood underneath her window. Max turned to her. “Take off your coat and pull your skirt between your legs and tuck it into the waistband.”

That accomplished, he stood behind her and wrapped his hands around her waist. He lifted her, then ducked his head and settled her on his shoulders. “Slide the window up.”

One shove and the window rose. She climbed off his shoulders onto the sill and put each foot gently on the floor.

“Your coat,” he whispered from under the window.

She took it from his hands, her fingers numb.

“Don’t forget the School Board Christmas party tonight. I’ll be by at seven.” He smiled warmly at her and left.

Ellie closed the window and rubbed her arms. What was she going to do? She may even be pregnant. That brought a smile. Then they’d have to marry. No. He’d resent her for the rest of his life. She dropped to the mattress and stared at the wall.

Max returned to the Oldsmobile and pulled away. He pounded his fist on the steering wheel. “Dammit.”

Oh, not at all sorry he’d made love to Ellie, it would’ve happened anyway, the attraction was too strong. It was just a matter of time. But it confirmed what he’d been deathly afraid of for days.

He’d fallen madly, completely, and forever, in love with Ellie Henderson. His mother’s duplicate. God help him.

Chapter 10

Ellie opened the front door at Max's knock, and her heart dropped to her stomach. There was no doubt. She loved him. But love should make her feel good, not this misery that enveloped her.

His startling blue eyes, hair falling over his forehead—*when did that start happening all the time?*—his strong features. They were all burned into her memory with the words 'life plan' right in front, as if he were holding a sign.

He smiled, bent, and kissed her cheek. With the other ladies in the parlor reading, sewing, and talking, it was probably best he didn't do more than that. But what did it mean? Were they now 'good friends,' sort of 'a kiss on the cheek' friends?

Max reached for her coat on the hook, helped her into it, and escorted her out the door and into the motorcar. "Did you get a lot done today, with school being closed for the Christmas holiday?" he asked as he snapped on his goggles and cranked the engine.

"I re-did the basket for the Mallard family that we ate. Mr. Jenkins from the Mercantile offered to deliver it for me."

"That was nice of him."

"Yes."

Awkwardness hung heavy in the air. Ellie took a deep breath and stared out the window. *I should have told him I had a headache and couldn't attend tonight.*

"Ellie?" He spoke in an odd, yet gentle tone.

She turned to him, eyebrows raised.

"Are you never going to speak to me again?" He gave her a lopsided grin, and her gut clenched.

She gazed at her gloved hands in her lap. "Yes, of course I will."

"Sometime soon we have to talk about what happened last night." He kept his eyes on the road, his jaw twitched.

"Why?"

He reached over and took her hand. "Because it meant a great deal to me." He glanced at her. "As I hope it did to you, too."

She pulled her hand away. "I'm still wondering what it meant." Her heart ached when she thought of all she wouldn't have because of Max's 'life plan.' Her own life plan seemed like so much dust in her mouth now that she'd tasted the side of life that once held no appeal.

The Christmas party for the School Board of Logan County High School was held at the home of Peter Morgan, President of the School Board. A small group had gathered, just the members and their wives, and the elementary and high school principals, with their guests.

The Morgan house was a stately residence, one of the largest on a block of other impressive homes. Gaslights lit every room, in addition to blazing fireplaces. The large entrance hall displayed a gray and white marble floor, with a flowing staircase leading to the second level. Holly interspersed with red ribbons adorned the banister. A huge Christmas tree sat in the middle of the front parlor, where the maid who took their coats directed them.

The men immediately huddled in a corner with glasses of whiskey to discuss politics and education, while the women sipped tea and hot apple cider and visited with each other. The women discussed children, grandchildren, and the difficulty in finding good household help. Every woman present except Ellie sported a wedding ring.

After a lull in conversation, a small woman with tidy steel gray curls surrounding her face turned to Ellie. "Miss Henderson, I understand you teach at the high school?" She'd been introduced as Martha Filmore, a wife of one of the board members.

"Yes, that's right. I teach History." She smiled at her.

"It must be dreadful getting up to go to a job every day. I'm sure you're anxious to find a husband and leave all that nonsense behind." Another woman, tall and thin, with pinched features nodded her head furiously as she spoke.

Ellie narrowed her eyes. "Indeed not. I love my job and I receive a great deal of satisfaction from teaching."

Each woman in turn looked at her as if she'd just announced she planned to take her clothes off and dance on the table. No one responded.

She snuck a peek at her timepiece and decided she'd had enough. Far from raising her spirits and putting her in the Christmas mood, this *party*

depressed her and made her ache even more for what she would never have, despite what she'd just told the women. "If you will excuse me, I need to speak with Mr. Colbert for a moment." A few of the women glanced at each other, a smile on their lips.

Max stood in the corner, his back to her, speaking with another man. "So have you had any luck in getting that teacher married off and out of your hair?" The man Max spoke with smiled at him and slapped him on the back

Max's shoulders stiffened. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"Come on, Colbert, the word around the Club is you invited a couple of the members to a concert and a dinner party, and then showed up with some teacher you were trying to marry off. Forest said you wouldn't have much luck because she's a terrible cook." He rubbed his stomach. "Not good for the digestion."

Max mumbled, "If you will excuse me," turned on his heel and came face to face with Ellie, who stood not three feet from him.

Eyes wide, all the blood gone from her face, she raised a shaky hand to her lips. "How could you?" she whispered.

"Ellie, wait." He reached for her, but she turned and fled out the front door. Max set his drink down and strode up to Peter Morgan. "Miss Henderson isn't feeling well, so we will be leaving."

"Wait while I get your coats." Morgan turned and opened the hall closet, took out two wool coats, scarves and hats.

"Thanks." Max grabbed them and hurried through the doorway, then down the steps. The street was empty, Ellie nowhere in sight. A cold lump of fear settled in his stomach. Where could she have gone? She'd been out of his sight for only a couple minutes. He dumped the clothes in the automobile and slid behind the steering wheel. With his heartbeat pounding, he cranked the engine, and the motorcar started up.

He rode two blocks, didn't see her, and turned in the other direction. He found her striding along the road, arms wrapped around her middle. "Ellie."

She turned, shook her head, and kept going.

"Ellie, stop."

He pulled up alongside the road, turned off the engine, and exited the car. He hurried after her and grabbed her coat. "Here." He put the coat

around her shoulders. “Come back to the motorcar so I can drive you home.”

“No.” She shrugged his arm off, pulled the coat closer around her body and kept walking.

“You can’t walk home from here, it’s too far.”

She turned to face him, eyes swollen, her nose red from the cold and crying. “Go away.”

“Look.” He circled around in front of her and raised both palms in surrender. “I won’t touch you, won’t even talk to you, but you have to get into the automobile and let me drive you home.”

Ellie stood staring at him, shaking from the cold. God, how he loved this woman. Her smell, her touch, her voice. She’d crawled into his heart and had taken up permanent residence. He could not let her go, even though she drove him to distraction, and had disrupted his well-thought-out life, and made his gut burn with desire.

“You’re a sneaking low down skunk, Max Colbert. All the time I thought you were being nice to me, might even—even I-I-like me. Instead, you were trying to pass me off as a wife to some stranger! You’re despicable. And I never want to lay eyes on you again.” She hiccupped.

“Can I explain?” Nothing he wanted more than to take her in his arms and kiss her tears away. However, since he didn’t relish getting a bloody nose, he kept his distance.

“No. Either get out of my way so I can walk home, or—” She paused, eyeing the motorcar. “Or drive me home and never speak to me again.”

He blew out a breath. “All right. Get in and I’ll drive you home.”

She huddled in the corner and kept her silence all the way to her boarding house. Once the motorcar stopped, she jumped from it, and hurried up the stairs, not looking back as she closed the door.

Max slumped in his seat, rubbing his temple and forehead with thumb and index finger. What a mess. It was his job to straighten it out, and straighten it out he would.

Christmas Day, usually the favorite day of the year for Ellie. Not this year. It’d been two days since the School Board Christmas Party. Two days of misery. Max had come to the door more than once each day, and every day she’d refused to see him. Mrs. Beamers kept sniffing disapproval every time Ellie came her way.

She couldn't face him. To think all those clabberheaded idiots he'd dragged along each time they met was for the sole purpose of palming her off so she could get 'out of his hair!' Oh, the humiliation of it all. And the heartbreak. It would be so much easier if she could hate him, but unfortunately, it didn't work that way. She loved Max Colbert and everything about him from his stubborn streak to his caring and compassionate side. And making love with him had shaken her world. That's what made his deception so much more painful.

Uncle Jesse had come to pick her up, unusually quiet during the ride to his house. "Everything going all right with you, Ellie?" His warm eyes and familiar smile had her on the brink of tears. Many times as a child and young girl, he would pull her into his arms and comfort her when life had handed her the short end of the stick. If only he could do that now. This time there was no comfort from her heartache.

As always, most of the family had gathered at Tori and Jesse's house for Christmas. The last to arrive, Ellie spent the first few minutes hugging and being hugged by the large group. Her big brother Michael and his wife Heidi were there with their baby, Madeline, her sister, Rachel, and her husband, Rusty, his daughter, Amelia, and Rachel's son, Zander as well. Rachel and Heidi both sported full bellies. Two more little ones on the way. Hunter, her brother only a year older, left a hole in the happy gathering, since as a Federal Marshal he spent all his time on the road. They hadn't seen him in over two years.

And, of course, the four Cochran cousins added to the chaos. She smiled as Jesse's gaze roamed around the room with pride at his clan. Her uncle cherished his family, and everyone knew it. Ellie sighed as he put his arm around Tori's shoulders, and then dragged her to the doorway where the mistletoe hung and gave her a rounding kiss.

Exchange of gifts always the first order of business, soon the room filled with the sounds of laughter and exclamations of thanks and appreciation. Large scraps of wrapping paper and ribbons adorned the floor. Madeline crawled among the discards, laughing her baby giggle at the excitement in the air.

Jesse stood, wearing the new sweater Tori had given him. "All right everyone, we have only about another half hour until dinner, so let's get this place cleaned up."

The Cochran cousins bagged up the wrapping paper, and Rachel, Ellie, and Heidi refilled the apple cider bowl, and arranged the opened gifts neatly under the tree. Ellie never heard the doorbell, or knew another person had entered the house until she felt the cold air rush in from outside.

“Merry Christmas.” Jesse’s voice boomed down the hallway.

“Merry Christmas to you too, sir.”

Ellie stilled, her heart in her throat. The voice she couldn’t get out of her head, no matter how hard she’d tried. Still on her knees in front of the Christmas tree, she turned. Max stood next to Jesse, a tenuous smile on his face as he looked at her.

“Glad you could join us, Max.” Jesse slapped him on the shoulder.

“Thank you. I appreciated the invitation.” He continued to stare at Ellie as he spoke.

She rose from her place on the floor and approached the two men. “Why are you here?”

“Merry Christmas, Ellie.”

“No you don’t. This isn’t going to work.” She backed away. “Excuse me.” She turned and fled to the kitchen, and threw herself into Tori’s arms. “I don’t want him here. Make him leave.”

Why was he here? Didn’t she make it plain she didn’t want to see him? If he came to apologize and be ‘friends,’ he could forget it. Her heart couldn’t take it. She needed to stay as far away from Max as she could. Maybe she should quit her job and move far away.

Tori eased away from her. “Now Ellie. Max is a guest in our home. I’m not going to ask him to leave.” She smoothed her hair back. “Whatever problems exist must be worked out between the two of you. Since when does Ellie Henderson run away?”

Ellie wiped her eyes and nose on the handkerchief Rachel handed her, and took a deep breath. “You’re right. I don’t run,” she said with an indigent sniff and left the kitchen. She would deal with him once and for all. Then continue on with her life plan. If only she could remember it.

Jesse and Max were in Jesse’s office with the door closed. She wandered back into the parlor and took Madeline from Heidi and settled herself on the couch with the baby. Could this Christmas get much worse? She kissed the top of the baby’s head, and then rubbed her cheek over the soft silky hair.

Slowly, the others drifted into the room, as if waiting for something. She caught a definite gleam in Tori's eyes when she looked at her, and Heidi and Rachel exchanged mirthful glances.

Uncle Jesse and Max entered the room together. Ellie's heart sped up, and her stomach clenched. Max stared at her from the moment he entered the room. Slowly he walked across the room. Heidi reached for the baby and sat on the chair next to the fireplace, leaving a wide-open space for Max.

He sat next to her and took her hand. She pulled it back. He took it again. She pulled it back again. Rachel giggled.

Max cleared his throat, forcing her to look at him. "Ellie, I have something to say, and I want your whole family to hear it."

"I have nothing to say to *you*, Mr. Colbert."

Max glanced at Jesse, who nodded encouragement.

He took her hand again, and it appeared they would play tug of war. He held her hand and gripped her elbow to keep her from pulling back. "Ellie, you've turned my whole world upside down. My life plan is out the window, and I'm not sure what's up and what's down."

"I know all this, *Mr. Colbert*." Heat rose from her middle and traveled to her face. Her jaw tightened and she fisted her hands. "I'm an annoyance, trouble, and a disaster waiting to happen. I'm in your way, you would love to get me out of your school, and you hate everything about me." She raised her chin. "Does that about cover it?"

His lips moved into a slow smile. "No. I *love* everything about you, and I love *you*." He slid onto one knee in front of her.

Tori sniffed, and Jesse dropped his arm around her shoulders, and tugged her to his side.

"Ellie Henderson. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

She sat there, stunned. This man, the proudest man she'd ever met, was on his knee in front of her entire family proposing marriage. A giggle started deep inside her and she covered her mouth to keep it in. She bent toward him and whispered, "Get up, everyone is watching."

"I know," he whispered back. "That's what I planned."

"You look silly. Get off the floor."

"Not until you say yes," he said, his voice still a whisper.

“What about the superintendent job, and the hours you need to spend traveling. Your desire to remain single?”

“I just asked Senator Cochran to remove my name from the list. I don’t want any job that would keep me from you.” He smiled that lopsided grin, and her heart did a double time thump. “Besides, I tremble at the thought of the trouble you would get into with me not here.” He raised her hands to his mouth and kissed them.

“What about your plan to marry me off to one of your horrible friends?”

“Merely a lapse of judgment.” His face softened. “I could never stand to watch another man walk off with you. You are *mine*. I’m just sorry it took me so long to realize it. Well? What do you say?”

“I say you need to get off the floor.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Answer me, Ellie.”

“If I say yes, will you get up?”

“Perhaps.”

She studied him for a moment. “Okay. Yes!” she shouted and threw her arms around him, knocking them both to the floor. The impossible had happened. The very stern, very rigid Max Colbert had put his life plan aside to marry the crazy and troublesome Ellie Henderson. Her heart soared.

Cheers and laughter erupted around the room as they rolled on the floor. Max gave her an enthusiastic kiss and helped her up.

“One more thing.” He placed her on the couch and sat alongside her. He slid his hand into his jacket pocket and took out a ring. “This belonged to my mother. It was left to me when she died. Since you’re so much like her, I’d like you to wear it as an engagement ring.” He slipped the gold ring with a ruby stone onto her finger. It fit perfectly.

“Dinner is served,” Tori announced, blotting her eyes with the corner of her apron. Hugs and congratulations followed the noisy group to the dining room. Max held Ellie back.

“Now that we’re alone, I want to properly kiss my future wife.” He cupped her face in his hands and gently kissed her. When she moaned, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, deepening the kiss. He reluctantly pulled away. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Dinner’s getting cold.” Jesse leaned against the doorway, arms crossed, grinning at the two of them.

Ellie eyed the mounds of dirty dishes and partially filled serving plates and bowls scattered around the long table. The baby slept in Heidi's lap, and eleven-year-old Benjamin sat on Jesse's lap playing thumb war with his papa. Tori looked as though she could use a nap, as did the two pregnant ladies. The end of a perfect Christmas dinner.

She turned to Max, her eyes sparkling. "Do you really love me?"

He placed his arm around the back of her chair and smiled. "Ellie, believe me, I really love you."

She looked at him from underneath lowered eyelashes. "I can think of a way you can prove it."

"Isn't giving up the superintendent's job enough?"

"Um. It helps. But I can think of another way."

"How?"

She sat forward on her seat, smiling brightly. "Let me drive your automobile."

Max's face leached all color. He looked quickly from face to face, catching quite a few smiles. His shoulders slumped, and he swallowed convulsively. Reaching into his pocket, he slowly pulled out the goggles he'd shoved in there earlier, and handed them to her.

"I love you, Ellie Henderson."

For more of the Henderson family,
follow Tori's story in
A Run For Love

Feisty school teacher Tori Henderson values her independence and has no use for a husband. When she finds herself the legal guardian of her two nieces, two nephews, and facing eviction from her Kansas home, she enters the 1889 Oklahoma land run and confronts a new set of challenges. The biggest obstacle being her new neighbor, cocky lawyer Jesse Cochran, the son of a whore--a man determined to put his past behind him and start a new life and family of his own.

Despite the undeniable attraction between them, Tori is determined to keep him at arm's length, but a family emergency brings them together and they declare a truce. Can Jesse win Tori's heart after a series of unplanned events, or will tragedy tear them apart forever?

Follow Michael's story in
A Prescription for Love

Guthrie, Oklahoma, 1903. Betrayed by his fiancée's infidelity eight years ago, pharmacist Michael Henderson vowed he'd never risk his heart again. But he doesn't anticipate the tug of attraction he shares with his new employee.

Heidi Lester flees her home, determined to prove to her overprotective parents she can conquer her debilitating asthma, to make a life of her own. However, her unscrupulous fiancé has no intention of letting her go. He has his own plans for Heidi and her inheritance.

Will a scheme to ruin Michael's family force Heidi to marry her fiancé, or will assistance arrive from a surprising source to allow her to be with the man she truly loves?

Also by CALLIE HUTTON:
An Angel in the Mail

An Angel in the Mail, set in 1861, unites newly penniless society belle Angel Hardwick and widower Nathan Hale, father of five, who is desperate for a wife to straighten his life out. Nate's looking for someone who loves children and can easily take over the cooking, cleaning and laundry. Instead, he is getting Angel, whose culinary knowledge consists of weekly meetings with Cook to decide the family's menu.

Angel is a strong-minded young woman, resigned to her fate, and determined to make the best of her situation. But will her new husband allow for mistakes? Or will he send her packing when she burns meals and misplaces his children?

Nate just wants a peaceful, well run household, without the distraction of an attractive wife. However, his beautiful wife with a very distractible body is not giving him peace. Somebody lied, because despite what he was told by the Bride Agency, this beauty knows nothing about running a home, but she sure sets him on fire at night.

Nate and Angel have to come to a working arrangement, overcoming problems between them. But will they be able to find a happily ever after with someone desperately working behind the scenes to destroy their relationship?

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