

JESSIE'S JOURNEY

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Cover Design by Marie's Designs

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Jessie Spencer feels like a prisoner in her own home and wants the chance to be independent without her father's spies watching her constantly. When she meets the incredibly handsome schoolteacher to work out issues concerning her younger brother, she is smitten. However, no matter how much she wants to confide in him, he cannot know about her family's secret. And he definitely cannot know that she wants to participate in the women's suffrage movement.

Morgan Buchanan's past is something he hides from everyone. It is bad enough that wealthy women look down on him because he is a schoolteacher, they don't need to know how he was raised. But Jessie Spencer is different, and she intrigues him. He feels the need to help her and her brother, even if his heart gets involved.



ONE



D*enver, Colorado 1893*

Panic rushed through Jessie Spencer as she ran toward her black stallion, and lifted her skirt to give her legs room as she swung up on to the animal's back. She knew this wasn't ladylike, but she couldn't have her father knowing she was in town by herself.

Could she help it that she wanted to be independent? She wished that women could go into town by themselves without causing the old hags or the old-fashioned men to gossip. Jessie also longed for the day when she could speak her mind without being reprimanded by her father. Then again, had she ever pleased him? He wasn't one to speak words of affirmation.

Leaning forward, she urged the animal into a fast run. Although people littered the streets, she had to get back home quickly. She maneuvered her stallion the best she could through the crowd, heading toward the edge of town.

Since her father was the mayor, people expected her to act with more decorum. Most of the time she represented the Spencer family name properly, but a voice inside her head was screaming to become the woman she had always wanted to be – the woman who could wear men's trousers and ride astride with her long, unbound hair flapping in the wind.

Unfortunately, she had to act like a *proper* daughter so that she didn't tarnish the Spencer name.

Slowing her horse, she glanced over her shoulder to see if the man she ran into earlier was following her. Jessie's gut told her that this man

was being paid by her father to watch her. She was too old for a governess, yet her father still felt the need to pay men to report back to him about his daughter's activities for the day. It was so infuriating!

Not more than ten minutes ago, this man had stepped in front of her as she left the General Store. At first, she thought he was trying to get inside the building, but then he blocked her way and asked her a few questions, which she found ludicrous. Even visitors to the city knew where to find bathhouses and saloons since they were practically on every street.

Jessie had quickly given him directions and left. Now as she searched the boardwalk and the cobblestone street, she saw no sign of him. She was certain he went back to the mayor's office to inform him that his only daughter was in town without a bonnet! Her father didn't understand the irritation those things were to her head.

She inhaled slowly and gradually released her breath. What if she had spooked herself for nothing? Maybe the man was indeed a visitor who had gotten lost. But she also knew her father's overbearing nature, and she didn't dare second-guess herself. Since her mother's death five years ago, Father had been more and more strict with her leisure time.

Finally, she reached the less congested part of town with more houses than shops. She could ride faster with less hindrance. She pushed the heels of her riding boots against the animal's sides, urging him to go faster.

Not often did she dare leave the house by herself, and now she knew why. Perhaps the only way to hide from her father's watchdogs was to go out at night or wear a disguise. Then she wouldn't always be looking over her shoulder or doubting people who asked her questions.

The sooner she could get home, the better. At least this time.

As she turned a sharp corner, the bright mid-morning sun shone in her eyes, making it difficult to see what was ahead. She lifted a hand to block the glare and noticed a man stepping into her path. Her heart jumped to her throat.

“Get out of my way,” she yelled, but he didn’t hear her.

A different kind of fear passed through her, and she tugged on the reins. The horse wasn’t slowing quickly enough. White-hot terror surged through her. She was going to run him over! He could die because of her impatience to get home.

Finally, the man lifted his attention to her. His eyes widened, and he jumped out of her way just in time. When he landed on the ground, he fell to his knees and rolled across a patch of dirt.

Grumbling loudly, she managed to stop the stallion. Annoyance flared inside of her as she dismounted and marched toward him. Her skirt swung around her legs with the quick rhythm of her gait. She stood above him, arms akimbo, and pierced him with a hard stare. The fear over what just happened gave her a hard edge.

“You imbecile!” She heaved deep breaths. “Do you normally walk into a street without looking first?”

He rolled his eyes before slowly rising to his feet. He brushed off the dirt from his trousers. When his gaze met hers, he swiped the cuff of his sleeve across his dirt-caked lips and cleared his throat. “Please forgive me, miss. I didn’t see you coming until you were almost upon me.”

She grumbled under her breath. What was wrong with men like him, those who thought of nobody else but themselves?

“Clearly, since you were walking with your head in the clouds. What kind of fool purposely moves in front of a fast horse?” Jessie shook her head. “Why don’t you people realize there are others on the road that might be in a hurry?”

His gaze skimmed over her from her green blouse and matching jacket, down to her brown skirt. When his attention moved back to her eyes, color bloomed in the man’s face, not blending well with the dirt smudged on his skin. In two strides, the tall man stood before her, bending slightly to her level, and scowling.

“And why don’t *you people* stop thinking you own the world?” He took a deep breath, his nostrils flaring. “Isn’t it enough that you turn up

your wealthy noses at those of us beneath your class?" He motioned his hand toward her horse. "Good grief, woman, you could have killed me. And have you forgotten that I did apologize? Are my words so difficult for *Your Highness* to accept?"

She blinked, not believing the tone he used with her. The nerve of him talking to her like this was all her fault. She gasped. "How dare you—"

He threw back his head as a harsh laugh exploded from his throat. "Oh, believe me, *Your Highness*, I dare quite a bit, especially today." He straightened his hat on his head and lifted his chin.

She stomped her foot. "You dare accuse me of being arrogant, and yet there you are acting like you are a powerful figure in Colorado."

His jaw tightened and his nostrils flared. "If I had been someone with power, I doubt you would have tried to run me over."

She arched an eyebrow. "Someone so powerful wouldn't have been foolish enough to wander into the road without looking."

His dark glare turned darker. At this point, she wasn't even certain what eye color he had. At first, she thought they were gray, but now they appeared brown.

"How many times do I have to apologize?" He growled. "Can't you see that *you* are the one over reacting?"

She gasped and then placed her gloved fingers over her mouth. Shock vibrated through her from this idiotic conversation. "Oh, please. If anyone is exaggerating, it's you."

"Why? Because *people like me* cannot possibly be right?"

She rolled her eyes. "You are intolerable."

He bunched his hands by his sides but remained quiet for a few awkward moments. Finally, he took a deep breath, and slowly exhaled.

"Once again," he said with a more controlled voice, "forgive me for disturbing you and your horse as you raced down the street without a care in the world. Now if you'll excuse me, I must be on my way before I dare say something else and put *you people* in your place again. Good

day, *Your Highness*, and try not to run anyone else over. They may not be as kind as I am.”

He swung away from her and marched toward the side of the street.

Jessie couldn't believe his audacity. It was true she didn't socialize much, but if most men were as rude as this one, she'd be content to live in the privacy of her home for the rest of her life.

Shaking her head, she walked back to her horse and mounted. She took a quick glance around at the curious watchers who had somehow gathered without her notice. Thankfully, none of them was the man who had asked her so many questions earlier. Perhaps she had made too much of it, but she couldn't relax yet. Someone in this crowd would tell her father, she just knew it.



MORGAN BUCHANAN SWIPED the dirt off his clothes as he walked to his horse. He'd never been so frustrated with women before today. And now, in a one-hour period, *two* women had tried his patience. *Two* women had made him feel like the lowest creature that had ever slithered on the ground.

Gnashing his teeth, he grasped the horse's reins and mounted. On impulse, he glanced back at the fancy porch wrapped around an even fancier house that bordered one of the best flower gardens in town. The white with green trim, two-story, home had large windows, and stood out as if advertising its wealth. When he'd first seen this place several months ago, he wanted a chance to look inside. Now that he'd been inside, he wished he'd never stepped foot on their polished-to-perfection walnut wood floors.

What had he been thinking earlier, asking Rosanna to marry him? Obviously, he'd lost his mind at some point during the last two months. Knowing a woman for that length of time certainly didn't qualify her for marriage.

Anger mixed with the sting from his damaged heart, as his mind whirled in confusion like a stubborn tornado. He still couldn't believe Rosanna had so crudely refused his offer of marriage. But her excuse squashed his dreams completely. Apparently, he just wasn't good enough for her or her family.

Morgan's profession as a schoolteacher wasn't sufficient, and the house he'd built with his own hands certainly hadn't impressed her. Though the truth of their relationship threatened to tear him apart, he was glad her true nature had been revealed. Lesson learned. Now he wondered if he had ever been in love with her, or if he had just loved the idea of being married.

Releasing a shout, he kicked his horse into a run, riding away from a time in his life he couldn't wait to forget. Two high-and-mighty women making him feel worthless on the same day was not a good thing. Most men wouldn't be able to handle it. But Morgan was strong. At least, he hoped.

He gripped the reins tighter. *Women!* Why had he decided to take a teaching job so near to these wealthy women? He should have realized by now that all they cared about was money, and if a man didn't have enough to support them, they were going to throw him aside like dog scraps. With the talk of the new referendum on women's suffrage, there would be more irritating women out there thinking they own the town.

It was really his own fault for thinking he could marry someone like Rosanna. From the first day they met, he knew he was far beneath her station in life. Yet, for some odd reason, she had acted as though she really liked him. Why would she lead him on if she wasn't serious about their relationship?

Within minutes, he reached his small house—the one he'd built with his own two hands. He was proud of his achievements, but apparently, his ability to build a home wasn't a tool to impress women.

He led his horse into the makeshift shed, dismounted, and tied the animal to the post. Anger still guiding him, he marched into the house

and slammed the door. Darby O'Brian, a friend Morgan had relied on for years, jumped from the table, knocking the chair over in the process. The shorter man's eyes widened, and his mouth hung open as he stared at Morgan. He'd known Darby since they had both lost their parents at a young age. Darby had always been there for Morgan, and he knew that the man would move mountains if he could just to make Morgan laugh. Funny thing was, because of Darby's height and weight, if he could move a flower cart, it would be a miracle.

Darby was like a brother—an often overprotective brother.

“Uh...I take it the proposal didn't go as planned?” Darby asked as he wrung his boney hands against his middle.

“It was a disaster.” Morgan marched into his bedroom in search of another set of clothes.

“What happened?” Darby's short, skinny legs stumbled over each other in an attempt to keep up with Morgan's wide strides.

“She said no,” Morgan snapped. “Actually, her very words were—*If you would consider working under my father as the Financial Advisor's Assistant at the bank, I might consider your proposal.*” He made the tone of his voice a little higher to sound like a woman. Over his shoulder, he threw Darby a stare. “Apparently, being a schoolteacher isn't good enough for Rosanna or her family.”

Tears swam in Darby's eyes. Out of the two, Darby was the emotional one, always wearing his heart on his sleeve. He was the one who encouraged Morgan to propose.

Darby slowly shook his head. “Oh, how sorry I am for this, my friend.” He wiped his eyes. “This is all my fault. I fear I'm not very good at being a fortuneteller. If I hadn't convinced you to court her...” He hitched a breath, which elicited a high pitch sound, and slapped his hand over his mouth. Tears filled his eyes faster.

If it was different circumstances, Morgan might have laughed at his emotional friend. But today, he wouldn't since the man was truly in more pain than Morgan right now.

“Darby, it’s not your fault.” Morgan needed to calm his friend down before the poor man swooned from stress, which he’d done several times before. “I was the one who wanted to get to know her. If I didn’t want to meet her, I would have ignored your advice.”

Sighing heavily, Darby shook his head as his breathing regulated. “From now on, I shall just stick to refining the art of card games and leave my matchmaking skills in the ground where they belong.”

Morgan chuckled. “Yes, stick to your card games. The more you practice, the better you’ll become, and maybe one day, you’ll be able to win at poker.”

Darby scurried back into the other room, so Morgan closed the bedroom door and proceeded to change his clothes. He and Darby had been together for years. They met at an orphanage. Both were amongst the oldest children in that center. Darby was only older than Morgan by five years, but his deformities made him look like an old, hunched-over man. Darby wasn’t exactly bald, but the hair sprouted in different areas all over his head, and over the years, it had grown longer. The man’s arms and legs were twisted, but he could still manage to walk and use his hands. And although most children found him repulsive at first, Morgan knew they would just have to get to know him in order to realize what a special person Darby O’Brian really was.

He definitely kept Morgan entertained. After all of these years of trying to play cards—any card game—the poor man could still only call himself a beginner. Darby tried hard, but most of the time, he could only do card *tricks*. In the end, the mayhem Darby caused made them laugh.

After Morgan shucked his dirty clothes and dressed in clean ones, he joined Darby in the main room. His friend stood by the stove, stirring a pot with a spoon while he stared out the window.

Morgan grinned. His friend enjoyed daydreaming and believing the best in people. It was too bad Morgan couldn’t do the same.

“What are we having to eat?” he asked.

Darby jumped as if startled, bumping his hand against the pot, nearly tipping it over. Although he was clumsy, he recovered quickly and kept the pot from tipping over onto the stove. However, the wooden spoon wasn't as lucky. It flew through the air, flinging food on the wall before landing by his feet.

Morgan chuckled. Thankfully, the sailing food particles didn't dirty his clean clothes. Darby squealed and picked up the spoon. He stood and looked at the mess on the wall, frowning.

"Oh, dear." Darby sighed. "I suppose I should clean this up quickly before the food dries."

Hiding his smile behind his hand, Morgan moved to the wash basin and found a cloth. After wetting it, he moved to the stove and peeked inside the pot. Carrots and potatoes floated in the boiling thin sauce, along with a few chunks of meat. They couldn't afford much, and they had to make the meat last as long as they could.

"I can wipe the wall," Morgan told his friend. "You worry about cooking our meal without spilling it."

"As always," Darby pouted, "you're coming to my rescue."

Morgan shrugged as he wiped the wall. "Isn't that what friends do?"

"Yes, but one of these days, you're going to get tired of helping me." Darby sighed heavily. "One of these days, you will find a woman who loves you no matter what profession you have, and you'll get married. There won't be room in your life for me."

Morgan's throat tightened. He had to admit, he'd thought of that as well. But he couldn't leave his friend. Who else would take care of him?

"Sorry, O'Brian, but you're not that lucky." He grinned. "You're stuck with me until you die."

Darby blinked his eyes as though he tried not to cry. "Then it is *you* who isn't very lucky." He turned back to the stove and stirred the pot. "We are having stew for our midday meal. I hope that is satisfactory."

“Yes, it is.” Morgan moved to the cupboards and withdrew two bowls and two spoons. On the way to the table, he grabbed the home-made bread.

Darby had been with Morgan for many years, and although the man couldn't find a decent job, he made a good cook and housekeeper. Morgan really couldn't ask for more.

“So, tell me,” Darby asked, “why were your clothes dirty? Did Miss Townley throw you out of her house?”

Morgan couldn't believe he'd forgotten about that irritating woman. His anger surfaced as he remembered their verbal exchange. “No, she didn't throw me out, but another woman nearly ran me over with her horse not more than five minutes after I left Rosanna.” He shook his head. “I don't know why wealthy women need to act as if they are better than everyone. This one made me so mad I wanted to throttle her. She acted as if it was my fault that she nearly killed me. When I apologized, even though I did nothing wrong, she ignored it.”

“Augh!” Darby snapped his attention to Morgan. “The nerve of that woman.”

“My thoughts, exactly. I swear, if I see her again anytime soon, I just might go with my first instincts. She'll rue the day she messed with a *schoolteacher!*”

Darby grinned, displaying a mouth of missing teeth. “You will show her that you're not to be trifled with.”

Morgan grew somber as he stared at the table. What was the use of showing her anything? The plain fact was that wealthy women were so far above him they couldn't even step down to wipe their fancy boots on him. If he continued to seek those types of women, his heart wouldn't be able to handle it.

Perhaps it was time to look for another profession... or move to another town.



TWO



If Morgan didn't cease his daydreaming soon, catastrophe would strike in his classroom. It always did whenever he let his mind wander.

The rain tinkling against the window and drizzling down the glass lulled him into relaxation, and the gentle rhythm was too soothing for him to pull away. Winter was approaching quickly. This was the time he felt the most serene. It'd been a while since he felt this way. It'd taken two months for his battered heart to return to normal after the woman he thought he wanted to marry rejected him. She'd been too pampered, too wealthy, and a fool to reject his proposal. It was her loss.

His poor upbringing shouldn't have made a difference in the kind of man he was today. He'd overcome the obstacles as a child and moved forward with confidence that he could make his life better. He had become an orphan at age twelve, but he persevered and made it through those tough years. He'd become a schoolteacher because of Darby's insistence, and Morgan loved his job. But a schoolteacher's position wasn't the lowest occupation, so why did some women look down on him for that?

Leaning his shoulder against the wall, he stared outside. The solemn mood settled about him in comforting silence. He wished he could close his eyes and enjoy without having a worry in the world. His class, remarkably quiet for this time of day, gave him a moment to himself. This didn't happen very often with his students. It must be the dreary clouds darkening the room, along with the gentle pitter-patter of the rain against the windowpanes. The soft popping of burning

wood in the hearth against the far side of the room added to his sense of peace.

He'd given his class a reading assignment. Since he didn't want to fall asleep in his own chair, he moved to the window to stand. A draft of cooler air touched his arms and brushed his face. He needed the chilly temperature right now to appease his raw nerves.

To take his mind off his troubles, he turned his attention to the class and stopped his gaze on one student in particular. Immediately, he clenched his teeth. Morgan didn't normally overreact when dealing with an unruly child, but fourteen-year-old Billy Spencer would never be considered a *normal* child. His thin frame slumped over his desk with the book brought upright in front of his face. The lad's curly light-brown hair waved around his ears and his locks brushed against the collar of his shirt. Although Morgan couldn't see the boy's face, his haughty smirk would always be branded in Morgan's mind, and Billy's high-pitched mocking laugh would continue to ring through his ears.

Although Morgan had lived in Colorado all his life, he'd only been teaching in Denver for two months. The children were from a wealthier class of people, and he'd learned quickly that most of these students didn't believe they should behave. Usually, he handled them with firmness. Each day Morgan counted the minutes until time to return home, and dreaded the time when school started up again the following day. He also prayed he would find a solution to this problem with Billy. The boy was disruptive and unruly. But why?

From up the street, a horse and wagon pulled to the closest building near the school. Mr. Sprat was making his daily delivery, taking eggs to the bakery. Morgan's heart lightened and he smiled. In the time he'd been in this area, there were certain people he'd learned to count on. Mr. Sprat was one of them. The reed thin man and his portly wife were the first ones to greet Morgan after he had moved in. Mr. Sprat was a hardworking man who had a genuine love and concern for everyone.

As Mr. Sprat climbed out of his wagon and stacked cartons of eggs in his arms, Morgan switched his attention to the store the man would soon be entering. Immediately, his attention fell to the clump of grass and twigs on the base of the wooden steps. Morgan's breath caught in his throat and his chest clenched.

The familiar grassy nest of hidden briars had been Billy's favorite trap. Morgan fisted his hands and gritted his teeth. Since he'd been unfortunate enough to be the recipient of Billy's tainted humor, Morgan knew the lad's contraption quite well.

He yanked away from the window and stormed across the wooden floor, his footsteps echoing with each step toward the cloakroom. As he grabbed his jacket off the coat hook on the wall, he stumbled over the balls and ropes the children should have put away earlier.

Growling under his breath, he cautiously sprinted over them and opened the door. The wind caught him full force and he blinked against the swirling wet leaves and debris. His arms went up to shield him against the weather's elements, as he rushed down the steps.

If Mr. Sprat didn't see the trap, the man would lose more than his dignity as he fell to the ground. His daily earnings would also be ruined. Morgan quickened his step toward the front of the schoolhouse. His foot landed in a patch of mud, making him slip. Flaying his arms, he searched for the brick building to hold him upright. After getting his bearings, he straightened and proceeded to warn the man.

"Mr. Sprat," he called out as he rounded the corner. "Stop—"

His call came too late. Cartons of eggs blocked the older man's view of the ground as his foot flattened on Billy's trap and the barbs hidden within. With a jerk, Mr. Sprat withdrew. The stack of eggs in his arms teetered, as did the thin man.

Morgan ran, reaching out to help, but he was too far away. The older man yelped and hopped on one foot. The cartons of eggs obviously forgotten as they flew through the air. Mr. Sprat swayed and slipped on the wet grass behind him, landing on his backside. Within seconds, the

eggs landed on him, breaking and coating his head and body with their gooey yolks.

Squeezing his eyes closed, Morgan released a ragged sigh and threaded his fingers through his hair. That was it! Billy Spencer needed to be stopped one way or another.

Groans from the man on the ground pulled Morgan from his seething thoughts. Mr. Sprat's wide eyes met Morgan. The older man shook his head as liquid swam in his gaze, his lower lip quivering.

Morgan hurried to him and held out his hand. "Mr. Sprat, I'm extremely sorry. I wish I had reached you sooner."

"Wh—what happened? What did I step on?" The other man's eyes darted around the walkway.

"You stepped on Billy Spencer's briar trap, I'm afraid." He sighed. "I have been the recipient of that prank numerous times." He knelt on one knee and gathered a few eggshells. "Here, let me help you."

"Nonsense, Mr. Buchanan." Mr. Sprat wiped the dripping yolk from his face and smiled. "You have a classroom of children to attend to. I'll be fine."

Laughter from the schoolhouse chimed through the air, frustrating Morgan that much more. He glanced over his shoulder toward the building. The children had gathered at the windows, their faces aglow, and fingers pointing toward the scene.

Mr. Sprat stood and continued to swipe the yolk and shells from his clothes. Morgan withdrew his billfold from his pocket. "Tell me how much this incident has set you back."

The older man's gaze met his with tears glistening in his eyes. "Not to worry, Mr. Buchanan. All will be fine."

"But this wasn't your fault."

Mr. Sprat shrugged. "Neither was it yours." He shooed him with his hands. "Go back to your classroom and try to teach some sense into those heathens."

Morgan chuckled. “*Try* is the operative word, I believe. It’ll take a miracle for me to teach them anything.”

As he stomped back toward the school, anger grew within him. He tightened his lips and hoped he’d be able to control his words and actions when talking to that boy. If not, Billy Spencer was in big trouble. This time, he wouldn’t hold back on contacting the boy’s parents.

Before heading inside, he kicked his boots against the steps, trying to loosen the mud coating the soles. When that didn’t work, he yanked them off and set them inside the door, then stormed into the classroom in stocking feet.

Immediately, the air clouded with smoke and tickled his nose. He waved his hand in front of his face and coughed. Something was on fire!

His heart sank as he hurried across the room. Billy and Nathaniel stood by the fireplace, tossing papers inside. When their gazes caught his, they threw in the rest of what they held and scrambled to their desks. Giggling throughout the room quickly hushed and the children straightened in their seats.

“What is the meaning of this?” Morgan’s voice boomed through the air as he rushed to the hearth. A few pages that had just caught the flame showed him what the two boys tried to burn. *Tomorrow’s tests*. He gritted his teeth. How was he going to handle those two? A willow switch came to mind.

He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths. Days like this tested the limits of his patience. Had he made a mistake in answering the call to teach? Yet, teaching was much better than going into the *family business*. He was no thief! He’d never follow in the footsteps of his father and older brother. Thankfully, they were dead which was why Morgan grew up an orphan.

Coughs increased in the room and brought him out of his thoughts. He hurried to the nearest window and pushed it open.

“Sarah, Beth, and Peter, could you please help me open some windows?”

The three eldest students followed Morgan’s instruction. He tried to maintain the fire in the hearth, bringing it to a normal level of heat. The thick smoke in the room threatened to push them outside and into the rain. The children were unusually silent while they aired out the room, and once the windows were closed and everyone returned to their seats, all eyes switched to him.

All except Billy Spencer’s.

Morgan paced the floor like a caged animal, his fingers twisting in his hair. How he would love nothing better than to shake some sense into that boy. Violence wasn’t the solution. Yet the temptation was great.

He stopped at the head of the classroom and folded his arms. Through narrowed eyes, he studied each child. The older girls sat rigid at their desks, looking like China dolls with their pretty bows and ruffles. Most were sweet and nonjudgmental—nothing like Rosanna Townley. He’d give them a few more years before they changed.

The boys wore crisp white shirts and brown trousers with suspenders. Their hair slicked back on their head, looking as if they were ready for church. He couldn’t punish them all for Billy’s prank. It wouldn’t be right.

Morgan took a deep breath and lifted his chin. “It’s very unfortunate that Billy and Nathaniel thought they had to warm the room with tomorrow’s test, because I must admit, it was the easiest test I’d planned so far this year.”

Moans of dejection filled the room. Morgan tried not to grin. “I suppose I’ll have to write another test tonight, which I fear will be more complicated due to my irritation over Billy and Nathaniel’s carelessness.” He shrugged. “Either that or I could fail you all.”

Once again, a round of grumbles arose in the classroom.

“That’s not fair, Mr. Buchanan,” Beth, the oldest girl in class spoke up, a frown marring her face. “After all, it was Billy and Nate who burned the test. You should give them the harder test.”

He walked to his desk and leaned back on the edge, crossing one ankle over the other. “Beth, you do have a point.” He scratched his chin. “But I don’t have time to write two tests before tomorrow.”

The blonde girl’s eyes widened, as did her smile. “I could help.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Pardon me?”

She pointed to the girl sitting next to her. “And Sarah can help. We’ll make up Billy and Nate’s test and you can make ours.”

Morgan nibbled on the corner of his mouth, trying to appear as if he were contemplating instead of holding back a grin.

“No.” Billy jumped up from his seat, his red face making his freckles dim in comparison. “That’s not fair, either. I know you, Beth, and you’ll give me harder questions.”

She smirked. “Of course I will. Maybe next time you’ll think twice about burning our tests and getting us all in trouble.”

Billy stomped his foot. “Mr. Buchanan, that’s not fair,” he whined.

Morgan held up his hands in mock surrender. “I don’t know, Billy. It’s either that or everyone will be given a zero. I think you’ll keep more friends following Beth’s suggestion.” Morgan paused and looked at the students one by one. “Who is in favor of allowing Beth and Sarah to write Billy’s and Nathaniel’s tests?”

The students nodded in unison, all except for Nathaniel and Billy. Their shaking heads silently spoke their disapproval. Morgan clapped his hands and stood. “The majority has it. Tomorrow Billy and Nathaniel will take the test made up by Sarah and Beth, and the rest of you will take the test I prepare.” Morgan scratched his chin. “Now, that solves one problem.” He focused on Billy. “What are you going to do about the other one?”

“What do you mean?” Billy asked.

“I mean Mr. Sprat’s eggs. They are all ruined, Billy. He lost money today because of your prank, and this kind of thing cannot go unpunished.”

Billy’s bottom lip stuck out in a dramatic pout as the boy crossed his arms over his chest.

“I think,” Morgan continued, “Billy needs to learn how much time and effort goes into getting the eggs ready in the morning.” A few snickers echoed in the room, but he kept his glare on Billy. “So tomorrow morning, bright and early, Billy will go to Mr. Sprat’s farm and help with the chores.”

The boy’s eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. Red blotches darkened his cheeks. “I will not!”

Morgan moved away from his desk and towered over Billy. “Yes, you will, and I will pick you up and personally take you there.”

Fire shot out of Billy’s eyes. He jumped to his feet and met Morgan’s glare. “You can’t make me. There’s no way I’m going to go to a farm and do their chores.”

Morgan reached out to grab the boy’s arm, but Billy pushed past him and darted out of the room. Within minutes, the door to the schoolhouse slammed shut.

Slowly counting to ten, Morgan cooled his anger. He’d deal with Billy later when he spoke to the boy’s parents.

The rest of the day passed quickly, and before he knew it, the end of the school day was upon them. Morgan couldn’t wait to breathe peacefully again and to think with a clear head. The children exited the schoolhouse quickly, and as he corrected assignments, his thoughts wandered back to Mr. Sprat and the loss of his eggs. Morgan still wanted to pay the man for what he’d been cheated. Perhaps he’d think of another way to give the older man the money.

Morgan shook his head. Unfortunately, money wouldn’t stop Billy Spencer. That boy needed a good scolding, but it should come from Mr. and Mrs. Spencer, not the schoolteacher. Working at the farm might be

good for Billy. Unfortunately, Morgan would have to hog-tie and drag that boy there in the morning, and his parents would probably be after him with a shotgun, too.

It didn't matter. Billy couldn't get away with this.

Grumbling, Morgan pushed away from his desk and stood. It was time to pay Billy's parents a visit.

As he shrugged on his duster, he remembered the rumors he'd heard about the boy's family. Apparently, Billy's great-grandfather had been very wealthy, and the money had been passed down to the boy's father. His father was now mayor of Denver. Morgan didn't think money should be the reason a child was disobedient and disrespectful to the schoolteacher and to others less fortunate.

Morgan wandered through the room to lock the windows and close the curtains before he left. Across the small field in back of the schoolhouse was Mrs. Krause's house. Her piano sang to life as she taught singing lessons to the children of the community. The student practicing at this hour had a beautiful voice, almost angelic. It reminded him of when he lived at the orphanage and the women of the nearest church choir sang praises every Sunday.

He doused the lamps then stepped into the straightened cloakroom. His boots remained by the door, less muddy than they'd been earlier this morning since he'd had time this afternoon to remove the dirt. Once he slipped into them, he walked toward the door. Just as he opened it, a luster of light from the descending sun nearly blinded him, and a whirlwind of silk and lace knocked into him, taking his breath away. A lilac scent accompanied the bundle and wafted from her hair.

The motion tilted him off balance, as it did the lady who'd run into him. He grasped her shoulders to keep her from teetering to the ground. After the initial whoosh of air from her throat, she pulled back enough to look into his eyes. The glowing sun silhouetted her head perfectly, giving her what looked like a halo circling her fancy hat. Singing from the neighboring house drifted through the air once again.

Heaven had opened and angels sang..

He shook his head to clear out the ridiculous thought. It hadn't happened with Rosanna, so why would it happen with a total stranger?



THREE



The woman stared at Morgan with wide eyes. Her gaze moved over his face in slow appraisal, first his eyes, then his nose, until finally resting on his mouth. From behind her, the sun had shifted enough for her face to become clearer. Azure eyes twinkled, highlighted by long, brown lashes that fluttered in a steady rhythm.

Absolutely beautiful.

“Are you all right?” Morgan asked.

She quickly stepped back. “Umm, yes. Thank you. I apologize for colliding into you. I didn’t realize you were on your way out.”

He chuckled. “How could you?” Stepping aside, he swept his hand in front of him. “Would you like to come in?”

“Thank you.” She tilted her head. “I presume you are the school-teacher?”

“Yes. I’m Morgan Buchanan.”

Her voice seemed oddly familiar. The way she dressed reminded him of someone, but he couldn’t put a name to who it would be. But then there were a great number of wealthy people living in the area.

As she walked past, she shrugged out of her lavender cape and displayed a matching skirt that pleated in the back. The white, short-sleeved blouse had pearls for buttons trailing down her back. When she turned and faced him, the high collar neck held a black and gold cameo. Whoever this vision of beauty was, she definitely came from a family of wealth. Somehow, she looked familiar, too, but he couldn’t place where he’d met her.

He closed the door and followed her into the classroom. Because of the covered windows and descending sun, the shaded room made it harder to see. He lit the nearest lamp.

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Miss...or are you married?" he asked.

"I'm not married."

He nodded. "You obviously know who I am, but I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure of being introduced to you."

She held out her gloved right hand. "I'm Miss Spencer. Billy's older sister."

Morgan had already extended his hand to slip into hers when the name struck. Immediately, irritation flowed through him. If she was Billy's sister, would she have the same rotten disposition as her brother?

"A pleasure to meet you, Miss Spencer. What can I do for you?" He dropped her hand and folded his arms across his chest.

Her gaze skimmed over him once again, this time with narrowed eyes. A frown marred her face as she played with the gold locket around her neck. After a few moments passed, she released it to sweep a lock of dark brown hair away from her cheek. "Have we met? You look familiar."

Wouldn't he have recalled meeting someone so lovely? But then the longer he stared at her, the more familiarity tugged on his mind. He *had* met her somewhere. It wasn't until she cocked her head and planted her hands on her hips that he recalled from where he knew her. The memory struck him like a tree trunk slamming against his skull.

His gut twisted. This was the same woman who had almost run him over as he was leaving Rosanna's house after she rejected his marriage proposal a few weeks ago.

"So, Miss Spencer, what would you like to discuss with me?" He bunched his hands into fists and hid them in the pockets of his duster. So far, she didn't act as if she recalled when they had first met. Then again, he had always been invisible to people of her station.

She sashayed to a student's desk and sat on the edge. "I'd like to talk to you about what happened today with my brother."

He chuckled. "You probably won't believe this, but I was coming to speak to your parents just before we ran into each other."

"Indeed?" She arched an eyebrow. "And what would you have said to them?"

Sighing heavily, he walked to his desk and sat on the corner, facing her. "Billy's mischief has become a nuisance to the class. He is disruptive, and extremely disrespectful. Today he pulled a prank that caused a man to lose his hard-earned money. Mr. Sprat sells his eggs in bulk to stores around this area, and Billy had set a trap for him. Not only that, but your brother also coerced another boy in the class to help him burn tomorrow's tests while I was outside trying to help Mr. Sprat." Morgan shook his head. "Miss Spencer, I cannot allow that kind of behavior in my classroom. His actions need to be punished."

She lifted her chin. "And so, you are going to punish him by making him take a test his classmates have written for him? That doesn't seem fair."

He shrugged. "It was either that or give the class a failing grade. The class made the choice, not me."

She arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Oh, I think you had a lot to do with helping the class come to this decision."

He folded his arms. "Tell me, Miss Spencer, what would you have me do, then? What kind of punishment should I have given your brother?"

"Well, I certainly would have discovered why Billy acted the way he did, instead of making presumptions."

"Oh, really?"

She nodded, keeping a solemn, hoity-toity lift to her chin.

"What if I don't need to find out why Billy acts this way?" Morgan continued. "What if I already know?"

Her lovely azure eyes widened. "You do?"

“Yes. He does it for attention.” He walked to the hearth and warmed his hands near the low burning embers. The fire was nearly out, but thankfully, warmth still emanated from inside. “Coming from a wealthy family, I assume he has someone other than his parents to raise him.”

She huffed. “They are called governesses and nannies, if you must know.” Her lips thinned.

Anger shot through Morgan and burned to the core of his stomach, causing it to churn with disgust. “Miss Spencer, did you not come here to talk about your brother and try to straighten out this mess?”

She nodded and reached into her reticule. “I have come to put an end to my brother’s torture.” She pulled out a coin purse and opened it. “I’m willing to settle this right now.” Her hard gaze met his. “How much do you think it would cost to overlook my brother’s behavior?”

He gaped as her graceful fingers withdrew dollar bills one at a time. He shook his head. “You cannot be serious.”

“I most certainly am.”

“You’re going to pay me off?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Only if it will soften your heart to see past my brother’s misgivings.”

Infuriated, Morgan strode to the window, pulled back the curtains, and peered into the evening. The setting sun sank lower in the horizon.

“What will it be, Mr. Buchanan?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “Miss Spencer, you don’t have enough money to make me overlook Billy’s behavior. Besides, what will that accomplish? It certainly won’t make your brother change, and he definitely won’t learn anything from this, either.”

Shooting invisible daggers at him with her eyes, she dropped the bills back in her wrist purse. She stood, keeping her chin as erect as her back. “Mr. Buchanan, you are one foolish man.”

He swung away from the window and marched toward her. The closer he came, the wider her eyes opened, but she remained in place, even when he stood face to face.

“I’m foolish because I can’t be bought? Where I come from, that’s called having honor. I come from a strong ethical upbringing, and I will not wavier in my beliefs.” He shook his head again. “Obviously, the wealthy are the ones who need a lesson in manners—and in morality.”

“Ha! You know nothing of principles.” She smacked his chest with her fists. “You have no idea what my brother has gone through to make him this way. You would rather look past the problem and punish him regardless.”

Morgan grabbed her wrists to keep her from striking him again. “And all you can think of doing is to cover his problems with money. How is that going to make it disappear? Do you plan on paying off every person Billy hurts or ruins because of his unruly temperament? What kind of man would he eventually become if everyone covers up his mistakes? What Billy needs is to learn compassion and responsibility.” He took in a deep breath, trying to control his ire.

Miss Spencer met his stare, her bosom rose and fell quickly, and her mouth was so tight, it turned a bright red. Within moments, the sparks of heat in her azure eyes simmered, as did the taut lines in her pretty face.

“You are correct, Mr. Buchanan,” she said in a whisper. “Please forgive me. I just...I just...” She lifted her gaze to his again. This time, there was a touch of sadness in her eyes. “I just want Billy to have a normal life. I want to make up for his lack of parental love and affection. My mother died several years ago. Billy is still mourning her loss, as am I.”

Morgan hitched a quick breath in his throat as pain twisted around his heart. Had he misjudged her all because he was still bitter toward what Rosanna had done to him? Perhaps not all wealthy people were rude and critical. Yet, that didn’t explain why Miss Spencer acted the way she had when they first met.

“I want to make up for the love and attention he doesn’t receive from our father,” she continued as her voice broke. She quickly cleared her throat.

Silence thickened between them as Morgan scrambled for an intelligent thought. From outside the building, Mrs. Krause’s student sang a sweet song, and once again, it was if angels crooned to him. Immediately, he knew his purpose for coming to this city besides running from his past. True, it was to be a schoolteacher, but it was also to have patience in teaching someone how to be kind and considerate and look past other’s faults.

Unfortunately, he’d have to learn this lesson first before he could become the instructor.



EMOTION CAUGHT IN JESSIE’S throat as she stared at her brother’s teacher, making it nearly impossible to swallow. Mr. Buchanan didn’t have the slightest idea what she was talking about. However, she wasn’t about to enlighten him with the family secrets. For nearly two months, she’d kept her family’s mysteries hidden, and she tried to live her life as though they truly did not exist.

Now, as she stared into Mr. Buchanan’s heartwarming brown eyes, something touched deep within her, making her want to confess all. *Impossible!* Nobody could know.

However, in the past two months, Jessie had to act as if nothing was amiss in the Spencer household. But time was running out, and something needed to be done. Being without a father—even as controlling as he was—would devastate both hers and Billy’s lives. The thought made her heart break piece by tiny piece. It was a struggle to keep on believing all would be well, but she must!

Jessie didn’t like all the questions Mr. Buchanan threw at her. All she could do at this moment was to let the schoolteacher think he’d won.

She cleared her throat and squared her shoulders. "As it is, Mr. Buchanan, I feel it's unnecessary for you to involve my father. Please allow me to discuss this problem concerning my brother's behavior with you instead."

The very handsome schoolteacher nodded, his eyes never leaving her face. Something strange poured through her, and warmth covered her entire being, confusing her even more. Without knowing why, her mouth dried as if she were growing cotton inside it. She swallowed, hoping to dislodge the lump stuck in her throat.

Mr. Buchanan swiped his hand through his thick black hair. "As you wish. I'll let you handle this, but if Billy acts up again, I have no other choice but to take further action and talk to your father."

"I understand."

"There is something else."

She cocked her head. "What is that?"

"Billy needs to apologize to Mr. Sprat. I think the best way to handle this is to have Billy help Mr. Sprat tomorrow morning with his chores."

She blinked as confusion filled her. Had she heard correctly? How dare this man presume she would allow him to take her brother to a *farm*? "Mr. Buchanan. I don't believe this is the solution. Billy has never...well, he doesn't know anything about that kind of labor."

The teacher grinned. "Then it's high time he learned so that he can better appreciate the gravity of his prank."

Butterflies danced in her stomach from the way the handsome man looked at her, but she must remain strong in her decision. "No, Mr. Buchanan. That is unacceptable."

His grin disappeared and his expression turned sour. "It's not up to you what form of punishment I give, now is it? Or do you think you could run my class any better?"

She tightened her fingers around her reticule strings before she lashed out at him. Not many people dared to argue with the mayor's

daughter, but *this man* wouldn't let it rest. Obviously, he was going to make certain he had his way.

"Miss Spencer," he said, "if it makes you feel any better, I'll allow you to accompany us to Mr. Sprat's farm. Billy might enjoy having his sister along."

She rolled her eyes. "He certainly would not enjoy that, and neither would I."

"Are you worried about getting the hem of your dress soiled? Because I can assure you a good wash will remove the dirt. And it won't take long to clean off your fancy boots, either."

She gritted her teeth. He mocked her, the dirty dog. She wouldn't allow him to treat her in such a way. Then again, most men didn't like a woman who could think for themselves or make their own decisions. One way or another, she would be strong and stand up for what she believed in—no matter the consequences.



FOUR



“I still believe this kind of experience will not teach Billy a thing,”
Jessie told him bluntly.

“What if I can prove you wrong?”

She gasped. “That’s utter nonsense, Mr. Buchanan. I will not allow this form of punishment.”

His hands bunched into fists at his sides, and even his lips thinned. “Miss Spencer, what would you have me do, then? Most teachers deal with unruly children by taking a willow switch to their backsides. I, however, don’t believe that’s the correct method of teaching a child.”

He stepped away from the desk and moved closer. Sucking in a breath, she tilted her head up because of his towering presence. He was definitely one tall man, and why did he have to be so incredibly handsome?

“You can inform your brother that I’ll pick him up at daybreak,” Morgan said. “If he isn’t ready, then I won’t pass him to the next grade level.”

“Oh!” She stomped her foot. “You cannot possibly—”

“Watch me.”

He escorted her to the door. His brown eyes captured her gaze and held it while she stepped down the four porch steps. Although she wanted more than anything to yell at him and tell him he was making a big mistake, she wouldn’t. She didn’t want to explain why she felt this way, and why Billy acted the way he did.

He followed her out as he placed his hat on his head. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Miss Spencer.”

She scowled. "This is *not* over, Mr. Buchanan."

"May I see you home? The evening is almost upon us, and shadows are everywhere."

Fear ran an icy trail through her blood. He could definitely *not* see her home. "No, thank you. I'm perfectly capable of making it home by myself. I shall be home before it gets dark, I assure you."

Tilting his head, he looked into the sky and her gaze followed. The slow growing sunset began to display purple colors in the sky. "I really don't feel right about leaving you alone." He met her gaze again. "A young woman traveling by herself in the evening is not proper. Besides, it's getting colder by the minute."

"I'm well aware of that, but rest assured, I shall be fine. Thank you anyway."

Surprisingly, he walked to her two-seated buggy and helped her inside. In an attempt not to stare into his smoldering eyes or her wanting to run her fingers along the locks of hair around his neck, she focused on her anger. "Good day, sir!"

Her tightly controlled tone refused to reveal her inner turmoil. With a nod, she guided the horse down the lane. Without being able to stop herself, she glanced over her shoulder to see if he still watched. He hadn't disappointed her. He stood at the end of the schoolyard, facing the street. Lifting a hand, he waved.

She snapped her head around and focused on the road. It was most imperative he didn't follow. If he ever discovered her secret...

Gritting her teeth, she tightened her hands on the reins until the leather threatened to bite through her dainty gloves. No, he couldn't possibly discover the truth. Although she tried not to appear as if her life had been shaken lately, she would continue to lead people in believing that she and Billy's father was out of town quite a bit for business.

She relaxed her grip only slightly. If by chance, the nosey Mr. Buchanan asked around, that's the only story he'd hear. Of course, he'd hear that their grandfather was very wealthy and passed it down to her

father. That was true. But what people didn't know was that her father had taught her how to invest her money.

Well, he hadn't actually *taught* her, since he didn't believe women should be allowed to think for themselves. However, she had eavesdropped on many of her father's conversations when it came to investing. She'd been doing this for over two years now, and already her money had doubled, and it continued to grow.

She sighed and watched the road ahead. Mr. Buchanan had been correct about Billy in so many ways. Father had spoiled his only son, and although her parent had spoiled her when she was younger, being an adult had made him tighten the reins on her. A few months ago, she felt like a prisoner because Father's spies were always watching her. But now... Well, at least she didn't feel like a prisoner, but she was sure her father's spies were still watching her.

However, Mr. Buchanan had been correct when he said Jessie shouldn't cover up her brother's mistakes. Instead, she should punish him for them. Did that mean going to Mr. Sprat's farm was the right choice?

She frowned. How could she continue to cover for her brother's unruly behavior? Especially when she'd been hiding him from the cruelty of the real world?

Night was coming upon her quicker than she had anticipated. The temperature had dropped. She didn't want to be outside when the sun finally disappeared on the horizon, so she urged the horse into a faster trot. Home was only one more mile.

As she passed an old barn, she noticed a few women entering in through the side door. From inside, some lanterns were lit, making Jessie see a good two-dozen women sitting on wooden benches. Immediately, she recognized Camilla Rogers, the librarian. She was one of Jessie's friends, because the library was one place her father didn't care that she visited. Although, she realized that there were no men in attendance.

Being a curious woman by nature, Jessie wondered what these women were doing, and why they chose to meet in the evening as night was nearly upon them.

Pushing her curiosity aside, she concentrated on guiding the horse toward home. But just as before, her thoughts were derailed when Mr. Buchanan's face popped into her head. He would take Billy to Mr. Sprat's house in the morning, just as he'd threatened. After all, he was one determined schoolteacher. Although she didn't want to go with them, she didn't want Billy to say something about their absentee father, either. Knowing that nosey Mr. Buchanan who thought he needed to fix everything, he might just try to help out when she couldn't have him involved. Indeed, she would have to go along with her brother and keep the topic of conversation away from their father.

She must not have been paying attention, because the street she should turn on was suddenly before her. She slowed the animal as quickly as she could and carefully guided the buggy onto the road. Only one streetlamp stood on this corner, making thick shadows appear on the buildings. People weren't out and about as they had been when she left, and she realized what a mistake it had been to venture out so late in the day.

To the right of her, three separate shadows moved away from a nearby structure. When the three men became clearer, she could see they were men wearing black, ragged clothes. Old farmer's hats were pulled low over their foreheads.

Fear lodged in her throat. Her shaky hands gripped the reins tighter. She whipped them against the horse, urging him faster.

One man jumped in front of her buggy, grabbed the animal, and pulled it to a stop. She screamed and hit him with her whip. "Get off, you street rat!"

Within seconds, the other two men swarmed around her, one stopping on each side of the vehicle. Her heart knocked in a quick rhythm against her chest.

The man holding her horse released an evil laugh. “Lookie what we have here, boys. Why, if it ain’t the haughty Miss Spencer.”

Another man guffawed loudly. “What is the mayor’s daughter doin’ out at night by herself, I wonder?”

Her blood chilled. *They know me?*

“Leave me alone.” She snapped the whip at the man holding the horse again, but this time he caught it and yanked it away from her.

“How much money do ya think she has?” the one on her left asked his friends.

“I—I don’t have any money.” She shouldn’t have lied. She realized too late that she should have thrown the money in her reticule away from her, away from the pool of the lamplights and ridden out of here as fast as she could. But then, men like these varmints usually always wanted more.

All three laughed, sending chills up her spine.

“The richie says she ain’t got no money. Should we believe her?” the tall man with an eye patch asked, patting the horse’s nose.

“Ya know what I think?” the third finally spoke. His shape was rounder than the other two, and he was shorter. “I think we should hold her for ransom. I’m sure her money-bags father would pay quite handsomely for her.”

Her heart sank. *No! That couldn’t happen.*

“Good plan, Joe.”

At least she now knew the portly-sized man was named Joe.

“Actually,” she said in a shaky voice, “that isn’t a wise idea. I’m a very stubborn woman, and I’m quite certain I will make it miserable for you while you’re waiting for my father to pay. You see, he is away on business.”

The man on her right grinned, displaying quite a few missing teeth, and the ones he did have in his mouth were brownish yellow. “Then I suppose we need to track him down.”

“Impossible. My father is in Oregon, and it will take him a few months to return.”

The monster on her left jumped on the buggy and sat beside her. His horrid scent overwhelmed her. She gagged. Obviously, he'd been rolling with the pigs—and a skunk—before ambushing her.

She pushed at him, hoping he'd fall off the seat, but the big ox wouldn't budge. Tears burned her eyes as helplessness enveloped her. She couldn't feel this way. She must somehow gain control of the situation.

“I think she's lying.” The man grabbed her arm.

“I think we should kidnap her anyway.” Joe grinned.

“And I think,” came a deeper voice from behind them, much deeper than the other men, “you should let the lady go before I shoot you.”

The grinding click of a rifle being cocked behind them pulled the men's attention away from Jessie. She peeked over her shoulder. As her teary vision cleared, Mr. Buchanan's face came into view. Her heart leapt with relief. The rifle was pointed at the man sitting beside her. In Mr. Buchanan's other hand was a pistol. He took a step closer, his gaze never wavering from his target.

“Take your hands off the lady.” The schoolteacher's tone left no doubt of his intentions. “Or I'll be mighty tempted to lodge a bullet between your eyes.”

The man beside her stilled, but she didn't dare look at him. Mr. Buchanan's presence comforted her. This sweet man would rescue her, she was certain of it.

“Why, lookie who came to visit us,” the man with the eye-patch sneered. “It's Buchanan, the schoolteacher. What are *ya* doing here? Shouldn't *ya* be in school?”

Mr. Buchanan arched an eyebrow. “Make one wrong move, and I'll show you with my guns what I'm doing here.”

“Now Buchanan, I wouldn’t be doin’ that if I were ya,” the man holding her horse said. “There are three of us and only one school-teacher.”

Mr. Buchanan nodded but kept his gaze on the man beside her. “Very true, but I have two guns. Once I shoot the man by Miss Spencer with my pistol, there will only be two of you, and my rifle will be able to get another one within seconds. I’m very skilled with these weapons, and I believe I’ll be able to hit all of you in my first attempt. Are you willing to take that chance?” He narrowed his gaze on the man next to her. “Mister, I advise you to take your hands off the young lady and remove yourself from her buggy. Now!”

Grumbling, the man released her and jumped down.

“Very good,” Mr. Buchanan commended. “Now, really slow, I want the three of you to walk away with your hands in the air, hold them high where I can see them.”

They did as instructed.

“Miss Spencer? Would you be so kind as to tie my horse to your buggy now? I see the urgent need to escort you home.”

This time she didn’t argue. Although her limbs shook, she scrambled out of the buggy and tied his horse to it. Mr. Buchanan stepped next to her, still keeping his eyes and rifle pointed toward the three men slowly fading into the distance.

She hurried back to her seat and Mr. Buchanan hopped in beside her.

“Get us out of here, quickly,” he whispered.

Smacking the reins against the horse, she urged the buggy forward in a fast trot. As soon as they passed the men, Mr. Buchanan lowered his rifle.

“That was close.” A deep sigh gushed from his lips.

Still quivering from the ordeal, she nodded. “Yes. It certainly was. But how did you know they were trying to rob me?”

"I didn't. I followed you because a gentleman always sees a lady home."

Tenderness touched her heart. "You were wise. I should have listened to you back at the schoolhouse." Her teeth chattered so she clenched her jaw.

He set the rifle on the seat next to him, stuffed the pistol in his coat, and then took the reins from her hands. The heat from his touch seeped through her gloves and comforted her, making her want to cuddle next to him and let him protect her. She scolded herself. Because of what was happening in her home life, she had to be independent. She couldn't rely on anyone but herself and her brother.

She wrapped her arms around her middle in an effort to create warmth. "Thank you," she said softly as she looked at him.

He glanced down at her and smiled. "You're welcome."

"How do those men know you?"

He shrugged. "I guess it's because I'm a schoolteacher."

"One of them was named Joe. Does that name sound familiar?"

He shook his head. "Not really."

They rode in silence for a few minutes then he cleared his throat. "Are you going to tell me where you live or just let me keep driving without knowing a direction?"

"You don't know where Billy lives?"

"Not exactly. I suspect I know, but not completely."

She chuckled brokenly. "I suppose I should tell you."

"I would also like to know why those men wanted to kidnap you. Were they seeking some kind of ransom?"

She seethed. Why did he ask her that? If she answered one more question, that would lead to another, and then another... No, she couldn't tell him anything.

"Turn right at this next corner." She pointed in the direction.

After he had made the turn, he looked at her. "Are you going to answer me?"

Inwardly, she groaned. "I think they wanted to kidnap me because they thought to get money from my father."

"Why didn't you give them the money in your wrist purse? Were you saving those bills to try and pay me off one day?"

Cocking her head, she arched a brow. "Mr. Buchanan, let me tell you something about myself. I'm a stubborn woman. I don't cater to thieves."

"But you were outnumbered, three to one."

"Until you came along."

"What if I hadn't? Then what would you have done?"

She wished he would cease with these ridiculous questions. "Fine, Mr. Buchanan." She shifted in her seat. "I'll admit I should have given them the money. Are you happy now?"

Grinning, he chuckled. "Very happy, thank you." He glanced at her. "Now the question I have is will you be that foolish again?"

She rolled her eyes. "You are incorrigible, did you know that?"

"I've never been called that, but I'm flattered."

Quickly, she turned her head before he could see the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. Heaven help her because she wanted to hate him but she couldn't. He had a charm that even she had a hard time resisting. And he was just too sweet.

A few minutes passed in silence. Every once in a while, he glanced at her before returning his attention to the road. The house was coming up on them quickly. She almost couldn't wait to get away from him.

She motioned with her hand up the road. "That's where I live."

As they neared, he whistled between his teeth. "I don't believe I've seen anything so grand in my life."

She huffed and placed a hand on her chest. "I hope that doesn't mean you would like to come inside?"

He pulled the buggy to the back of the house near the stable, stopped and set the brake. He met her stare and grinned.

“Thank you very much for the offer, but it’s getting late, and I must return home.” He bumped her with his elbow. “We have an early morning planned for tomorrow, and I don’t want to keep you up late tonight.”

She scowled, but he had jumped down before noticing. He walked to her side and held out his hands.

“May I assist you?”

She sensed it wasn’t a question. Though she really wanted to refuse his help, her limbs had a mind of their own and she slipped her gloved hands into his, allowing his help. Warmth spread through her and heated her face. Quickly, she looked away before he noticed her flushed expression.

As she stepped back, he offered her his arm. Surely, he wasn’t serious, was he? She arched an eyebrow and waited.

“I wouldn’t feel right,” he began, “if I didn’t take you the rest of the way to make certain you reach your home safely.”

Shaking her head, she hooked her hand around his elbow. Silently, he walked her to the front door. Her heartbeat knocked against her ribs.

When they reached the door, she let go of his arm and placed her hand on the doorknob. “Thank you again, Mr. Buchanan, for coming to my rescue.”

With a tip of his hat, he bowed and said, “Any time, Miss Spencer.”

He turned and hurried back to the buggy to untie his horse. Although relieved he was leaving, her breathing became ragged as she couldn’t stop from gazing at his lithe movements. Her heart took on a different rhythm, and a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. Stubborn as she was, she still couldn’t deny he was a fine man, a very sweet and caring person.

But nonetheless, he was a man who wanted to know more than she was willing to tell.



FIVE



“Pleeeeeease let me go with you.” Darby hopped awkwardly back and forth on his twisted legs as he stood in front of Morgan. “I want to meet Miss Spencer and her spoiled brother.”

It was really too early in the morning for Morgan to argue with his friend. Yet, at the same time, he didn’t think Darby should go.

“But we aren’t going on an outing. We are going to Mr. Sprat’s farm to teach Billy a lesson.”

“I know, but I think the excursion would be so much fun. I’ve never been on a farm, either. I want to see how Mr. Sprat runs things.”

Darby stared up at Morgan with his big, brown eyes. Even the man’s big ears twitched. They always did this when the man became too excited.

“Oh, please, Morgan. I promise not to get in the way. I’ll stand back and not say a word.”

How could he tell Darby no? Especially when his friend’s expression was so childlike? It didn’t matter that he was older than Morgan, he’d always thought of Darby as his *younger* brother. Morgan was certain Mr. Sprat wouldn’t mind one more person. The man was quite surprised that Morgan had suggested bringing the boy and his sister in the first place.

Morgan blew out an agitated breath. “Fine. But I want you to stay back and try not to get into trouble. It’s enough that we are there to teach Billy a lesson. I don’t need him thinking this outing is just a game.”

“Oh, indeed! I shall be on my best behavior.”

As Darby dashed toward his room, Morgan thought he'd spotted a gleam in his brown eyes, and a mischievous grin tugging on his mouth. Morgan wasn't sure he liked that look on Darby's face. But he did promise to be good.

Yawning, Morgan sauntered outside to prepare the wagon. Within minutes, Darby hobbled out of the house, yanking a hooded cloak around his shoulders. Morgan helped his friend in the back before climbing up front and taking hold of the reins. He peeked over his shoulder to see Darby pulling the hood down on his head as he tried to hide his appearance. Perhaps it was best to hide his face since most people were a little startled the first time they laid eyes on the crooked man.

Darby was quiet during the drive. A few times, Morgan had forgotten he was in the back. By the time he pulled up in front of the Spencer estate, the sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, which gave the house a glowing appearance. Shaking his head, he whistled, still amazed at the grandeur of the place. The manor looked like a miniature castle and was so strikingly breathtaking.

Just like Miss Spencer.

He grinned. He shouldn't think such things. Her vicious, arrogant tongue could ruin even the prettiest expression on her face.

Several times during the night and early morning, he kept thinking about those men who tried to attack her last night. If he hadn't shown up when he did... He shuddered to think what might have happened.

He actually had known one of those men, even though he'd told Miss Spencer differently. The man was a friend of his deceased father. It was a good thing the ruffians didn't give any indication of *how* they knew Morgan, though.

"Stay right here," he told Darby. "I'll go get them."

Darby nodded. "I won't move a muscle."

Morgan jumped down and hurried to the front porch, but before he could reach the door, Miss Spencer and Billy walked out, closing the

door behind them. Morgan should have taken her word when she tried to explain to him that she and Billy didn't know anything about working on a farm. Both were dressed in impeccably fancy clothes, but they were far from being bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this morning.

Miss Spencer's puffy eyes appeared as if she had just awakened, and Billy's constant yawn nearly had Morgan feeling guilty for making them wake before the sun. Thankfully, he didn't have to physically drag them out of the house just to prove his point.

"Good morning, Miss Spencer, Billy." Morgan grinned.

Billy threw glares his way, but his sister wouldn't meet Morgan's eyes, even when she mumbled a greeting. Miss Spencer's gaze moved past Morgan and to the wagon. Her brow furrowed.

"Who is coming with us?" she asked.

"That is a man who is like my brother," Morgan explained. "He's never been on a farm either, so he begged me to come with us." He stepped closer to Miss Spencer and Billy. "However, let me warn you about my friend's deformities. He might look scary, but he's the sweetest man you'll ever want to meet. Please treat him with respect." He aimed that last sentence at Billy.

"But of course, we shall." Miss Spencer nodded and then elbowed her brother. "Won't we, Billy?"

"Yes," he grumbled.

Morgan walked them to the wagon and then assisted Miss Spencer up to the front seat. Billy jumped up and sat next to his sister. They both glanced Darby's way, but he kept his head down and didn't look at them.

"Miss Spencer, Billy," Morgan said. "This is my friend Darby O'Brian. Darby, this is Miss Spencer and her brother, Billy."

Darby mumbled a greeting, but kept his head down. Billy said nothing, but Miss Spencer turned in the seat and peered toward Darby.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. O'Brian."

It eased Morgan that Miss Spencer didn't shriek with fright. Hopefully, she would keep calm for her brother's sake, anyway.

When Morgan was seated beside Miss Spencer, he urged the horses forward. Keeping her back straight and chin erect, she stared ahead at the road.

As the horses pulled their vehicle, Morgan glanced at the woman perched next to him, still not looking his way. "I'm happy to see you're ready for your adventure to the farm this morning. I half expected you and your brother would be kicking and screaming."

She kept her gaze ahead but shrugged. "Did we have a choice, Mr. Buchanan?"

He chuckled. "Actually, you did, but I'm glad you decided to do it my way this time."

Since he could tell she didn't want to talk, he wasn't going to push the issue. Instead, he whistled a lively tune as he drove them to Mr. Sprat's farm. Miss Spencer continued to keep her silence even after they reached the farm. Morgan helped her down before leading her and Billy toward Mr. Sprat.

The older man gave them a tour of his farm and explained what he did every morning. Just as Darby had promised, he stayed behind and didn't say much. Thankfully, Billy didn't stare, either.

They ended their tour at the chicken house. Mr. Sprat politely showed them how to collect the eggs from underneath each chicken then carefully placed them in a basket.

Billy reached out to touch the fowl, but quickly pulled his hand back before making contact. He curled his upper lip in distaste. Morgan switched his gaze to Miss Spencer whose expression resembled her brother's. She grumbled and shook her head.

As they stepped around the chickens, Miss Spencer clutched her skirts and lifted them to the ankles of her black boots. She studied the ground carefully as she walked. Morgan knew he'd be cleaning those fancy boots of hers as soon as they arrived back at her home. He'd hate

to think she would throw them out just because she didn't have the slightest inkling how to clean them.

"Billy," Mr. Sprat said, "why don't you take an egg from under that chicken?"

Billy grimaced and shook his head.

"Come now," Mr. Sprat encouraged. "The chicken isn't going to bite you."

Chuckling, Morgan took a peek at Darby who stood back by the gate. His hood wasn't hiding most of his face this time, and his eyes lit up as he watched. Morgan moved his attention back to Billy. The boy slowly walked to the chicken.

"Slip your hand easy like, underneath the bird, and grab the egg," Mr. Sprat said.

Billy took a deep breath and slowly released it as he followed the farmer's instruction. Morgan kept his eyes on the chicken. The fowl sat still as Billy pulled out an egg.

He beamed and showed the egg to his sister. "Look!"

"Yes, very nice, Billy." She smiled. "I knew you could do it."

Billy moved to the next chicken, but just as he slid his hand underneath, something irritated the fowl. Before Morgan had time to realize what might happen, the chicken screeched and squawked, flapping its wings in chaos.

Billy screamed as if he was being attacked, and jumped back. This action caused the bird to become more distraught. The chicken flew through the air and pecked at Billy's head.

Miss Spencer grasped Morgan's arm and yanked hard. "Do something!"

Morgan tore away from the woman and assisted Mr. Sprat in chasing the angry fowl. Between Billy's screams and the shouts from Miss Spencer, the whole henhouse was in an uproar.

Mr. Sprat grabbed the chicken, but then the hen slipped out of his hands and ran between his legs. Billy darted toward his sister. His feet

slipped in the mire, and he knocked into her head on. Miss Spencer teetered and flailed her arms, trying to grab at anything that might keep her from falling, but she found nothing to stop her.

Morgan spun around and lunged toward her. He caught her mere moments before she landed in the mire. Gasping, she wrapped her arms around his neck, holding on tight. Fear plastered across her expression. He figured she was more frightened of falling and getting dirty than she was of him holding her so close.

When their gazes met, something sparked between them. The noises around them seemed to disappear. Morgan felt it like a lightning bolt. He really should step away—far away—but he couldn't. His arms wouldn't move. He didn't want to release her. The softness in his arms was too cozy, and he wanted to experience this feeling for as long as he dared.

She cleared her throat and stepped out of his embrace. No words in the form of an apology came to his tongue. The brief experience had left him speechless.

Slowly, the noises from inside the henhouse came back. Billy still screamed. Mr. Sprat continued to call after the chicken, and the fowl wouldn't stop squawking.

Morgan focused on the commotion and what he needed to do to help. Just then, the chicken landed in front of his feet. He dove for the animal, pinning it with his body against the ground. Billy ran into his sister's comforting arms as they both glared at the panicked chicken.

Chuckling, Mr. Sprat picked up the bird and stroked its feathers as he calmly assured the animal everything would be all right.

Morgan lifted himself off the ground and brushed the dirt from his trousers. Hay and animal droppings also coated his pants. Inwardly, he groaned. So much for trying to look presentable today.

When he met Miss Spencer's eyes, he expected to see disgust dripping from her face, instead her lips twitched as if she held back a grin, but the twinkle in her azure eyes let him know she found the situation

humorous. Ease spread inside him, calming his ire. He laughed and was joined by her and Mr. Sprat.

Billy scowled. "I don't know what you're laughing about. That chicken could have killed me."

Morgan laughed harder as did Miss Spencer. He shook his head. "Billy, the worst that chicken would have done was peck at your feet."

Mr. Sprat walked up to Morgan and patted his shoulder. "I think the lad has had enough excitement for the day."

The boy's eyes widened. "You mean we can go home?"

"Yes, you can." Mr. Sprat nodded.

"Are you certain?" Morgan asked the older man. "Don't you want to show Billy how to milk a cow?"

The boy's face paled and he folded his arms and clamped his lips in mutiny. "I won't do it, I say. I just won't," he muttered while shaking his head.

Miss Spencer stood next to her brother and smoothed back the hair that had fallen across his forehead with her gloved fingers. "Billy, I hope you have learned something today. If not, I will make Mr. Sprat show you how to milk a cow."

Billy pouted. "Oh, Jessie. Please don't let them do that."

Hearing her name made Morgan's heart skip a beat. He really wished he hadn't experienced that kind of reaction.

She arched an eyebrow at her brother. "Did you learn something from all of this?"

Sighing heavily, Billy rolled his eyes. "Yes. I learned not to shove my hand underneath a chicken."

She grasped his chin and forced his face toward hers until their gazes met. "I wasn't referring to that. Have you realized what Mr. Sprat does every morning to prepare to sell the eggs and how important they are to him?"

"Yeah, I suppose," Billy grumbled.

Shock vibrated through Morgan as he watched Miss Spencer deal with her brother. Tilting his head slightly, he studied the pair. It surprised him that Miss Spencer would say that to Billy when only last night she was totally against this morning's outing. Morgan wondered what had changed her mind. Was she doing this all for show?

She glanced his way then quickly looked back at her brother. A blush brightened her cheeks and moved down her neck. Morgan would give anything to know her thoughts right now.

She squeezed Billy's shoulders and faced him toward Mr. Sprat. "Billy, I want you to apologize to Mr. Sprat for what happened yesterday."

Billy kicked his shoe into the dirt. "Well, I didn't originally set out to cause Mr. Sprat any problems."

Clearing his throat, Morgan folded his arms and aimed his gaze at the boy. "You may have not targeted Mr. Sprat, but setting that briar trap on the steps of the store meant you were up to no good." He nodded toward the older man. "I think you owe Mr. Sprat an apology, anyhow."

Anger sparked Billy's glare at Morgan, but he moved his attention toward the old man and frowned. "I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted." Sprat nodded.

Billy stepped past his sister, and with his head ducked, squeezed by Darby, and then left the henhouse. Miss Spencer smiled at Mr. Sprat. "Thank you for understanding."

"And thank you for coming with your brother." The older man winked. "I'm certain it wasn't an easy outing for either of you."

Morgan trailed Miss Spencer as they headed toward the wagon. His steps slowed to match Darby's. Immediately, Morgan noticed a slingshot in his friend's hands. Darby's expression had mischief written all over it.

Morgan arched an eyebrow. "By chance, do you know why that chicken suddenly became irritated, do you?"

Darby's eyes widened and his face turned a dark red as he tried to hide the slingshot. "I—I don't know what you mean."

Rolling his eyes, Morgan shook his head. Everything began to make sense now. "Would you care to explain?"

Darby giggled with his hand over his mouth. "I could tell the boy wasn't learning anything, so I decided to help out."

Not knowing whether to become upset—or laugh—Morgan bit his bottom lip and shook his head. He counted to ten under his breath before scolding his friend. "Darby, you promised..."

"I know, I know. But really, it was worth it, wasn't it?"

Morgan didn't want to answer that. "But you said you would be on your best behavior."

"And not only that," Darby continued as if he didn't hear Morgan, "you caught Miss Spencer from falling in the mud. Now she will think you are gallant."

"Oh, good grief!" Morgan realized why his friend really wanted to come along. "Darby, don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't try to match us together like you did with Rosanna. Miss Spencer is just like Miss Townley. Water and oil do not mix, so just leave well enough alone."

"Yes, Morgan." Darby ducked his head.

When Morgan reached the wagon, Miss Spencer waited for him to assist her up before Billy climbed up next to her. The boy sat with his arms folded smartly across his chest as he turned his attention away. Morgan waited until Darby was in the back before he urged the horses forward.

Morgan shook his head, wondering if Billy would ever learn. Maybe Morgan would never get through to him. But really, it wasn't the schoolteacher's responsibility to mold a child into a nice person. That fell to the child's parents.

As he drove the wagon, he glanced at Miss Spencer whose gaze had dropped to her fancy boots, now mucked with dirt.

She noticed Morgan looking and frowned. "I suppose I shouldn't have worn this pair of boots to a farm."

He grinned. "Your boots will be as good as new as soon as I clean them."

Her eyes widened. "*You* clean them?"

"Why not?" He shrugged. "I was the one who dragged you to a place you weren't used to being."

"I must say, that's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me."

He blinked. "Are you jesting? Nobody has done anything nice for you? Ever?"

"Well, nobody has ever offered to clean my boots, and you have no idea how much I appreciate it. Thank you." She smiled.

He stopped the wagon in front of their house, and then helped Miss Spencer down. He enjoyed the way her eyes stayed on him. He shouldn't feel this way about her, but she interested him more than he wanted to admit. He didn't need to get his heart involved with this woman only because he knew she'd turn out like Rosanna. Yet, when earlier, Billy had said her name—Jessie—the rhythm of Morgan's heart sped faster. How could he not think that way about her now?

"Leave your boots on the porch and I'll collect them after school today." He turned to Billy. "Do you want to ride with me to school?"

The boy jumped out of the back and shot Morgan a heated glare. "No. I need to change my clothes. I stink."

Morgan tried not to laugh, but his sister chuckled as Billy ran into the house. She placed her gloved hand on Morgan's arm.

"Thank you for your concern. I fear Billy will be a handful for a few more years, but this morning has taught him—and me—a lesson in humility. A lesson I shall never forget."

"Well, Miss Spencer, I can't be lenient with Billy when he misbehaves in my class. I hope you understand."

“I do.”

He bowed slightly and tipped his hat. “I’ll bid you a good day then. I have a class to get ready for in an hour.”

“Yes, you do.” She smiled brightly. “And I hope you have a pleasant day.” She looked toward Darby. “And Mr. O’Brian. Perhaps one day I can get to know you better.”

Darby’s head snapped up, his eyes wide in shock.

As Morgan watched her walk into her house, he shook his head slowly. It surprised him that she even spoke to Darby. Most people just ignored him.

Grinning, Morgan climbed in the vehicle and took them back home. He felt today’s lesson was good for both Miss Spencer and her brother. But more than anything, Morgan couldn’t stop thinking about the twinkle in Jessie’s eyes when she had gazed at him.

It was quite nice to be looked upon as a human being instead of a lowlife miscreant. Perhaps, in some small way, Darby’s little mischief with the slingshot had made Morgan appear gallant in her eyes. Dare he hope?



SIX



Jessie sat in the parlor and stared out the window as she twirled the gold locket's chain around her finger. Although she hated waking up so early in the morning, she realized how her day didn't pass as quickly as it usually did. She had more time to do things now and more time to think about Mr. Buchanan.

Perhaps that wasn't a good thing. She had never allowed herself to enjoy a man's company. Years ago, none of the men who courted her made her feel such strange emotions. Several tried—but all failed. Miserably.

Jessie tore her gaze away from the window and looked down at the letters she'd been trying to write for an hour now. If only she could focus. But after writing two lines, her morning with Mr. Buchanan disturbed her again.

When he had caught her from falling into the mud, she stared into his deep brown eyes while he held her so tenderly.

She shook away the distraction. There was no way she could think that way about her brother's schoolteacher.

Blowing out a gush of air from between her lips, she shifted in the chair and studied the letter to her maternal grandmother. Although this letter would never reach the true destination since she'd set up a fake address, it needed to appear as if she corresponded with her grandmother, because certain people who were involved with her life now would wonder about her absentee father. This was to put off any questions people might have.

Dear Grandmother, I'm writing you to ask if Father is still visiting. He has been gone too long, and he is needed back home. I pray you are feeling better now and can carry on without Father's help. Billy and I love you very much and we hope to visit you soon.

Jessie reread what she'd written as tears swam in her eyes. She prayed nothing terrible had happened to her father. Since Mother had died when Billy was very young, Jessie's only family was her father and brother. The grandmother that she told her father's associates about had been dead for three years, but Jessie would keep that secret as long as her father remained missing.

Frowning, she leaned back in her chair. Her twenty-fifth birthday was coming quickly. According to what her father told her, when she turned twenty-five, she would inherit three-quarters of his investment in the railroad and be in charge of her brother's share until he turned eighteen. Even though her father had no intentions of dying yet, he felt that her inheritance should be put to good use while he was still living.

She pushed the letter to her grandmother aside and glanced over the letter she'd drafted for her father to keep up pretenses.

Dearest Father. I hope you can conclude your business quickly. Both Billy and I miss you terribly. He has been in trouble in school quite a bit, and I fear it's only going to become worse until you return to us.

She sighed heavily. This would have to do as well. She didn't know what else to write. If these letters made curious people believe that her family was still alive, then she had completed her goal.

Rebecca, the kitchen maid, walked into the parlor carrying a tray of food. "Miss, would you be hungry for some lunch now?"

Jessie smiled. "Yes, I would. Please put the tray on the table."

Rebecca did as instructed and then left.

The aroma of Jessie's favorite soup made her stomach grumble. This potato and cheese with chunks of ham had been her mother's favorite, as well. Jessie moved from the desk to the table and started to eat. Just as she finished the last bite, the butler Hobbs walked in.

“Excuse me, Miss Jessie, but Mr. Prescott is here to see you.”

Jessie’s stomach twisted. Mr. Prescott would undoubtedly want to know when her father would return—an answer she could not give. How much longer could she keep lying to this man and putting him off?

“Show him in, Hobbs.” She wiped the linen napkin across her mouth.

Mr. Prescott strutted in, holding his hat against his chest. The thirty-nine-year-old man had been managing her father’s investments for nearly two years now. Mr. Prescott was her father’s right-hand accountant. Mr. Prescott would absolutely fall over dead if he knew *she* was the person who would soon own the railroad stock, with her father as just a mentor.

Because of what she’d learned from her father, she was able to buy stocks in a different investment—gold mining, and the profits were increasing daily. Since women weren’t allowed to own businesses, she bought the stocks using her brother’s name. No one needed to know he was still a child. During correspondences, she just said her brother was away on business. She presented herself as her brother’s accountant, and nobody seemed to question her in all this time. After all, Jessie’s name could be a man’s name as well.

“Good afternoon, Miss Spencer. Forgive me for interrupting your lunch.”

“You didn’t interrupt anything. I just finished.” She stood from her chair and pointed to the sofa. “Would you care to sit?”

“Thank you.” Mr. Prescott walked past her and joined her on the sofa.

Ever since her father hired Mr. Prescott, Jessie had noticed how sweet he was on her. She thought he was a nice man and slightly handsome, but she could never think of him as anything more than her father’s accountant.

She scooted to the far end of the sofa. “How are things with the railroad? Are the stocks increasing? I still worry due to the earlier financial crash that happened in the year.”

“Everything is running perfectly.” He smoothed out his mustache. “Your father’s investments are continuing to grow. We just might have enough money to invest in a new concept—the motorized vehicle.”

Her hopes lifted, recalling what she’d heard about this. “How wonderful. I attended an exhibition earlier this year, and a man was talking about this. It sounds very exciting.”

Mr. Prescott’s smile widened. “That is why I need to speak with your father about taking some of the money and investing in this new idea. Has he returned from his trip yet?”

“No.” Jessie frowned. “I wish I could tell you when he’s coming back, but I cannot. I’m writing to my father and grandmother right now.” She pointed toward the table and the writing utensils still displayed. “I’ve asked my father to hurry home because he is desperately needed here.”

Sighing, Mr. Prescott ran his fingers through his red hair. “I wish I knew what kept your father away for so long.”

“Mr. Prescott, why can’t *you* make the decision about the new investment? After all, Father trusts your judgment. I’m certain he wouldn’t mind if you decided this one in his absence.”

He touched her hand. “Do you really think so? This is quite a big decision. It would be expensive at first, but the results would be fabulous.”

Mr. Prescott had always taken the liberty to touch her in a casual way, but she had never felt right about it. Perhaps it was his age that bothered her the most because everything else about him seemed fine. He’d always been polite and talkative to her. The other men she dealt with were always condescending toward her. All of them thought her brainless just because she was a woman. She loathed men like that.

Slowly, she pulled her hand away until he withdrew. "Yes, Mr. Prescott, I honestly believe my father would support your decision." She shrugged. "Or you can wait until he returns, which we don't know when that will be. In fact, would you be willing to deliver these letters to the post for me? That would certainly hurry up the process since I don't know when I'll be able to venture into town to take them myself."

"Of course, Miss Spencer. It would be my honor."

She hurried back to the table and finished sealing the letters before handing them to him. Standing, he grinned wide and slid the letters into the pocket of his overcoat.

"I appreciate your support in this decision, Miss Spencer. I'm certain everything will be perfect. I just wanted us to jump on this new venture before the competitors snagged all the stocks."

He reached out to touch her again, so she moved away and walked to the window. "I do think Father will be happy that you invested in time."

He moved toward her. "Miss Spencer, since your father isn't here for me to ask, may I be so bold as to call upon you tonight?"

Jessie gulped, not knowing how to nicely discourage him. Then again, she didn't want to be rude, either. Genuinely, she liked Mr. Prescott, but she didn't want to like him *that* way. "Um, well—"

"I thought you would enjoy the opera this evening," he quickly added.

She did like the opera, but she was still leery to be with Mr. Prescott alone. "As much as the idea is tempting, I fear my brother will be left by himself if I go with you."

His forehead creased. "Where will your servants be?"

"They have it off." She realized how quickly she was to answer, and although she hated to lie, telling him the truth was out of the question.

"All of them?"

Her mind scrambled to come up with a logical explanation. “Usually my lady’s maid is here, but her mother is ill, and I told her she could visit her family. So really, tonight would not be good.”

Distrust coated his gaze as he stared at her. “What about tomorrow?”

Jessie wanted to slap herself for not thinking ahead. “I, uh...well, I suppose tomorrow would be fine. It all depends on how I feel.”

His smile widened. “Then I shall look forward to taking you to the opera tomorrow.” He took her hand and placed a kiss on her knuckles.

Jessie groaned silently as her mind scrambled to come up with a reason to give him that would get her out of this. While he was truly a good fit for being her father’s accountant, his overt attention made her jittery.

This was not good at all.

Jessie backed away from Mr. Prescott, but the persistent man kept coming closer. Blast it all, did she have to slap his face to get her message across? Getting his attention like that might be the only way she could make him to stop his advances.

“And after the opera, I thought of taking you to this fine restaurant that serves the most delicious food. I’m certain you will be very pleased with my selection.”

She rolled her eyes. *His selection?* Did that mean he didn’t care what she wanted to order? She had an idea which restaurant he was referring to, and there were many dishes she had enjoyed. However, she wanted to be the one to choose them, not him.

Her stomach churned with the idea of spending any amount of time with this controlling man on such an outing. Over the years, she’d abhorred men who thought she shouldn’t have an opinion of her own. She couldn’t stand the ones who insisted they think for her. Father had been that way, as well.

Mr. Prescott’s eyes sparked with the familiar glimmer she’d seen before. Her last beau had looked at her that way and she knew exactly

what he'd been thinking. If Mr. Prescott acted in that way, she wouldn't mind kicking him out of the house.

She sidestepped him and headed to the door, hoping that he'd follow so that she could usher him outside. "It all sounds wonderful, Mr. Prescott, but as I said before, I'll have to see what tomorrow brings before I can give a definite answer. I shall send word in the morning if I will accept your invitation."

He nodded. "Then I shall remain hopeful and watch for your message."

As she opened the door, Billy stumbled into the parlor. Startled, she jumped back. Tears streaked her brother's dirty face, but it was the bruised eye and cut lip that worried her more. She grasped his shirt, running her gaze over his disheveled appearance again. "What happened to you?"

He shook his head. "I almost told Mr. Buchanan the truth. I wanted to tell him, but I couldn't. I knew what would happen if I told him... or anyone."

She hitched a breath. He could only be talking about one thing. *The secret.*

"Oh, my dear Billy." She pulled him against her. She needed to shut him up before he said any more in Mr. Prescott's presence. She couldn't have her business associate knowing the truth. "It's all right. We shall discuss this after Mr. Prescott leaves."

Billy's body stiffened and he turned his head to look at their visitor. Her brother lifted his gaze to hers and his face paled. "I don't think I can keep this a secret any longer, Jessie."

"Shhh..." She quickly pressed his head against her. "It's all right. I'll help you with your problem." Taking a deep breath, she moved her focus to the older man. "Mr. Prescott, as you can see, my brother is out of sorts and needs my undivided attention. I hope you don't mind showing yourself out."

"Uh, well, I suppose—" Mr. Prescott stammered.

“Thank you so much for coming over. And please don’t forget to mail those letters for me.” She offered a forced smile as she waited for him to leave. He shifted in his stance, glanced around the room a few times, and toyed with the curly ends of his mustache. Finally, he looked at her and nodded before leaving.

When the door closed, Jessie expelled a heavy breath and tightened her arms around her brother. Worry still surged through her and seeing her brother’s breakdown made her fret even more. Billy was too young to deal with what had happened to their family, but right now secrecy was their only option. How could she help him through this when she had a hard time with it as well?

She brought her brother with her to the sofa, and they sat. He straightened and wiped his wet eyes. His frown tugged at her heart and tears stung her own eyes.

“Billy, tell me what happened today.”

Billy sobbed most of the way through the story, describing how much he hurt when hearing Nate was going on an outing with his father and Billy could not do that with his. Jessie nodded as she tenderly stroked his arm. Poor Billy. She wished she knew what to do to help him through this troublesome time.

“And then when Mr. Buchanan talked to me...” Billy’s voice trailed off as his gaze communicated a silent plea to her.

Her heart jumped to her throat. “What happened with Mr. Buchanan?”

More tears filled his eyes. “He was being so nice to me and telling me that he knew what I was feeling because his father ignored him, too.” Billy shook his head. “I knew my teacher didn’t fully understand, but for a moment, I wanted to tell him the truth. I felt that Mr. Buchanan would understand and help me... help us.”

A tear slipped from Jessie’s eye before she could stop it. “Oh, Billy. I wish I could tell you he could help us, but I fear nobody can.” She

grasped his hands and squeezed. "Please, promise me you'll keep our secret, no one can know."

He nodded. "I'll try."

She smoothed his messy hair back on his head. "And I shall help you. We need to be each other's support. That's the only way we can get through this."

"I know."

Sighing heavily, she relaxed against the sofa. "Do you want to return to school?"

"No. My face hurts. Nate hit me hard."

"Yes, he did."

She reached over to the end table, picked up the bell, and rang it. When Rebecca came in and saw Billy, she gasped.

"Rebecca," Jessie said quickly, "could you please take Billy into the kitchen and get him some meat for his eye?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Jessie." Rebecca hurried to Billy, took his hand, and led him out of the room.

The butler stood nearby, so she motioned to him. "Please get my carriage ready. It's most important that I see Billy's schoolteacher today."

"Yes, Miss Jessie." He turned and hurried down the hallway.

A knot of emotion clogged Jessie's throat. She leaned her head back against the cushions and closed her eyes in mental exhaustion. Nobody knew why life dealt some hard blows. But by handling these trials, she would become a stronger person.

Groaning, she rubbed her head before dropping her hands back to her lap. Her whole body was exhausted from all of this. But no matter what, she could not fall apart. She must keep on believing that everything would turn out right.

What Billy didn't realize was that keeping the family secret was hard on Jessie, as well. She wanted to confide in someone. Being the

stronger sibling was wearing her down, and she feared she would break like Billy had almost done today at school.

Tears blurred her vision, and she closed her eyes as her chest grew heavy. How could she find her father and bring him home? Carrying this load was almost too much to bear.

She recalled Mr. Buchanan's soothing, kind voice, and immediately, an image of his face popped into her head. Smiling, she allowed herself to think about him as she mentally rested on the sofa. While at Mr. Sprat's farm, she had laughed so hard with Mr. Buchanan. It had been too long since she had that kind of enjoyment, and she cherished how it made her heart light.

Strange to think he had even rescued her from thieves, and that she'd felt so protected while in his presence. She didn't want to trust him, and yet she couldn't stop her heart from wanting to believe in him.

Her body warmed and thinking of him that way offered an escape from reality. She didn't want to open her eyes and face the real world. Dreaming of him calmed her, but it also made her breathless.

This was one man God had put together quite nicely. Morgan's arms and legs held more muscles than she'd seen on a man for quite a while. Schoolteachers weren't supposed to be so incredibly handsome, were they? How was it that he could annoy her one minute and the next, make her want to be held intimately?

Ridiculous! There was no way she could allow the emotion to fill her heart. However, just as her brother had felt, she had a feeling the schoolteacher might be the one she could tell, and he'd understand. For some reason, she hoped he would be able to help.

Within seconds, warmth grew inside her, starting at her cheeks and quickly spreading throughout her body. She didn't know why, but it felt like a man's hand was cradling her face. Inwardly, she chuckled. Although she didn't have to open her eyes to see that she was alone in the room, it was wonderful to imagine Morgan's gentle touch comforting her. In fact, she could actually smell his scent of leather and chalk.

Dreamily, she sighed and cuddled her face closer to the warmth surrounding her.

“Miss Spencer?”

She sighed heavily, hearing his voice. She really needed to give him permission to call her Jessie.

“Miss Spencer, wake up.”

I'm asleep?

Snapping alert, she sat up. It took her a few awkward moments to adjust her vision, and suddenly, the man in her dreams was right in front of her. His smile was so tender it made her melt. Thank goodness she was on the sofa because if she'd been standing, she'd be in a puddle on the floor.

Her heart hammered like a locomotive, or at least that must be why she was breathing so fast. “Morg... um, Mr. Buchanan?” she said in a voice too low to be her own.

One side of his grin lifted higher than the other. “Yes.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Your butler showed me in.”

She rubbed her tired eyes, took a deep breath, and tried to focus. Had she really fallen asleep? Of course, she had. That's why she was dreaming of Morgan, yet he was really here. Had he been cradling her face as she'd imagined? Dare she ask? Yet, she could still feel the imprint of his palm against her skin.

What worried her more was that her heart still sang from his nearness. How could she concentrate on anything else while gazing into his mesmerizing brown eyes? It surprised her to realize that she wanted nothing more than to cuddle against him and lose herself in his protective embrace.



SEVEN



Morgan couldn't believe how lovely Jessie looked. Even half awake.

He smiled, noticing how her hands trembled as she smoothed her palms down her dress. Her gaze darted around the room, avoiding him.

"Why did you come to see me?" she asked. "What about your students?"

He chuckled. "Miss Spencer, it's three-thirty in the afternoon. Class is out for the day."

Her eyes widened as her attention snapped to the miniature grandfather clock in the room. "Oh, heavens. I must have fallen asleep."

He chuckled quietly. When he'd first been shown into the house, he'd lost his breath a few times taking in the luxury of the family home. He practically drooled over the walnut wood floors, the large grandfather clock, and the ivory inlaid ebony cabinet in the hallway. When he walked into the parlor and saw her asleep on the green velvet sofa carved with a deep walnut finish, he hitched a breath. She appeared enchanted, a vision of loveliness that surely could not be real. The other objects in the room—the exotic Persian rugs and the rare deep brown pump organ—paled in comparison to Jessie.

She remained asleep, even as he had moved closer, taking quiet steps and then kneeling beside the sofa. Whatever she was dreaming about had made her smile, which softened his heart. When she'd finally awakened and sat up, sleep still coated her glassy eyes.

"Indeed, you had fallen asleep." He stroked his fingers along her cheek again, now bright pink and heated.

Finally, her azure eyes met his. He sucked in a quick breath. Several emotions brightened her eyes as she stared at him. They held a touch of sadness, and yet at the same time, longing, and most certainly desire.

“Um, Mr. Buchanan, I insist you get up off the floor. Where are my manners?” She laughed with difficulty as she played nervously with the gold locket hanging around her neck. “Please, have a seat. Can I get you any tea and cakes?”

He widened his grin. *Tea and cakes?* She must have forgotten he was a schoolteacher, and tea and cakes were not on his daily schedule. “No thank you, but I’ll definitely take a seat.” He winked before standing. Since the sofa she was on left enough room for him to sit, he went ahead and sat beside her.

She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “So, Morg—um, Mr. Buchanan—I must admit, I’m surprised to see you here.”

His heartbeat tripped in happiness, enjoying how flustered she acted around him. “Please, call me Morgan.”

Her shoulders relaxed. “All right, Morgan.”

Was he imagining it, or had it sounded like she’d sighed his name? It didn’t matter. His heart sang with gladness, and the undeniable pull of attraction ignited between them. Even in her eyes, the spark of interest was evident.

“Then I insist you call me Jessie.”

“Jessie.” He had to admit, he liked the way her name sounded in his voice. “What a lovely name for a lovely woman.”

Her face flamed red again as she linked her fingers together on her lap. “Thank you. Now please, tell me why you came to see me.”

For a brief moment, his mind went blank. Staring at her beauty, it was hard to think of anything else. “Your brother.”

“Oh yes, my brother. I do need to talk to you about him.”

“Did he tell you about the fight he and Nathaniel were in this afternoon?”

“Yes. But first, let me apologize for my brother’s behavior. You see, our father is away on business—”

“Yes, he told me that.” He touched her arm. “I also received the impression that your father has been ignoring Billy a lot lately.”

She kept silent for a few awkward seconds. Slowly, tears filled her eyes, but she blinked quickly. “Yes. Our father has been ignoring us lately, but it’s only because he is away on business.”

“How long has he been gone?”

“Um... well, off and on for about a year and a half. But these past few months have been the longest he’s been away.”

Morgan frowned. *That long?* Why, the mayor should be horse-whipped for leaving his family for that amount of time. No wonder Billy acted out the way he did. “I’m sorry. That is a long time for a fourteen-year-old boy.”

“He’ll be fifteen in two weeks.”

Poor kid. Morgan wondered if the mayor would even be here for his birthday.

Frowning, he recalled the heartbreak of a young boy who knew his father had chosen a life of crime instead of being home with his wife and youngest son. Morgan had experienced this until his mother took him, leaving her outlaw husband and oldest son. His mother had done her best until her untimely death. Once in the orphanage, Morgan wondered if having a criminal father would be better than none at all. But over the years, he decided it was best that he didn’t contact his father or older brother.

“It’s hard on both of us.” Jessie’s voice broke and she quickly cleared her throat. “But we are dealing with it the best we can. To be sure, there will be times when we have breakdowns, as Billy did today. I just hope you don’t punish him because of it.”

His chest tightened as he grasped her folded hands. “No, Jessie. Now that I realize what is going on in his life, I understand him better. However, I would still like him and Nathaniel to talk this out and be-

come friends again. I met Darby when I was about Billy's age, and Darby helped me through the tough times in my life. Billy needs a friend to rely on, just as I had."

She nodded. "I believe you are correct. I shall talk to him about it as well."

"That would be good for Billy." He squeezed her hands tenderly. "The main reason I came to see you was because I want to know if there is anything I can do to help."

She blinked quickly, but tears filled her eyes again. Her throat jumped with what he assumed was a hard swallow.

"I shall give it some thought, Morgan, but right now I cannot think of anything you can do to help Billy."

"And how about Billy's sister?" He lowered his voice slightly as he ran the pad of his thumb over her knuckles. "Is there anything I can do to help her?"

Her breathing quickened, moving the lacy bodice of her blue gown up and down faster. He couldn't stop his gaze from dropping to her neck and the top of her shoulders that the gown displayed for his view. The urge to stroke her skin became overpowering, but he fought it.

This was certainly not the time to charm her, and did he really want to charm her knowing how quickly her temper snapped since he'd experienced her tirade firsthand? But the more he talked with her, the memory of their first meeting faded. Perhaps she had been in a foul mood before nearly running him over outside Rosanna's house that day.

Pink highlighted her cheeks like pretty roses. He enjoyed seeing her this way.

"Oh, Morgan." She sighed, licking her lips. "You are too kind. I appreciate that you want to help, but right now all we need is your understanding."

"You have that." He breathed in slowly, enjoying her sweet fragrance. No wonder he'd compared her cheeks to roses. She smelled just like flowers.

Her beauty and nearness were having a strange effect on him. He should move away, sit across the room, perhaps. Then maybe he could have a decent conversation with her. When her gaze dropped to his lips, his mouth turned to cotton.

If he leaned closer, would she pull away? Could he steal a kiss from her so tempting lips without offending her?

Taking the initiative, he followed his instincts and bent closer. She sucked in a breath but didn't back away, nor did she try to stop him. Her breathing grew faster, as did his.

Now what should he do? If he kissed her, would his heart become involved as it had with Rosanna? Undoubtedly, it would, and the end result would be Jessie eventually breaking that particular organ in his chest. He couldn't allow that to happen twice in one year.

Dejectedly, he pulled back. Her eyes widened, and before he knew what was happening, she closed the space between them and placed her lips on his. Explosions erupted inside his head and his heart leapt into his throat. Instinct took over, and he wrapped his arms around her, bringing her closer.

A moan echoed from her throat. Or was that his own groan of pleasure he'd heard? Yet right now it didn't matter. All that mattered was the soft woman in his arms, and the way she slid her hands up his arms and hooked them around his neck.

An irregular pounding shook through him as urgency spun inside him like an out-of-control whirlwind. Good heavens, she was passionate. Even the times he'd kissed—uh, what's-her-name—he'd never felt so lost in his head like he had just now.

Jessie was the first to break the kiss, but she didn't pull out of his arms. Instead, she lowered her face to his chest.

"Oh, Morgan," she said breathlessly. "I don't know what came over me. Please forgive—"

"Shhh," he soothed and lifted her chin. When her eyes met his, he smiled. "There is nothing to apologize for."

Her body relaxed again. She felt so wonderful in his arms, and so... right.

"I just feel like I should say something," she whispered.

He chuckled. "Then say, *Thank you, Morgan. That was the best kiss I've ever had.*"

She laughed. "I don't know. I'd hate for you to become so full of yourself that there is no room for my compliments."

"Impossible." He stroked her cheek. "I will never get tired of hearing you tell me what a good kisser I am."

He meant it as humorous, and thankfully, she laughed harder. This time she did break out of his arms, but the genuine smile on her face let him know she wasn't uncomfortable about their kiss in the least.

"Morgan, do you know how long it's been since I've laughed like this?" Sighing, she leaned back against the sofa, keeping her focus on him.

"It has been that long?" His playful mood dimmed as he thought about her father and the problems the older man was putting his family through right now. "Then I suppose I need to come around more often to make you laugh."

"Will that be the only reason you want to come and see me—to make me laugh?"

He winked. "And whatever else you would like me to do, I'll most certainly be up for the task."

"I'm having a pleasant time with you now." She slid her palm up his arm slowly. "I really appreciate you coming to talk to me about my brother, even though I know you have other things to do that are more important."

He shook his head. "When Billy ran out of the classroom crying earlier this afternoon, I knew I had to come see how he was faring."

Silence stretched in the room for a few awkward moments. Her expression turned from pleasant to worry in a split second as her forehead creased.

“That doesn’t make sense,” she said. “Billy had only gotten home about a half hour or so ago. When did he leave school?”

“During our lunch break.”

“That long?” She gasped and jumped to her feet. “Billy had been gone for three hours? Oh, that’s not good at all.”

She wrung her hands and walked to the window. She briefly peeked out of the laced curtains before turning to pace the floor.

He could understand a sister’s concern about her brother, but Morgan didn’t understand why Jessie fretted about Billy being gone that long. As a young boy, Morgan used to play hooky from school and go fishing with his friends.

He stood and walked toward her. “I’d assumed he had come home after leaving the school.”

“No.”

She gazed at him with wide eyes, and she fidgeted. What made her so nervous? Then again, he hadn’t been able to figure out the Spencer siblings yet. The more Morgan had gotten to know them, the more confused he became. They were hiding secrets, he just knew it. But he felt like they both needed someone to talk to, and he wanted to be that person. If only he could get them to trust him.



PANIC SURGED THROUGH Jessie like hot lava, burning and twisting her gut. Where had Billy been all that time? He only had a few friends, but what if lately he’d made friends with people that she didn’t know about?

“Jessie,” Morgan said, grasping her shoulders, stopping her. The trepidation in his gaze eased her nerves slightly. If only she could trust him enough to tell him the truth.

“What?” she asked.

“Stop your fretting. Your brother is fine. He is home now.” He winked. “Take it from someone who used to sneak out of school and

disappear for a couple of hours without his mother knowing. Billy is a tough kid.”

“Oh, Morgan. It’s more than that. I just fear that the wrong people will—” Her thoughts skidded to a halt, stopping her voice. *What am I doing?* She didn’t dare say any more.

He cocked his head. “The wrong people? What wrong people?”

She released an uneasy chuckle. “Just the ones who might be a bad influence on him.”

“My dear Jessie.” He stroked her cheek. “You can’t keep all the bad people away from him. Billy needs to learn how to deal with problems on his own. He needs to experience the good and the bad. How else will he grow and become his own man?”

It didn’t matter that Morgan was right, he was speaking of something entirely different, but she wouldn’t let him know that wasn’t what had been on her mind. “Indeed, you are correct. I’ve been overprotecting Billy for so long, it’s hard to know when to stop.”

“I wish I’d had an overprotecting sibling, well...besides Darby.” His voice lowered and his smile disappeared.

“You are an only child?”

He dropped his hand from her face and stepped away. “I had an older brother, but he and my father died several years ago. Then my mother died when I was sixteen.”

“I’m sorry.” Her heart twisted from seeing the inner pain in his expression. She didn’t like seeing the sadness in his brown eyes. She’d rather have them vibrant and dreamy as they’d been not too long ago.

Knowing that Morgan understood what Billy was going through, emotion choked her throat. She moved in front of him and held his hands. “I’m sorry that you were orphaned at a young age.”

“Thank you, but that’s when I found Darby. I consider him my family now.”

“I’m happy that you have someone like Darby.” Another pang shot through her heart. To think they shared similar backgrounds, with absent parents.

An awkward silence crept into the room, and she wondered if he suddenly became quiet because he couldn’t ask about her mother. Perhaps it was a good idea to change the subject, anyway. She didn’t enjoy feeling uncomfortable around him. She wanted to feel light-hearted and dizzy like she’d been feeling right before he kissed her, and especially during the passionate kiss.

“Morgan, thank you for sharing that with me about your family. I feel I know you a little better now.”

His tender smile returned. He lifted one of her hands to his mouth and brushed his lips across her knuckles. “I feel like I know you better, as well.”

As she stared into his caring eyes, she felt the urge once again to tell him everything. She had held secrets for too long. Morgan would understand, and he would help, she just knew it.

She took a step closer to him, yearning to release the burden weighing on her shoulders. Desire lit his eyes as he gazed upon her. “Morgan,” she whispered, “I really need to tell you something.”

“You can tell me anything.” He nodded, keeping hold of her hand as it stayed near his mouth.

“I...I...” Her heart was telling her she should trust him. So why was she still frightened?



EIGHT



Jessie's mind brought her thoughts to a quick halt, and she swallowed hard. No, she couldn't tell Morgan—or anyone for that matter. She must remain strong.

But now Morgan waited for her to tell him something, and her mind went blank. What explanation could she give? Her gaze dropped to his mouth and suddenly an idea popped into her head. There was one way she could deter his mind—and hers—from what she'd almost confessed.

Her heart hammered out of control once more, knowing she wanted to kiss this gorgeous man again. And as before, she'd be the one making the first move, but for some reason, she couldn't move.

Slowly, Morgan leaned closer, his attention focused on her lips. "No, don't tell me," he whispered, cupping the back of her head, pulling it closer to his. "*Show me.*"

When his mouth landed on hers, it literally took the breath from her lungs, and within a heartbeat's time, she released a heavy sigh. He pressed her against him as immeasurable delight surged through her. She slid her hands up his broad chest, marveling once again at his incredible build, before linking her hands behind his neck.

The kiss was very different from the one they'd shared earlier. A wild urgency took control over her actions, and she participated fully, moving her mouth back and forth with his.

So many emotions confused her. Happiness was one, along with pleasure, but fear and anger intertwined, but she couldn't understand why. She didn't want to be afraid, and yet the more she kissed him this

way, the stronger these feelings became. Yet at the same time, ending the kiss wasn't what she wanted to do. She'd already experienced the emptiness that filled her after she withdrew from sharing such a tender moment with him.

Before she could summon the courage to break the kiss, Morgan had removed his mouth from hers, and his lips traveled down her neck. On impulse, she tilted her head, giving him better access.

What am I doing? Although she should really stop this wonderful madness, the tingles flowing through every nerve in her body, and the way her heart fluttered with happiness overrode any other decision. His moist lips on her throat and his hot breath on her skin drove her insane. Pleasant thoughts drifted through her mind, wondering... hoping... this man might indeed be the man of her dreams.

"Oh, Morgan," she sighed audibly, not recognizing her own sated voice.

"Yes, my darling Jessie?"

His voice was just as profound, which made her happy to know she hadn't been the only one affected by the kiss.

"I... I need to catch... my breath," she said.

Chuckling, he raised his head as his gaze met hers. "You, too?"

She nodded. "I'm having... a hard time... breathing."

"As am I." He kissed her briefly on the lips. "Perhaps it is best we don't become too carried away."

"Indeed, we should not." She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "But something so wonderful is hard to resist."

"I couldn't agree more." He smiled and withdrew, stepping away from her. He cleared his throat. "But I suppose I should leave since I've done what I came here to do."

"You have? You came here to kiss me?"

His laugh came out louder this time. "Not exactly. I came to talk to you about Billy."

"Oh yes, Billy." She grinned, but her heart sank. "Must you leave?"

"You don't want me to?"

Chuckling, she shrugged. "I must admit your company has been rather nice."

"So has yours."

"And if you leave, I shall have nobody to talk with, except the servants, of course."

"That's true, but I really should be leaving. I do have assignments to grade before tomorrow. However, if you are willing, can I take you to dinner tomorrow?"

Her heart jumped with excitement. "Oh, yes. Dinner sounds wonderful."

"Splendid." He winked. "Is six o'clock too early?"

"Of course not."

"Wonderful."

Heat grew in her face again as she nodded. "I'm certainly looking forward to it."

He hesitated in leaving, and she wondered if he was going to bestow another kiss on her. Instead, he took her hand and placed a chaste kiss on her knuckles.

"Until then, my darling Jessie."

He turned and walked out the door. Her heart cried out to have him come back, and yet she needed more time to sort through her feelings.

Maybe she shouldn't have had so much enthusiasm in her voice when she'd replied to his dinner invitation, but she couldn't help it. Did this mean he was courting her? By the soft smile and twinkle in his eyes, she suspected he was just as happy about their dinner arrangements as she was.

It was hard to keep her mind from thinking of Morgan after he left. Tomorrow was too long to wait, yet she didn't want to seem too eager. She didn't want him to think she was an aggressive woman who had to know what he was doing every moment of the day.

Jessie grabbed her heavy cloak and wrapped it around her. The clouds in the sky were thick and puffy. Winter would be upon them soon, which undoubtedly would keep her inside the house more. However, today she needed to get her mind off Morgan, and the only way to do that was venturing into town to her favorite spot—the library.

It didn't take long for her to reach her destination. The jingling bell announced her as she walked inside the building. The smell of paper and leather filled the air. Camilla, her middle-aged friend, greeted her with a quick wave since she was already helping another person. Jessie had a soft spot in her heart for Camilla. She looked up to her as a mother figure. Camilla and her husband couldn't have children, so she seemed to take in all children who needed extra loving.

Jessie ran her finger over the binds of some poetry books as she looked to see if there was anything new. *Does Morgan like poetry?* Jessie shook her head. Here she was in a place to forget about him for a while and instead, he wouldn't leave her thoughts.

"Jessie," Camilla's light voice greeted her. "I was getting worried about you. You didn't show up last week for the new book shipment. I thought for certain you'd be here."

Jessie grabbed a book from the shelf. "I had some family issues to deal with. Billy has been getting in trouble at school, and it's been difficult to control him."

"Your father hasn't returned home from business?" Camilla pulled her glasses down onto her nose and peered over them.

"He should be back any day now." Jessie smiled, not wanting to give anyone the wrong idea. "I was hoping he could be home to handle this, after all, he is the one who makes the decisions."

Camilla folded her arms. "It frustrates me that men won't allow us to make decisions. My husband is like that." She glanced around the library. "I'm surprised he allows me to work here."

"Your husband probably thought this was a good place to keep his eye on you." Jessie looked across the street to the bank where Mr.

Rogers worked. She couldn't help but think of her own father and how he had wanted to keep his eye on his daughter twenty-four hours a day.

Camilla huffed. "I'm fully capable of doing things on my own, if only he would let me show him."

"I couldn't agree more." Jessie leaned against the bookshelf. "Father treats me as though I can't think for myself. Sometimes I feel like a prisoner inside my house." Jessie looked around to make sure no one was within listening range. "My father has gone as far as hiring spies to watch every move I make, and then report it back to him."

Camilla's mouth hung open. "Whatever for?"

"To make sure I don't ruin our family name. Everything I do must make him look good."

Camilla's lips thinned. "They shouldn't control us like that. We are not animals."

"I know." Jessie walked to the next row of books, and Camilla followed her closely behind.

"If you are interested," Camilla whispered. "A few of us ladies are meeting here tonight after the library closes. We are talking about the woman's movement."

Jessie narrowed her gaze. "Are you talking about the *suffrage* movement?"

"The very same."

"But isn't it against the law for women to meet about this?"

Camilla did another glance around the area as if wanting to keep their conversation private. "Next month there is talk that the bill will be signed to make it legal to meet, but all members of the city council must be in attendance. Women need to stand together, just in case something goes wrong. And because our meeting is in secret, bring your sewing sample with you." Camilla grinned. "You really should come."

The mere idea that women could finally speak their mind, excited Jessie. Maybe then she could come clean about her gold mining busi-

ness, changing the name to hers instead of her brother's name. Women needed this vote. They needed to be heard.

Jessie smiled widely. "I'll be here."



MORGAN PRACTICALLY skipped out of the house and to his horse after leaving Jessie. His grin stretched so wide his cheeks hurt. He couldn't believe the excitement bubbling inside him, knowing that Jessie had enjoyed his company and the kiss. So far, she hadn't said anything condescending about him being a schoolteacher, and as far as he could tell, she didn't seem embarrassed about being seen with him, either.

Not yet.

Something tugged at the back of his heart, reminding him that Rosanna hadn't shown signs of being critical either, but she'd still wanted him to be something he could never become.

He'd have to take this relationship with Jessie much slower. He couldn't fall in love and get his heart broken again. She wasn't like Rosanna, and really, their only similarities were that their families had a lot of money. He'd always believed people were naturally decent, yet lately, the rich had treated him like dirt. There was no way he could marry a woman like that.

Marry? Chuckling, he shook his head and urged his horse into a fast trot. Was he really thinking about marriage after only one kiss? Although, technically, it was two kisses... two very passionate and earth-moving kisses. He should calm his elation down and remember that he really doesn't know her very well.

He urged his horse into a faster trot. As he came upon the same location where Jessie had almost been assaulted, he gripped the reins tighter. He scanned the area, searching for any signs of trouble. He hadn't exactly lied when he told her he didn't know who those men were. In truth, he did recognize one of them. Joe Edwards. Morgan

didn't know Joe personally, but the man had been associated with Daniel Buchanan, Morgan's older brother.

His stomach churned. He suspected Joe was as corrupt as Morgan's father and brother, after all, they tried to rob Jessie.

Morgan had been harboring a secret since he moved to Denver, and he prayed nobody would discover the truth about his family. He wanted his past to stay dead. Nobody could know Morgan Buchanan had been raised by outlaws.

Bitterness coated his tongue and made him want to gag from just thinking about his father and brother. His father had turned to a life of crime only a few years after Morgan was born. When Daniel was old enough, their father had taught him the trade, mainly to be the alibi. Although Morgan hadn't stayed in touch with them once his mother took him away, he'd heard that his father and brother had died in a shootout.

From the corner of his eye, a shadow in the trees pulled his attention. On instinct, his hand flew to the pistol he kept in his overcoat. Immediately, three familiar faces popped into view—the same three who'd tried to rob Jessie.

Morgan slowed his horse and glared at Joe. The years hadn't been very kind to his brother's friend. Fresh scars across Joe's cheek and upper lip were red and puckered, and the man had put on a little weight around his mid-section. Joe's once-thick head of hair was now receding. The other two men appeared worse, with more scars, missing teeth, and unkempt hair.

"Lookie boys, it's the uppity schoolteacher again." Joe grinned.

Although all three held a club, it was their evil scowls that worried Morgan the most.

"Joe Edwards," Morgan said with a nod as he stopped his horse. "It's a surprise to see you here. Did you run out of people to rob in California, and you're working your way to the east?"

The portly-sized man threw back his head and laughed. "That's close enough to the truth, I su'pose." He slapped his club against his palm. "After yer pa and Daniel died, I found my own gang and we moved on."

Morgan glanced briefly at the other two men. "Yes, I noticed your outlaw friends."

"Now, Morgan," Joe shook his head. "I see ye've got it all wrong. We're not outlaws. We're just men tryin' to make a livin'."

"By robbing and kidnapping?" Morgan rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry to inform you, Joe, but in this town, that's considered a criminal act."

The three men standing near his horse exchanged glances and seconds later, broke out into laughter. Morgan didn't know why he wasted his breath. These imbeciles obviously loved their life of crime.

"I think," Morgan said louder, to be heard over their boisterous laughter, "that you and your friends need to move on. The U.S. Marshal is very good at catching criminals, and the sheriff is the best I've ever met."

Joe shrugged. "I'm not worried. Like I said, we're not outlaws. We're just doin' what we can from day to day."

Morgan didn't like Joe's cockiness. It reminded him too much of his father and brother. "That's good to know, then you'll let me move on, right? After all, I'm a measly teacher. We don't make hardly enough to eat."

"If'n ya say so." Joe chuckled.

Morgan held Joe's stare. "I do say so."

He shrugged again and bounced the club off his palm. "So, are ya still protectin' that rich lady Miss Spencer?"

Morgan tightened his grip on the reins, anger seething through him like fire. "Yes, I plan on protecting her from now on." He narrowed his gaze. "And I'd better not see you or your friends anywhere near her again. Is that clear?"

“Cry-stal,” Joe said in a strong twang. “I’m guessin’ ya want her money just as much as we do.”

“Then you guessed wrong. She’s my friend, and her brother, Billy, is one of my students.”

Joe tilted his head to one side, like a hound who heard a high-pitched sound. He scrunched his eyebrows together.

“Her brother?” Joe questioned. “Bill Spencer?”

“Billy,” Morgan corrected.

“Is he the mayor’s only son?”

“Yes.”

“He’s still in school?” Joe asked again.

“What is it to you?” Morgan now wished he hadn’t said anything. “You stay away from him and Miss Spencer.”

The three men chuckled. Morgan noticed their disbelief and decided to just let the subject drop. “Well, I’ll be going now. Stay out of trouble if you can.”

As Morgan rode away, the echoes of their laughter grated on his nerves. Men like Joe and his friends were nothing but a nuisance. He needed to report them to the sheriff quickly. Hopefully, those outlaws would be caught soon.

On the ride back home, his hopes dropped even lower. He didn’t trust Joe and his men, and now that they knew Morgan was friends with Jessie and Billy, that meant he’d have to keep an extra eye on them at all times. With her father still away on business, that made the mayor’s family easy prey.

With any luck, Morgan would be able to keep the truth from Jessie and Billy as well. This was not the time for her to learn about his family connections. Then again, he never wanted anyone to find out.



NINE



Jessie snuck out of the house soon after dinner was served. She made the excuse that she had a headache and wanted to lie down. Even though her father wasn't around to stop her from leaving without a chaperone, she knew Mr. Hobbs would be upset if he discovered she was gone.

She carried sewing samplers in her carpetbag that she had been working on in her spare time. It was sad that women needed to make an excuse to get away every now and then. Jessie drove her buggy to the library and tied it to the hitching post. A few other buggies were there.

As she stepped closer to the library, the hairs on the back of her neck raised enough to give her an eerie feeling that someone was watching her. Jessie glanced around the area, searching for one of her father's spies. The sun had set, leaving the air colder and causing more shadows.

Jessie quickly opened the door and stepped inside the warm building. The chatting of the women briefly stopped when she entered the room.

"Everyone," Camilla announced. "I'm sure you all know Miss Jessie Spencer, the mayor's daughter." Camilla motioned with her hand. "Jessie, dear, come take a seat."

Jessie found a seat next to an older woman who had knitting on her lap. She smiled kindly at Jessie, making her feel welcome.

"As I was saying," Camilla said, "I overheard my husband saying that in New York, Susan B. Anthony and others were raising funds for the campaign to prove there is support for the suffrage amendment."

Excited gasps filled the room.

"We need to do that here," Camilla continued. "The government needs to know there are supporters for this and to push it along quickly."

The old woman next to Jessie rested her knitting and looked at Jessie. "Isn't it true that the mayor doesn't agree with the signing of the suffrage amendment?"

Jessie couldn't feel offended. After all, she couldn't sway her father into doing anything she wanted. "I can't speak for him, and he has never listened to me. What he discusses on this matter is behind closed doors."

"My husband doesn't listen to me, either." The woman wearing a blue bonnet set her crocheting down. "He thinks I'm losing my mind if I give an opinion."

A few of the women whispered their own frustrations with their husbands. Jessie twisted her hands in her lap. She sure hoped her husband would never think that of her if she ever got married.

"What do you think about women owning their own businesses?" Jessie spoke softly.

Camilla's eyes widened. "I think we should have the choice to do it. We bear the children, after all. It shouldn't be that hard to learn to manage a business." She pointed to the red-headed woman to the left of Jessie. "I'm sure Dorothy would love to have the dress shop be in her name. Clyde is getting feeble. He really can't run the store without her help."

The bell jingled on the front door. A hush fell over the room as each woman quickly picked up their sewing and glanced to the front door. Jessie looked over her shoulder to see Mr. Prescott standing at the door. Her heart sank. What was he doing here? But more importantly, would he turn them in to the sheriff for meeting in secret?

"Mr. Prescott," Camilla greeted. "The library is closed. It's our sewing circle. You're welcome to join if you like."

Snickering from the women almost made Jessie laugh.

“Thank you, Mrs. Rogers.” Mr. Prescott tipped his hat. “I actually came to see Miss Spencer.”

The gazes of the women all landed on Jessie. It was as if they accused her in some way. Jessie quickly put her sewing back into her bag and stood. “I’ll see what he needs.”

“Make him leave,” the old woman sitting next to her whispered.

Jessie lifted her bag and hurried to the entrance of the library.

“Mr. Prescott,” Jessie said as politely as she could, even though she was upset at him. “I’m surprised to see you here. Is everything all right?”

“Forgive me for intruding, but even though your father is away, I feel obligated to keep an eye on you. I was passing by and noticed your buggy. I don’t recall you ever being here this late. I was worried and so I stopped.”

“That is thoughtful.” Jessie cleared her throat. “However, I’m just sewing with the ladies.”

“You look a little out of place,” he whispered. He was referring to how much younger she was than the other women. “May I escort you home? It’s getting late and it looks as though it might snow tonight.”

Irritation filled her. What these women were talking about just moments ago of not being able to do anything on their own, needed to end. She could think for herself. If she wanted to leave, then she would, but she just got here.

“It’s all right, Miss Spencer,” Camilla called from the circle. “We’re about done here, anyhow. But please come to our next sewing circle. We have one every week.”

Heaviness grew in Jessie’s chest. But she knew that these women didn’t want Mr. Prescott being in their midst while they talked about women’s rights. Jessie understood why Camilla was dismissing her, and she wouldn’t argue.

“Thank you,” Jessie told Camilla. “I’ll speak with you another day.”

Mr. Prescott offered his arm for her to take. Reluctantly, she slid her arm through his so he could escort her out. Light snowflakes were already floating from the sky.

"Looks like I came for you just in time," Mr. Prescott said. "I do believe winter is approaching sooner than expected."

"You may be correct." Jessie unhitched her horse and climbed into the buggy. "Thank you, Mr. Prescott. I didn't realize the time and I need to get home to my brother."

"Not to worry, Jessie. I'll always make sure you are safe." He winked.

At least he had his own horse, because she wasn't going to invite him into her buggy. Being seen with Mr. Prescott riding next to her would be very improper. Jessie smiled. *Improper?* Kissing Morgan was improper, yet it felt so right. Her cheeks grew warm just thinking about him. Oh, she couldn't wait for tomorrow to arrive.

Suddenly, a memory surfaced. Mr. Prescott had asked her to the Opera tomorrow. She needed to think of a clever way to decline his offer. Tomorrow would be all about her and Morgan.



MORGAN HAD A GRIN ON his face all day. Tonight, he would see Jessie again. The kiss they'd shared had been on his mind, and it had definitely affected the way he taught his class. In fact, he was certain his students were able to get away with a lot today. But he didn't care. Nothing and nobody could take away the peaceful feeling sweeping over him whenever he thought about her. Nothing would be able to remove from his mind the wonderful memory of them together in her parlor.

He didn't know how he had arrived home, because he couldn't remember much of his day, but when he walked into the house, Darby sat at the table waving his hands over his deck of cards. Darby picked them up and tried again to shuffle in a fancy way, but they splattered all over the table.

“How was your day?” Morgan asked.

Startled, Darby dropped his hands to the table. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

Morgan shrugged. “I think it’s because you were concentrating so hard.” He nodded toward the cards. “What are you trying to do?”

He scratched the section of his scalp that was bald. “Well, I was hoping to lay out the cards in a certain way and maybe it would lead me to those things I have misplaced.”

“You’ve lost something?”

“I lost my brush, and now I have found it.” He grinned.

Morgan held in a laugh. “What did you lose this time?”

“My favorite shoes.”

“I hope your card trick works, then.”

Inwardly, he chuckled, Darby always made him laugh because of his simple mind. Morgan walked to his over-stuffed chair and sat. He inhaled slowly and released it with the same speed. What could he fix for tonight’s special meal? Because he didn’t have much money, he would make dinner, instead. Perhaps she would enjoy eating some meat, cheese, and bread. Hopefully, he’d find some fruit as well.

Where would he take her? As his mind wandered around the area, he knew wherever they went, it would have to be secluded, peaceful, and out of the weather’s elements. Thankfully, it hadn’t snowed much last night, but it was still chilly. Perhaps there could be a small stream nearby and they’d get to experience the serene sound of a gurgling brook as the water cascaded over boulders. He pictured an abandoned barn not too far from the schoolhouse. That would be perfect.

One thing he shouldn’t do is gaze at Jessie for too long or sit too close to her. He’d lose himself in her beauty, and he wouldn’t be able to think straight. And would he try to kiss her again? The emotion between them had been so wonderful yesterday. If the mood was like that again, he doubted he’d be able to control himself. Most certainly, he’d take her in his arms and kiss her soundly...

"You're thinking of Miss Spencer again, aren't you?"

Darby's voice was too close. Morgan jumped. His friend stood right beside his chair, wearing a wide grin that showed his missing teeth. Morgan couldn't believe he didn't see his friend until now.

Morgan rubbed his neck. "Why would you think that?"

Darby snickered. "Because your smile is so wide that you could catch a fish in there."

Morgan chuckled. "I wasn't smiling that big."

"Indeed, you were."

"Well, if you must know, I'm taking her out this evening."

Darby clapped his hands and giggled. "I knew it. She thinks you're gallant."

"I couldn't tell you that." Morgan shrugged.

"But she must. Why else would she want to go out with you?"

Morgan was certain Darby didn't mean to ask that question in a rude tone, yet the little man knew Morgan struggled with wealthy women. "Actually, I've been thinking the same thing. Why would a wealthy woman want to be courted by a penniless schoolteacher?"

"Because you are a good man, Morgan, and if she doesn't see that, she's not worth your time." Darby hobbled toward the kitchen. "I suppose I should start getting your dinner ready. You definitely need to sweep her off her feet."

Morgan sighed. Darby was right. If he wanted to win the fair maiden's heart, he couldn't do it with money. He'd have to show Jessie what was inside his heart. Hopefully, it would be enough. He didn't think he could handle another rejection so soon after the first.



TEN



Jessie strolled to one of her favorite rooms in her home—the library. She loved books and insisted that a variety of genres were stocked for her reading pleasure. Shelves filled with books lined the walls. She had probably read each novel at least twice and was starting on the third round. Nibbling on her bottom lip, she glanced toward the clock on the mantle above the hearth. Five o'clock. She still had one hour to waste. Yet, reading didn't interest her right now. Her mind had been jumping all over the place since she made this arrangement with Morgan, and her anticipation grew the closer the time came to see him again.

Jessie moved to the next room, her father's office. As she opened the door, her father's cologne filled the air. She didn't realize until now, how much she missed him. Jessie sat in his big chair behind the desk.

"Father, what am I to do?" she whispered. Opening the top drawer of the desk, she pulled out two envelopes. The first one was delivered to her two months ago, and the second letter arrived a week ago. Her hands trembled as she opened the first one. Looking down, she read the words even if she had them memorized.

Miss Spencer, we have your father. Please don't go to the authorities or tell anyone. Mayor Spencer is in good hands and is well. He will be returned in due time. Please don't come looking for him.

Emotion clogged her throat. Who had him? What do they want with him? Jessie dropped the letter to the table. How long would they

keep him? Even though the letter stated to not go to the authorities, she needed to, or at least trust someone to help her find him. Jessie picked up the second letter and read.

I've been watching you. You are talking to the wrong people. If you don't obey my warnings, I will kill your father. The mayor's life depends upon you.

Nothing made sense. She wasn't talking to authorities. Everyone still assumed her father was away on business, but the truth was, he had been kidnapped. No ransom notes were sent, so she had no clue as to why they wanted her father. Billy had stumbled across the first note while looking for his slingshot. Jessie had to calm him down and explain that if they followed the rules, their father would be returned unharmed. She made Billy promise not to tell anyone.

Over the past month, she could see Billy changing. Keeping this type of family secret quiet was very hard for him. Maybe telling Morgan the truth about her father could help, but then again, if someone watched them like the letter stated, she'd be responsible for her father's death.

Growling, she shoved the letters back into the drawer. It was useless. Jessie stood and left the room and walked up the corridor to the music room. Playing the pianoforte had always calmed her because it reminded her of her mother, who had loved to hear her play. She sat on the bench and placed her fingers on the ivory keys. Over the years she had memorized many tunes, but at this particular moment, she couldn't recall one of them.

Frustrated with her impatience, she left the room and rushed back upstairs to her bedroom. Just inside the door she spotted her full-length mirror. She checked herself over once more to make certain every hair was in place and that her dress was absent of wrinkles.

This evening she chose to wear a blue cotton walking suit with Venetian point lace sewn in the bottom of her skirt and cuffs of her

jacket. The white high-neck blouse with pearl buttons down the front made the ensemble complete.

Instead of styling her hair into a bun, she decided to leave it long, flowing down her back and over her shoulders. Her maid had pulled the top section of Jessie's hair back away from her face, fastening it with a silver and blue flower-shaped clip.

The chime from the front door jerked her out of her thoughts and she jumped. Her heart pounded so fast, she thought she'd pass out. Taking a deep breath, she smoothed her moist palms down her skirt and walked out of the room, grabbing her shawl on the way. As she passed the grandfather clock, it showed only fifteen minutes after the hour. Apparently, Morgan must be excited about their dinner to arrive so early.

She finally reached the end of the stairs and Hobbs stood nearby.

"Miss Jessie, the gentleman caller wanted to wait outside for you."

She furrowed her brow. "He did? I wonder why?"

"I didn't ask."

"Well, I shan't keep him waiting any longer then." She smiled. In five steps she walked out the door and closed it... then came to a halt. Where was Morgan? She glanced around the empty space on the porch. Wouldn't he be right here waiting for her?

Cautiously, she stepped off the porch and made her way around the large potted plants and manicured bushes outlining the property's drive. Eeriness crept over her. Something wasn't right. She couldn't see Morgan or his buggy, or anyone for that matter.

She should turn around and go back inside. If Morgan were indeed here, he'd come in the house, not stay outside and wait.

Jessie turned quickly and bumped into Mr. Prescott. Her hands immediately fell to his chest to push herself away. Then she recalled he had wanted to take her to the opera tonight. Why had she forgot to decline?

"Jessie, you look so lovely." Mr. Prescott's hands moved to her shoulders.

She squirmed away from his touch. "Mr. Prescott—"

"Please, you may call me Matthew." His voice cracked slightly as he was trying to be romantic in his speech. "I see you are ready."

"Mr. Prescott," she said again, not wanting to speak his given name. "I have a very important meeting this evening. I will not be able to go with you to the opera."

Shock covered his face. His mouth dropped open slightly. "It's all right to be nervous on our first outing together." His hands touched her upper arms.

"No, Mr. Prescott, I really do have something else planned tonight." Her mind scrambled to think of an excuse. "Billy is having issues in school. I am attending a parent night in place of my father." She hated being untruthful.

His gaze wandered over her outfit. "Don't tease me, Jessie. We talked about this. We are going to the opera." His hands tightened more around her arms. "We should leave now so we're not late."

"No," Jessie snapped. "I have other arrangements. Please, unhand me."

"How else am I to get to know my future wife?" Mr. Prescott's grip was hurting her arm. "Your father gave me his approval before he went out of town."

"I don't believe you." Jessie pushed out of his grip, dropping her shawl. "You need to leave now, or I will call for Mr. Hobbs. He is quite handy with a rifle."

Mr. Prescott's hands bunched into fists as he glared at her. Jessie knew her father wouldn't make that type of an arrangement without her consent. Her father wasn't that ruthless.

"You can't stay away from me forever, Jessie. You will be my wife." He stepped back, still keeping his gaze on her. "You will see."

Jessie grabbed her skirt, lifted it slightly and dashed back into the house, slamming the door behind her. She would *never* become Mr. Prescott's wife, even if that meant she was an old maid. She rubbed her throbbing temples. A headache was forming thanks to that rude man. She glanced at the grandfather clock. Morgan still wouldn't be here for another half hour.

She quickened her steps back to the library. She needed to calm herself before Morgan arrived. Hopefully, he would know how to keep her mind off the issues at hand. Not more than five minutes after she entered the library, the chime of the bell rang again. Growling, she stomped to the front door. If punching Mr. Prescott in the nose would make him leave, then she'd do it.

Jessie held up her hand to Hobbs. "I've got this. You go." As soon as Hobbs exited the room, she threw open the front door. "Mr. Prescott, are you deaf—" No one was on the porch. She fisted her hands. "I'm not falling for this trick again. For the last time, leave me a—"

From behind the bush to the right of the entryway, a man in a dark hood tossed a blanket over her head and yanked her from the porch.



IT TOOK MORGAN A WHOLE hour to get ready for this special evening. Usually, he didn't fuss over his clothes much, but he really wanted to impress this particular woman almost as much as he wanted to breathe. He could only hope Jessie would look past his faults and see the person inside.

He'd donned his favorite gold and black waistcoat over his white shirt and wore a clean pair of black trousers and matching over-jacket. Being so dressed up made him feel special. He didn't want to disappoint Jessie in any way.

Darby had helped Morgan in making this evening's meal, and as he guided the single horse pulling the buggy toward her estate, the aroma of fried chicken and freshly baked rolls filled his senses, causing his

stomach to grumble. Darby had always been a good cook, and Morgan was certain this meal would surprise even Jessie.

Eagerness flowed through him as every second passed. He couldn't wait to get to know her better. During yesterday's visit, he felt she had wanted desperately to tell him something, yet she didn't. Hopefully, this evening he'd be able to show her that she could tell him anything. He especially wanted her to know that he'd always be here for her.

When he pulled the horse and buggy into the drive leading toward the manor, his heartbeat quickened. Even his palms were moist.

He stopped the horse and jumped down from the buggy, grabbing the bouquet of flowers he'd picked for her that were fresh from the flower vendor near his house. Taking two steps toward the front porch, an object lying near the bushes caught his eyes. He stopped and studied the piece of cloth. It was Jessie's shawl. Diverting his direction, he moved to the garment and picked it up. Her scent still clung to the fabric, which told him she'd only recently had this on.

He glanced around the drive. He didn't see or hear Jessie anywhere.

Curious, he hurried to the front door and paused to straighten his waistcoat, before knocking. Hobbs, the butler, opened the door.

"Good evening," Morgan greeted. "I'm here to pick up Miss Spencer. Is she ready?"

The old man's bushy eyebrows grew together, and he frowned. "No. She left less than thirty minutes ago and has not returned."

Worry gripped Morgan's chest. "Do you know who she left with?"

The servant shrugged. "I assumed it was with the man she had plans with tonight."

Irritation grew inside Morgan, even though he wanted to stop the emotion until he'd heard the whole story. "Had she made plans with two men, by chance?"

"No. Only the schoolteacher."

Morgan nodded. "I'm the schoolteacher."

“Oh, dear.” Hobbs’ eyes widened and he stepped past Morgan and walked outside. His gaze searched in the yard.

Morgan didn’t like the frightened expression on the servant’s face, and he especially didn’t like the worry escalating through him right now. “Hobbs, can you tell me what the other man looked like?”

“He was thick around the middle,” Hobbs motioned his hand toward his waist, “and he had a scar on his upper lip. I also recall his hair thinning on top.”

Bile lurched inside of Morgan. *Joe!*

Groaning, Morgan rubbed his forehead as a throb beat against his skull. “Hobbs, I believe that man’s purpose was to kidnap Miss Spencer.”

Color left the older man’s face, and he shook his head slowly. “No. That can’t be...”

“I’m assuming he left a ransom note.” Morgan moved his attention to the porch, scanning for any type of note, but he saw nothing.

“None whatsoever, sir.” Hobbs’ throat tightened and he fidgeted with his collar. “This evening has been so confusing. There was another man here to see her earlier, and he upset her greatly.”

“Another man? What did he look like?”

“It was Mr. Prescott. He’s Mayor Spencer’s accountant.” Hobbs frowned. “I’d overheard them talking on the porch, and from what I could gather, I think they had plans to go out tonight, too. But that man left because Miss Spencer came inside. Not long after that, she received another caller.” Tears filled the old man’s eyes. “She had wanted to answer the door, then, so I let her. I peeked out the window and got a glimpse of him, but then turned and went into the other room. Now I realize I shouldn’t have left her alone—” His voice broke as his bottom lip quivered.

“I’ll find her,” Morgan stated, hoping he’d be able to find her before something awful happened.

He jumped off the porch and walked back to the place he'd picked up the shawl. He studied the ground and could see from the disturbed soil and new skiff of snow—and the broken branches in the bushes—that there was definitely a struggle. He followed the footsteps back into the yard a little more until they reached the barren apple tree. Horse's hooves had recently made their mark in the snow, as well. And wagon tracks. Joe wasn't working alone.

Irritation filled Morgan. He must find her as soon as possible.

Morgan spun toward Hobbs who hovered behind him. "Don't say anything to Billy. Not yet. I don't want to worry the boy. And keep an eye on him until Miss Jessie returns."

The older man nodded. "Are you going to look for her?"

"Yes, and I'll bring her back home safely."

Tears fell down the man's cheeks. "I truly hope you can."

Morgan hurried back to his buggy and climbed in. He whipped the reins, urging the horse forward. Although he wanted to forget his upbringing, he needed to remember all that his father and brother had taught him about tracking. Morgan prayed he would make it in time.



JESSIE WANTED TO RETCH all over the man who'd taken her, but she had nothing in her stomach. Although she had no idea where the kidnapper had taken her, there were two things she was certain about. One, that this man was not Mr. Prescott. He was too short, and his voice was whinier than the aggressive accountant. And two, that this particular outlaw was dumber than rocks—as were the other two imbeciles he'd met up with. She wasn't sure where they were taking her, however, they were close by a stream because she could hear the water rushing by.

If only she had allowed Hobbs to open the door, she wouldn't be in this predicament. Instead, she was kidnapped. She had fought back,

but then he'd said the very thing that made her body and mind go stiff with terror.

"Say one word, lady, and I'll kill yer brother."

If they could capture her, she knew they would be able to get Billy. She had to protect him any way she could, and in this case, that meant by being quiet.

During the time in the wagon, she realized three men worked together in taking her away from her home. From what she'd gathered from their conversation, they weren't exactly sure what to do with her seeing how her father was still out of town.

Although these men probably didn't know one end of their body from the other, she was certain they weren't stupid enough to ignore her. They probably expected her to try and escape. And given the chance, she'd take the opportunity to get away.

She wasn't sure how far they traveled in the wagon, because for her, it seemed like an eternity. But finally, they stopped and dragged her into a barn and sat her on a chair. Rough hands bound her wrists to the wooden slats of the chair while binding her ankles together. Finally, they took off the blanket.

When she was able to look at these men clearly, recognition struck, making her head throb. These were the three men who'd tried to accost her when Morgan had rescued her, and the man who'd done the initial kidnapping was Joe.

"My, aren't ya a pretty one," one of the other men said as he stroked his dirty knuckles along her cheek.

Joe stood against the wall with his arms folded across his chest. His gaze pierced through her, making her extremely uncomfortable.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked shakily.

"We're gonna get a ransom for ya. As the mayor's daughter, yer pro'bly worth a lot." The other man in the threesome moved to the back of the room, motioning his arm for the others to join. "But first, we need to figure out how."

As the men conversed in low tones, tears stung her eyes as she watched out the grimy window. The sun was setting and soon it would be dark. She was sure Morgan was trying to look for her by now, yet how could he find her in the dark?

Every so often, she heard what the three men were discussing. It seemed they couldn't put a price on how much they wanted for her. When they finally decided on a price—five thousand dollars, no less—they couldn't decide on how to collect the money. The fools knew her father's absence was going to be a problem. She rolled her eyes. Hadn't she told them that when they first tried to rob her on the bridge?

She blew out a frustrated sigh. If only these idiots would have planned the kidnapping in advance, she wouldn't be sitting here waiting for them to make up their tiny minds. Her limbs ached, and she needed a drink. She needed to eat, too. Would they keep her in this position until they expected her father to arrive?

Suddenly, one of the men growled and slammed his hand on the table. She jumped, but she couldn't see what they were doing.

"Joe, I've had enough of this." He cleared his throat. "We either return her, or ya need to figure out a way to get the ransom. We can't wait for her father to return, especially when nobody knows where he is or when he'll come back. I'm sure her servants have contacted the sheriff by now, and they'll be sniffin' our trail like hounds searchin' for the fox."

"Well Garrett, I can't help it if I misunderstood your instructions," Joe whined. "Ya should have been more clear."

The man growled. "What don't ya understand about *we'll wait until her father gets back?*"

She wanted to laugh at his idiocy, but this really wasn't a laughing matter.

“Ya didn’t get the ‘structions wrong,” the man named Garrett snapped back. “Ya prob’ly just wanted to be the leader, and that ain’t right.”

Joe growled. “So what if I wanted to be in charge of this kidnappin’?” He muttered a curse. “I should have listened to Buchanan when he told me what fools the two of ya were.”

Buchanan? Was he talking about Morgan? Jessie’s heart hammered faster. How did Morgan know these men?

“Ha!” the other man snapped. “We aren’t fools. Yer the fool for listenin’ to Mr. Buchanan in the first place.”

Jessie shook her head, feeling more confused.

“Cuz now that schoolteacher will be lookin’ for her,” Garrett added.

She didn’t know what these men were talking about, but all she wanted was for Morgan to find her. Things would be explained later, she’d make sure of that.

“We don’t have to worry about the schoolteacher. When it comes to brains, he got the short end of the stick. His father was the smart one,” Joe said. “But if’n the teacher finds us, I’ll kill him, just like I killed his father.”

A different kind of fear sliced through her. Somehow she must warn Morgan. She scrunched her forehead. Had she heard correctly? Joe killed Morgan’s father? But from what she understood, Morgan’s father and brother were not good men. So, had Morgan lied to her about his family?

Her heart twisted as the ache of betrayal consumed her. Tears burned her eyes. If he lied about this, what else had he lied about?

Her heart crumbled a little more. She hadn’t really known him at all. He probably just told her those things to get close to her, as most men who wanted her money.

Tears fell freely down her cheeks now. She didn’t know what else to think, and she wished it would all disappear. Her heart hurt too much.

She must put aside her doubt and concentrate on getting out of here. Billy needed her just like she needed him. They couldn't rely on—or trust—anybody else.



ELEVEN



Jessie needed to get a grip on the situation. She couldn't sulk like a wounded cat. At that low point in her life, she'd decided not to be a helpless creature any longer. She wanted to be as strong and brave as the suffrage women.

Lifting her shoulder, she tried to wipe her wet cheeks on the material of her dress. When she was satisfied, she cleared her throat and said loudly, "Beg your pardon, but might I have a word with one of you jackanapes?"

The three men in back of her grew silent. She waited for one of them to speak, but after a whole minute passed, she wondered if they were pretending not to be there. Indeed, they were that stupid.

"Please, sirs, I need to make a deal with you. I've been listening to your conversation, and I think I can assist you with the mess you've gotten yourselves into."

Finally, the shuffling of feet grew closer, and she squared her shoulders, ready for battle of any kind. When the imbeciles moved around and stood in front of her, all three men pierced her with menacing stares.

"I hear you have a dilemma," she began, deciding not to act as if she was afraid of their glares, "and I agree with you. Keeping me here until you hear from my father will not work. As you had mentioned, the sheriff will eventually find me, as well as Mr. Buchanan."

Joe traded worried glances with the other two.

"Anyway," she continued, "here is what I propose. You release me and I shall get you the money you so desperately seek. However, I won't

be able to get you the five thousand dollars. Instead, I shall pay you one thousand.” She decided to start out low and make it sound as though she couldn’t get her hands on the rest of the money. “And then,” she looked directly at Joe, “you and your friends can be on your way out of town before the sheriff finds you.”

One of the men who appeared to be around her age, scratched his bushy chin. “What if the schoolteacher finds ya first?”

She shrugged. “If we keep on talking, he will find me, but if you let me go, I can get you the money.”

Once more, the three exchanged glances. Two out of the three nodded as if they agreed with her proposal, but Joe’s scowl told her he was going to fight her all the way.



DARBY HELD UP HIS SLINGSHOT for Morgan to see, then tucked it inside his coat pocket. He slid on his mittens and cap. He looked like a little snowman, but there wasn’t that much snow on the ground.

Morgan needed to hurry before the sun fully set. It would be almost impossible to search for her in the dark. Even though he hated to admit to his upbringing, it was times like this that he was actually thankful that his father and brother had taught him some of their criminal ways.

“All I want for you to do is to distract them,” Morgan told Darby. “Stay out of the way. They have guns.”

“But my slingshot is faster than their guns. I made it myself.” Darby grinned with pride.

“These hoodlums are not very bright, and I don’t trust foolish men with guns.”

“Then that makes my job so much easier.” Darby patted his coat pocket where the slingshot was. “They won’t know what hit them in the head until it’s too late.”

Morgan had followed the wagon's tracks up toward the mountains, which led to the same barn where he would have taken Jessie for dinner this evening. He thanked the Lord for guiding him here.

"Look." Darby pointed toward the barn. "There is smoke."

"We need to get closer, but please, be as quiet as you can," Morgan said.

Darby's little legs waddled to keep up with Morgan's large steps. He had to slow down a few times to make sure he wouldn't lose his friend.

As they neared the barn, Morgan stopped. There was a window on the east side of the structure. He needed to get closer and peek inside.

"You stay here," Morgan instructed. "I'll be by that window. I'll wave for you to come when the coast is clear."

The cold air had turned Darby's cheeks bright red. "I'll keep an eye on you."

Morgan hurried closer to the barn. The horse's tracks were fresher here, as were footprints in the snow.

He pressed himself up against the side of the structure, close to the window. Men's voices came from inside, so he peeked through the window. Jessie sat on a chair in the middle of the room. His heart leapt with joy knowing she was safe.

Morgan wrapped his fingers tightly around his pistol. He took a few breaths. He hadn't really thought this through. Should he burst inside and start shooting? There were three of them and only one of him. Yes, he was fast with the gun, and if he caught them off guard, he would most likely take down two of them right away.

The voices from inside were clearer now. Poor Jessie's voice trembled when she talked, even though she tried to remain strong. This was all Morgan's fault, and he would save her, even if it meant taking a bullet.

"Although your idea has merit," Joe said, looking at Jessie. "Ye weren't exactly the person we originally set out to take."

She shook her head. "Then who did you plan to take?"

"Bill Spencer, yer brother."

She blinked with wide eyes. "Billy? But why would you want to take a child?"

Joe moved closer to her and folded his arms. "Is he or is he not the owner of the goldmine?"

Morgan frowned. *A goldmine?*

Jessie gasped. "How do you know about the goldmine?"

"I'm assumin'," Joe continued, "that yer brother really isn't the owner."

She scowled. "No. I am."

Shock shook through Morgan and his head whirled with confusion. What was she talking about? Obviously, she was still trying to protect her brother.

"But ye used his name, right?" Joe asked.

She nodded. "It's unheard of for a woman to own anything of importance, but things will change. Mark my words."

Morgan moaned. What was she trying to do? Get herself killed?

"But until now," Joe snapped, "ye'll do as I say."

"What do you want?" She lifted her chin stubbornly.

"The goldmine, of course."

Jessie rolled her eyes. "Well, we can't exactly conduct business here, now can we?"

Suddenly, a scratching sound came from the barn door. All heads turned to the door and pistols were drawn. Another few seconds later, came a dog's whine.

"What's that?" Joe asked.

"I think there's a dog out there," Garrett mumbled in a low voice.

Joe elbowed the other man in the arm. "I can hear that, but why is there a dog out there?"

"Do ya think he's hungry?"

Joe growled and glared at his friend. "I don't care if he's hungry or not. The point is, there shouldn't be a dog scratchin' at our door."

Garrett huffed and turned to face his partner. “And why not? If’n I was a hungry dog, I’d try to find someone to feed me.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” Joe’s voice lifted in irritation. “I don’t care if yer hungry or if yer a dog. That’s not the issue here.”

Jessie couldn’t endure these three idiots any longer. How had they made it so far in their lives without using their brains? “If you’re so worried about the animal, why don’t you just open the door and shoo him away?”

The beefier man pointed to the door. “Garrett, open the door.”

“Fine.” He marched toward the door with the other two close behind.

Garrett took a few steps toward the door, and Morgan held his breath. The men couldn’t know he and Darby were here. But then, where could they hide now? Snowflakes were falling again, and their footprints would be noticeable. There was definitely going to be a gunfight tonight. Morgan prayed he and Jessie came out the winners.

As Garret unhooked the latch and pulled the door open, Morgan held his breath as his heartbeat hammered. He’d never had to injure or kill a man to protect himself or those he loved, but he would do that tonight. In just a short time, Jessie Spencer had grown on him, and he wanted her in his life if she would allow it. He would do anything to protect her.

When Garrett pulled open the front door, all guns pointed to the opening. No one was there. Suddenly, something white flew through the air, and smacked Garrett right in the forehead. Snow dripped down his face as he let out a scream.

Another snowball sailed in, smacking him again. This one left a cut against Garrett’s nose. When the snowball splattered to the floor, a rock rolled out of it.

Confused, Morgan moved away from the window and glanced at the spot where Darby was hiding. A grin stretched across Morgan’s face. Although Darby didn’t follow orders well, the man had picked the

perfect time to come to the rescue. Morgan would hug his friend later, but now, Jessie needed saving.

As he watched the snowballs smacking the outlaws, he waited for the right moment to take over and show these men that they made a terrible mistake by messing with Morgan and Darby.

“What-the—” Garrett cried out.

Joe pushed Garrett away from the door, with his gun pointed out. Garrett held his bloody nose.

“Who’s out there?” Joe yelled. “Show yourself or I’ll—” His words were cut off. A marble sized rock slammed directly into Joe’s wrist that held the gun, making it fall to the ground.

Another rock flew low, hitting him just below the kneecap. The *thunk* of the hit even made Morgan cringe. Joe side-hopped away from the barn’s opened doorway.

Morgan knew this was the moment he’d make an appearance. He moved away from the window and holding his gun high, rushed into the barn. He aimed at Joe lying on the ground and shot his knee, bringing forth a cry of pain. Morgan turned and aimed at the man who stood in shock, shooting the gun out of his hand. Blood spilled from the wound, and the man cradled his injury against his chest.

When Morgan turned to Garrett, the man was still distracted with the bloody nose, so he wouldn’t worry about that outlaw.

“Darby, come help,” Morgan called to his friend as he gathered the men’s fallen guns.

“Jessie?” Morgan looked her way. “Are you all right?”

“I’m good!” Her sweet voice warmed his heart. “Can’t say too much for the others.”

Darby hurried inside and to the chair where Jessie was tied up. The disabled man untied the ropes from her wrists and ankles. She watched Morgan the whole time. He was relieved that nothing had happened to her.

“Bring me the ropes,” Morgan told Jessie.

She brought them over and tied up the three men.

“I told you I’d watch your back.” Darby grinned widely.

Morgan smiled. “You did well, my friend. Thank you.” Morgan handed Jessie one of the guns. “Let’s get these worthless men on the wagon. I’m taking them to the sheriff.”

Jessie threw her arms around Morgan and buried her face in his chest. A small sob emitted from her throat. Morgan held her close and kissed the top of her head.

“Thank you for coming for me,” she said. “I hoped it would be you to save me.”

“How could I not? You have crawled inside my heart and I don’t want to lose you.”

She tilted her head and looked into his eyes. A smile stretched across her face. “How amazing because I feel the same way.”

He arched an eyebrow. “So, you have a goldmine, huh?”

Jessie pulled out of his arms. She straightened her shoulders, looking him in the eye. “I do, even if I had to use my brother’s name to get it, but I’ll tell you about that later. Right now, there is something more important that I need your help with.” She inhaled deeply. “My father has been kidnapped. I thought maybe these men were the ones who took him, but they aren’t. They were solely after my goldmine.” She blinked as her eyes watered.

Frowning, Morgan wrapped an arm around her as he helped her into the wagon. “Then we will search for your father and not stop until he’s found.”

She nodded as her expression changed to gratitude. “Take me back home and I’ll tell you everything.”

“Jessie, I want you to trust me.”

She nodded. “I will, I promise.”



TWELVE



Jessie stood behind Morgan as he sat at her father's desk. She twisted her hands together, praying that Morgan would be able to help find her father. As Morgan carefully studied the two letters that she had been sent in regards to her father's kidnapping, Mr. Hobbs brought in some warm drinks for everyone. Darby sat by the fireplace, warming his feet, and eating the cold chicken that he'd made earlier.

"These missives were written by two different people," Morgan said.

Jessie leaned closer to Morgan, looking over his broad shoulder at the notes in his hands. "How can you tell?"

"In the first note, they don't want to hurt him. It sounds very apologetic, like they didn't want to do it, but they had to."

Confusion filled Jessie and she shook her head. "If they didn't want to kidnap him, then why did they do it?"

Morgan turned his head and glanced at her. "A man in your father's position probably has many enemies. Maybe they thought they could force him to do something by kidnapping him." He pointed to the second note. "This note is angry. It is very aggressive. They are watching you. Apparently, you've done something that has made them want to kill your father. I don't think they've done it yet." Morgan shrugged. "This makes me think that the kidnappers didn't get what they wanted, so that's why they are being forceful." He paused as his eyes narrowed. "But that doesn't make much sense, either. Why send you the threatening note if your father isn't doing what they want? I just don't understand."

“So, you think two people have kidnapped him?”

“I do.” He took her hand and tenderly stroked her fingers as he pulled her around to sit on the edge of the desk. “But if they kidnapped him for money, why haven’t they sent you a ransom note?”

“I’ve been waiting, and nothing has been delivered. I hope you are right and that he is still alive. I’ve been running his business without him, even though his associates don’t have the slightest clue to what I’ve done. Father has investments in the railroad and he still needs to finalize a few more documents before handing off these investments to me.”

Morgan leaned back in his chair, linking his fingers across his chest. “My father was a thief when I was young. When Father’s gang kidnapped people, they always asked for a ransom within twenty-four hours. My father would use me to deliver the notes.” He let out a sigh. “I am ashamed to admit that, and I didn’t want you to know and think any less of me.”

Jessie’s heart softened for this incredibly wonderful man. “Morgan, you were just a child. I’m sure you didn’t know any better.” Jessie leaned over and took his hands in hers again.

“After my mother took me and left, I turned my father in.” He shrugged. “Years later, I’d heard that he and my brother had been shot. But I have never regretted turning him in.”

“You did the right thing.” Jessie pulled his hands up to her lips and kissed them. Her chest tightened, knowing he would always have terrible memories. “My father has always been absent. We didn’t get along very well when I was young, and after my mother died, Father became worse. He hired men to spy on me just so Father would know if I was ruining the family’s good name. I felt like a prisoner.” She shrugged. “But even though we don’t always see eye-to-eye, I would give anything to have him back.”

“And we will get him back. I promise.” Morgan frowned. “I’m sorry our outing was ruined.”

"We'll plan another one." Jessie grinned. "But if you must know, I don't care where we go. I enjoy being with you."

"I agree. I've cherished getting to know you better. I feel like we've grown close."

"We have."

He winked at her. "It's getting late. Darby and I need to return home. I was thinking that tomorrow we could go to your father's office and see what appointments he had the day he was kidnapped. Perhaps that might give us a starting point to start our search."

Jessie sighed heavily. "That's a splendid idea. His appointment book should still be in his office at City Hall." Jessie stood, pulling him with her. "We will go in the morning."

Her thoughts turned to being in the house all by herself once Morgan left. Although Hobbs and a few servants were here with Jessie and her brother, she would feel safer with Morgan around. Especially, since she feared Mr. Prescott hadn't gotten her message yesterday about not wanting to be with him.

"Morgan, there are extra rooms in the house if you and Darby would like to stay."

Morgan stepped closer, loosely circling his arms around her waist. "Do you want me to stay?"

"I do. Your presence here is comforting. I feel safe when you are near."

"I feel safe with you, too." His eyes grew a darker and more desirable brown, and his face relaxed, giving him a more sensual look. His lips tempted her. She wanted to feel them against hers again, but not with Darby in the room, and especially not when her servants were still awake.

"Then Darby and I will stay here," Morgan answered huskily.

Sleeping tonight would be difficult, knowing he was so close.



THE NEXT MORNING, JESSIE and Morgan searched her father's office for any clues of his whereabouts. As suspected, the office had been untouched for two months, but sadly, there was nothing that gave them an idea as to who had taken her father. She still couldn't understand why someone would kidnap a person that long without wanting a ransom.

Jessie pulled on the desk drawer to open it, but her father had locked it. She grumbled, slapping her hands on the desk. "It's locked."

"Let me have a look." Morgan stepped closer, pulling a black pouch from his coat pocket. Inside was a lockpick. His gaze met hers. "Don't judge, but I learned this from my father."

Jessie smiled. "Why would I judge? I've done things in my life that I wasn't supposed to do. Besides, I'm sure a tool like that comes in handy. I'm sure you've been locked out of the schoolhouse a few times."

Morgan laughed. "How right you are."

Jessie's heart grew, realizing how much she loved hearing his laugh.

He stuck the device inside the lock and twisted it a few times, and then pulled the drawer open. Jessie stood to the side of him looking at the contents of the desk. A black notebook was neatly placed in the corner. She reached for that first.

"This is his appointment book." She flipped the pages.

"Who did he see on the day he went missing?"

"The last entry was August 19th, 2:00 p.m., tea with Camilla Rogers and Judith Fillmore. At 4:00 p.m., he had an appointment to approve a business license for Jerome Tidwell." Jessie put the book down on the desk. "Nothing more."

"Let's go speak with Mr. Tidwell. His daughter is in my class, and I know where they live. He would have been the last person to see your father." Morgan closed the drawer. "Bring the book. There might be something more on the inside."

Jessie nodded and followed Morgan out of her father's office. Once outside, a strange feeling came over her. This wasn't the first time she

felt as though someone was watching her. But with her father gone, was his men still spying on her?

She glanced up and down the street. Nobody looked at her as if they were watching her, so she brushed off the feeling.

Morgan helped her into the buggy, then he slid in beside her. Taking the reins, he put the buggy into motion. She could feel his stare on her so she met his gaze.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked.

He chuckled. “I can’t stop thinking about the goldmine you own.”

“Are you upset that I own a business because I’m a woman?”

“Not at all. I think it’s marvelous. It’s a brave thing to do in this uncertain world.”

Could her heart soften anymore? This man was so compassionate and understanding. How did she get so lucky to find someone like him? “Then why are you watching me?”

“When I came to pick you up last night, Hobbs said you were talking to another man. He said you were going to the opera with him. I’m just confused as to why you would make two appointments?”

Jessie placed her hand on his. “I wasn’t going with Mr. Prescott. He is my father’s accountant and has been sweet on me for some time, although I haven’t encouraged it. Mr. Prescott must have figured that he could control me since Father wasn’t around.”

“Then you have no feelings for him?”

“No.” Jessie snuggled against his arm. “My heart is elsewhere.”

“Oh?” His voice raised. “And who might that lucky man be?”

“I think you know him. He’s the town’s schoolteacher.”

Morgan caressed her cheek. “I know him well, and I can promise you that he feels the same way.”

Jessie grinned. “Thank you for helping me today.”

“And thank you for trusting me.”

They stopped at a house not too far from the schoolhouse. It was the Tidwell's residence. Today was Saturday, so somebody should be home.

Morgan knocked on the door. A man wearing overalls opened the door. A bushy beard covered the bottom half of his face.

"Mr. Buchanan, what brings you here?" Mr. Tidwell asked. "Did Melissa forget to do her homework?"

"Oh, no, it's not about school. The mayor's daughter has a question, though." Morgan gave her a nod to take over.

Jessie stepped closer to the door. "When you visited my father two months ago, did he seem well? Did he act as if he was nervous or out of sorts?"

"I'm sorry," Mr. Tidwell replied. "I never met with him. I showed up at his office and he wasn't there. No one saw him return. I came back a day later and was told he was out of town. Has he returned? I need to update my business license."

Jessie looked up at Morgan. Discouragement covered his face, which matched her defeated emotion. At least they knew that the time he went missing was before four o'clock. Someone had to see him. He couldn't just disappear. Maybe he was dead.



THIRTEEN



Jessie fought back tears as she rode next to Morgan in the buggy. Although she feared the worst, there was still one more person they needed to talk with. Her father's appointment before Mr. Tidwell was Camilla Rogers, but Jessie didn't understand why a librarian would want to meet with the mayor. Because she had known about her father's spies, she suspected he was paying Camilla to watch Jessie. It would crush her if she discovered that was why her friend had an appointment with her father.

"I will need to go speak to Camilla alone," Jessie told Morgan. "She is strong spoken on the women's rights movement, and she doesn't trust men. I know she won't open up if you are with me."

Morgan slowed the horse and turned to look at Jessie. He frowned. "Although I understand, I don't want you to go alone. So, will you mind if I wait outside for you?" He pointed up the street. "I won't be far, but far enough that she doesn't see me."

She stroked Morgan's muscular arm. "I'm sure everything is fine."

He stopped the buggy and assisted Jessie out. Once she walked toward her friend's house, Morgan drove the buggy up the street and stopped.

Jessie knocked on Camilla's front door. She waited, but no one answered. The library wasn't open on Saturdays, which is why Jessie figured her friend would be at home.

She stepped off the step and wandered to the back of the house, wondering if Camilla was tending to her farm animals. Once again, Camilla wasn't there.

Jessie went to the back door. As she placed her hand on the door to knock, the door pushed open. She poked her head inside the house.

“Camilla? It’s Jessie.” She listened. The house was empty. Maybe she was at the library doing some cleaning. Jessie turned to leave, but the loud banging sound coming from the cellar made her stop.

Jessie’s heart jumped to her throat. Perhaps her friend was injured and needed her help. Without another thought, Jessie hurried inside and down to the cellar door.

She pulled on the cellar doors and opened them. The room was dark, but today’s sunlight provided the much needed light to enter.

“Camilla?” she called down the stairs.

A muffled sound followed by chair legs scraping across the floor resonated from below.

“Who’s there?” she called down.

The scraping became louder, until finally she saw a person’s foot wiggling in the beam of light. Jessie quickly descended the stairs. Once her vision adjusted to the darkness, she saw...

“Father!” Jessie gasped and rushed to him, throwing her arms around his shoulders. Tears of joy filled her eyes and her body shook from the sobs wrenching from her throat.

A handkerchief was wrapped tightly around his mouth, so Jessie quickly loosened it.

“Praise the Lord,” her father cried out. “My prayers have been answered.”

“Father.” She kissed his cheeks, then fumbled to untie the ropes. “What’s going on?”

“Mrs. Rogers and Mrs. Fillmore drugged me and are holding me hostage.” Once the ropes dropped to the floor, her father rubbed his hands together.

“Whatever for?” Jessie helped her father stand.

"The suffrage reformation bill is planning on being signed in November. They knew I was against it and that I was planning on delaying it. With me out of the way, the bill would go through."

Jessie gasped. "They went to all this trouble for that? Oh, Father, I'm so sorry this happened. They shouldn't have kidnapped you to get their voices heard. There are other ways around this issue."

"Well, those women will never get my vote now. Before this incident, I had briefly thought of signing, but now..." He shook his head. "I will not allow women like them to have a say in anything."

Jessie's chest tightened. She must change his mind, especially because this was something she strongly believe in.

She placed her hand on his arm, frowning as they carefully moved up the stairs. Her father would certainly try to stop the bill from passing. When they reached the top of the stairs, the bright sun blinded them.

"Where am I, anyway?" he snapped.

"This is Mrs. Rogers' home."

"Where are those awful women?" he grumbled. "I need to get to the sheriff and have him arrest them immediately."

"Father." Jessie stopped as they reached the cool outdoors. "I need you to listen to me... *really* listen. I know our communication hasn't been the best since Mother died, but Father, I need you to hear what I have to say. Listen with your heart, please."

Panic filled her father's expression. "What's happened? Is Billy all right?"

"Billy is fine, but I need to tell you something." She took a deep breath for courage. "Not every woman is like Mrs. Rogers and Mrs. Fillmore. They were going about this the wrong way. Women *need* to be included, Father. We need men to listen to us and trust our opinions. There are so many women in the world that can help influence others. We can help make sure the right men are running our country. We can help take the load off our husbands and fathers by working and *own-*

ing our own businesses. You've taught me to be smart with my money, whether you realize it or not. And I'm not the only woman who feels this way."

His brow creased. "But all this responsibility will go to their heads. The world will be filled with gossip and crocheted doilies everywhere."

Jessie laughed lightly. "I'm sure men gossip, too. I know they lie, just like women do." She touched his arm again. "Father, I've bought a goldmine."

His eyebrows raised. "How can you do that? You're a *woman*."

Irritation grew inside her, but she tried to keep calm and think of how to explain it to a hard-headed man.

"Yes, I'm a woman, but I'm also a person who has my own mind and opinions. I used Billy's name on the deed to buy stocks into the goldmine because I didn't want to have to be dependent upon you for everything. But Father, I can help others. My mine is producing lots of gold, and in a few months, you'll allow me to manage the railroad certificates. Not only that, in your absence, I've been dealing with your associates, and I know what I'm doing. Many women want the chance to feel important as I do. All it takes is your signature on—"

"On this prenuptial agreement."

The voice of Mr. Prescott interrupted her speaking, and she spun toward him. Why hadn't she seen him sneak toward them? She opened her mouth to chastise him and tell him to leave, but the gun in his hand as he aimed it toward her father, stopped her words.

Her father gasped. "Matthew, what is the meaning of this?" He pointed toward the weapon. "And put down that gun before someone gets hurt."

"No, Mayor. This time you will listen to me." Mr. Prescott's eyes grew dark with anger as he spoke. "You will sign this prenuptial agreement, allowing me to wed Jessie and be in charge of the railroad stocks. You will *not* sign the reform bill for the suffrage, because women should not have this type of power. That belongs to men only."

Jessie hooked her arm around her father's arm, helping him to be strong since he was probably weak from being locked up for two months. There was no way he could fight Mr. Prescott at this moment. Then again, she couldn't either since the man had a gun.

"And if I don't?" her father huffed.

"Then I will kill you." Matthew grinned. "And your railroad stocks will come to me."

Her father scowled. "No. They would go to Billy."

"Not if he's dead, too."

Panic tightened in Jessie's throat as she bravely stepped forward. "I'll never marry you, Mr. Prescott. You are a controlling man, and I won't have that in my life." She lifted her chin stubbornly. "Mr. Prescott, I don't want you as my father's accountant. You're fired."

Matthew laughed. "What gives you that authority?"

"I do," her father said decisively. "I've been training her to handle my business affairs for when I need to travel, and I trust her judgment."

Matthew withdrew papers from his coat pocket and shoved them against the mayor's chest. "Sign these now!"

Her father pushed the papers away and shook his head. "If you kill me, my daughter gets nothing. Only I can release the stocks in her name."

Mr. Prescott shrugged. "Then I'll forge your name. I don't need you."

Jessie watched in horror as his finger gently pushed on the trigger. A gunshot blast ripped through the air. Her heart pounded out of control, and she could feel herself swooning, even as she fought it. Tears streamed down her face as she held onto her father, hoping to catch his fall.



ONE THING THAT MORGAN prided himself on was being a good shot, which was another thing he learned from his good-for-nothing father. Thankfully, it had saved his life more than once, and he planned on using it to help save others that he loved.

The color in Mr. Prescott's face drained, and he grasped his right hand that once held his pistol. The bullet from Morgan's pistol pierced right through the man's hand, causing him to drop his gun on the ground. Morgan didn't like outlaws, but he wouldn't tolerate businessmen who turned greedy like Mr. Prescott.

Jessie picked up Mr. Prescott's pistol and pointed it toward the accountant. The man's eyes rolled back into his head, and he collapsed to the ground. Morgan grinned, loving that he had made a man swoon from the sight of his own blood.

"Morgan," Jessie called out and she ran to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "You saved the day, again."

He hugged her tightly. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, but we need to get Father to the doctor's office." She stepped back and to her father, linking her arm around his. "He's weak from being in Camilla's cellar for two months."

Morgan moved to the mayor and took his other arm, holding him steady. "Jessie, I'll take your father to the buggy, but I need you to find some rope to tie up Mr. Prescott."

"There is rope in the cellar." She nodded.

She darted back toward the house as Morgan walked with the mayor toward the vehicle.

"Are you a schoolteacher or a gunfighter?" the mayor asked.

Morgan smiled. "I am the schoolteacher, but I was taught how to shoot."

"Thank you, for saving me and my daughter."

"I was happy to help. I protect those I care deeply about."

The mayor studied Morgan's face a bit longer, and then he grinned. "I understand completely. And you have my approval to court my daughter."



EPILOGUE



A band played and women cheered as a banner was unveiled. November 7, 1893, Colorado became the second American state to grant women's suffrage, and allow women to vote in the same manner as men.

Happiness burst in Jessie's chest. She couldn't believe this day was finally here. Because of what she'd told her father, he had signed the bill. She'd never been more proud as he stood next to the governor of Denver and shook hands with him.

Women all over burst out singing an anthem of sorts. Jessie wanted to join in, but she hadn't attended many meetings to learn the songs well enough. The group of ladies Jessie had mingled with over the past month were in complete shock knowing that Camilla and Judith had kidnapped the mayor just to stop him from signing the bill. The women were now in jail and would be punished for their crime.

Mr. Prescott was also arrested and thrown into jail—with a bandaged hand, of course. The doctor said that Mr. Prescott would never have use of that hand again. Jessie couldn't believe the accountant hadn't thought of his actions and what it might cost him. Then again, the imbecile couldn't understand why she would never love him.

A strong, warm arm slid around her waist. She was so caught up in this glorious moment that would go down in history, she almost forgot who was with her. Morgan stood behind her, grinning down at her. She leaned against him and sighed heavily.

"What's the first thing you are going to do as a free woman, my darling Jessie?" he whispered into her ear.

She looked over her shoulder at him. His dark eyes were hypnotizing to look into. "I'm going to put my name on my goldmine."

"I'm sorry I'm not wealthy," he said. "But I am a hard worker."

Confused at his words, she turned toward him more. "Does it bother you that I have a lot of money?"

"It doesn't bother me. My feelings for you wouldn't change even if you were as poor as a church mouse. But I pray you don't think any less of me because I'm a schoolteacher."

"I've never thought you were less of a man because of your occupation. You are wonderful just the way you are." She slowly slid the palm of her hand across his chest. "Exactly what kind of feelings do you have for me?"

Morgan moved them away from the crowd until their conversation was more private. They stopped by the frozen water fountain across the street from City Hall. It was nice to be somewhere a bit quieter.

He caressed her cheek. "From the moment you almost ran me over with your horse, I've known that we were meant to be together."

"You are a fibber." Jessie laughed. "You didn't like me, one bit."

"Fine. I'll rephrase that." Morgan cupped the side of her face. "Since you stepped foot into my classroom, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. Your face is the first thing that pops into my head when I wake up in the morning, and it is what I see before drifting off to sleep. You occupy my dreams, Jessie, but I don't want you to just be in my dreams. I want you to be with me, always. I love you, Jessie Spencer. Will you marry me?"

Jessie's heartbeat quickened with excitement, more so than when the vote came through not too long ago. This was really happening. For years, she thought she had passed up the opportunity for marriage. No one wanted to get to know the real her. No one, except Morgan Buchanan.

She wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled his face closer to hers.

“I love you, Morgan.” Jessie pressed against him, stood on her tiptoes, and met his lips with hers. Warmth spread all over her body as they enjoyed their passionate kiss. The world around them seemed to disappear.

Morgan’s strong arms lifted her and swung her around, keeping his lips on hers. He then withdrew slightly. He gazed sweetly into her eyes.

“Does that mean you will marry me?” he asked.

“Yes, but I have one stipulation.” Jessie smiled.

“What is that, my love?”

“If teaching is what you love, I don’t want you to quit. I want you to do whatever makes you feel successful, and I will support you in whatever you decide to do.”

His expression softened as he tightened his arms around her waist. “Do you know how lucky I am to have fallen in love with such a wonderful woman?”

Her heartbeat skipped. “I think that way every time I look at you.”

“I love being a teacher, and as long as you’re happy, I’m happy.”

“You make me happy, Morgan Buchanan, and becoming your wife will only make my life better.” She paused and grinned. “As long as we have children, of course.”

He wagged his eyebrows. “And I promise we’ll get started on that as soon as we exchange vows.”

She relaxed in his arms. “Hopefully, Father will get us married within the week, or we might have to elope.”

He laughed loudly. “I’ll make sure we’re married by the end of the week.”

As she kissed this incredible man again, she didn’t know which made her happier—that she was finally given the same rights as men, or being in love. But the answer was easy. Morgan was her true happiness.





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Author's Bio



Marie Higgins, a multi-award-winning, best-selling author, crafts clean romance novels that melt hearts and keep readers falling in love. Since 2010, she's published over 100 captivating stories, spanning mystery, suspense, humor, time-travel, and paranormal genres, all while excelling in historical romance. Dubbed the "Queen of Tease" by her fans, Marie is known for her twists and unexpected endings.

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