

BOOK 5
SONS OF A GUN
series

*A Lost
Love's Legacy*

BRENDA SINCLAIR

A LOST LOVE'S LEGACY

SONS OF A GUN SERIES

BOOK 5

Brenda Sinclair

Kindle Edition

ISBN 978-1-926474-25-0

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All characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names.

While reading her grandmother's diary, Rosemary Dalton discovers a skeleton in her ancestral closet. But during a trip to her grandfather's hometown, Rosie suspects her grandmother kept an important secret from her family. When Rosie's mother threatens to destroy her future, Rosie enlists the help of the handsome young rancher who befriends her, hoping they can prevent a horrible misjustice.

Michael McLennon is torn between acknowledging his growing feelings for sweet, kind-hearted Rosie and joining his family against her greedy mother who refuses to consider anyone's opinion except her own. Fate creates an unexpected situation which may assist the McLennon family in fighting the menace threatening the future of every McLennon living on the Double M Ranch. While hoping to win Rosie's heart, Michael also vows to save the family legacy.

Will Michael and Rosie ensure the truth prevails? Or could a shattered love from generations past tear them apart forever?

DEDICATION

To my family and friends who continue to support my writing endeavors,
even when my self-imposed deadlines interfere with family events.
Thanks for your understanding. I love you all.

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Chapter 1

Milestone, Montana
May 1889

Rosemary Dalton feared her entire life was comprised of one huge lie.

She clasped her recently deceased grandmother's leather-bound diary in her gloved hands. After discovering a secret within these yellowed pages, she'd embarked upon this trip, hoping the skeleton in her ancestral closet would be willing to tell his story. Her mind raced with questions, and she might not sleep a wink until she learned more. If she accomplished nothing else during this trip, she was determined to meet Michael Miller from the Double M Ranch.

She gazed through the stagecoach's small window, as the rig rumbled into the dusty frontier town representing the final leg of her journey. She gazed at the buildings on Main Street, many of them unpainted and a few looking rather decrepit. Growing up privileged and sheltered within the safety and security of a private estate on the outskirts of Boston, she never imagined such primitive towns existed. She wished she could take the time to jot anecdotes on her observations in her notebook. What a marvelous story she could tell. But who would read it?

The conveyance jostled to a halt outside a weathered wooden building with the large MILESTONE GENERAL STORE sign painted in red lettering on the front. A few moments later, the gray-haired driver yanked open the door and extended an age-spotted hand to assist her exit.

"Thank you, sir." Rosie stepped onto the wide wooden boardwalk and shook out her skirts. Her navy velvet traveling suit was wrinkled and dusty beyond belief, and she straightened her feathered hat which hadn't fared much better throughout the journey. The two other passengers returning home after a brief stay in Butte followed behind her. Keeping the purpose of her trip to herself, she'd nonetheless befriended the gregarious locals and enjoyed their company.

Mr. Watson, the well-dressed local manager of the First National Bank, touched the brim of his bowler. "It was a pleasure meeting you, Miss

Dalton.”

“You, too.” She smiled at him.

“Go inside, Rosie, and Ray Cochrane will lend you a hand,” Mrs. Watson instructed her. “And I do hope you enjoy your stay in Milestone.”

“Thank you. I enjoyed making your acquaintance, Nancy. And I’m certain we’ll cross paths again while I’m in town.” She waved as the couple strolled down the sidewalk.

Rosie stepped through the general store’s front door and gazed at the rows of shelves filled with everything imaginable and all contained within the four walls. Apparently, the concept of specialty shops had not yet taken hold in the far reaches of Montana. A middle-aged man stood behind the counter. He peeked over wire-rimmed spectacles while wiping his hands on his shopkeeper’s apron, and then he smiled broadly.

“Good afternoon. I’m Ray. How can I help you, miss?”

“I’m Miss Rosie Dalton. From Boston,” she introduced herself using the moniker she preferred. The name her beloved grandmother had called her.

“Miss Dalton, I hope you enjoy your stay in Milestone.”

“Thank you. Would you consider the Milestone Hotel across the street a reputable establishment?” Rosie had read the sign on the building as the stagecoach rumbled down Main Street, the enterprise kitty-corner to the store and easily within walking distance.

Ray chuckled. “I surely suppose it is. Farley Johnson is the owner and a stickler for propriety. Of course, it’s the only hotel in town.”

Rosie gaped. Only one hotel? That bit of information certainly limited her options.

Ray pointed outside. “If you brought luggage with you, I could have it delivered to the hotel?”

“Yes, thank you for the offer. There are two trunks,” Rosie confirmed. “Once I’m settled in, I’ll send word to have them sent over.”

“Can do. Visiting anyone in particular?”

Rosie stared at the man, shocked by his blatant curiosity. Should she answer him or was her business in town none of his concern? She hadn’t any notion what would be proper in a small town like Milestone. Having chatted up several ladies during her journey, she’d been informed certain proprieties were relaxed in the west in comparison to her strict eastern upbringing. Of course, these proprieties hadn’t been spelled out in any

detail, and she hadn't thought to request clarification from Mr. and Mrs. Watson. She decided to err on the side of caution and ignore his question.

"I'll see myself to the hotel now. It's been a pleasure meeting you." Rosie offered him a smile and exited his store.

She crossed the dirt-packed, slightly rutted street and strode toward the prominent two-story building with large red lettering painted on the front stating MILESTONE HOTEL. Arriving a few minutes later, she climbed the trio of curved wooden steps and entered, allowing a moment for her eyes to adjust to the interior. Dark furnishing, heavy draperies on the rectangular windows and the enormous gas chandelier overhead welcomed her. Ahead stood a check-in area. Her footsteps echoed as she strode across the polished plank floor. Despite a sudden case of nerves, she approached the skinny, bespectacled clerk standing behind the six-foot-long mahogany desk. A leather-bound registry lay open with a quill pen in the crease and ink pot nearby.

She smiled. "How do you do?"

"I'm well, thank you, ma'am." The clerk returned her smile and pushed the register toward her. "Are you waiting for the rest of your party to arrive?"

Rosie shook her head and extended her hand toward the pen. "No, there's just me."

The fellow's mouth dropped open and he yanked the register out of her reach. "Then I cannot provide you with a room. I apologize, but it's the hotel's policy. No rooms will be rented to single young women."

"But I require a place to stay while I'm in town."

The fellow pursed his lips. "Then I suggest you make alternate arrangements."

"But I only require the room for one night. Tomorrow morning, I'll be making arrangements to travel to the Double M Ranch. I'm hoping the owner will invite me to lodge there for the duration of my stay in Milestone," Rosie explained.

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a tall young man dressed in western clothing and a hat which she'd learned during her travels was called a Stetson. The fellow was standing in the doorway of what appeared to be the hotel's dining room. He must truly be a real cowboy, she reasoned, gaping at the hat, denim trousers, cotton shirt, vest, and polished boots. And

if all cowboys were this good-looking, she should truly consider extending her stay in Montana.

Her breath caught when he suddenly strode toward her, his boots tapping out a rhythm on the plank floor. "Did you mention the Double M, ma'am?"

"Yes... yes, I did," she stammered, mesmerized by the bluest eyes she'd ever seen.

The handsome cowboy stood, hands on hips, unabashedly examining her from the feathered hat atop her head to her fashionable boots. Of course, she'd just done the same to him and appearing miffed at his perusal of her person seemed rather unfair.

"What business do you have with the Double M?" he demanded.

His question sounded extremely rude, but perhaps bluntness was one of the more lax proprieties she'd been warned about. "I rather doubt that is any of your concern," she blurted without thinking.

"Suit yourself." He shrugged and wandered out of the hotel.

Rosie returned her attention to the hotel clerk. "Now, where was I?"

The clerk shook his head. "Big mistake," he muttered.

"Why would you say that?"

"Because I am not renting you a room, and that fellow would have provided you a complimentary ride to the Double M Ranch," he explained, heaving a sigh.

"Him?"

"Michael lives on the Double M."

Rosie considered her options for a moment, hoisted her skirts, and rushed out of the hotel. Her head pivoted while she searched up and down the street, finally spotting the fellow climbing onto the seat of a wagon. "Sir, wait a minute, please," she called, waving frantically and then hurrying toward him in a most unladylike manner with her skirts hiked above her ankles. "Wait. Oh, please, wait."

The fellow settled onto the wagon seat and frowned as she approached. "And what does the huffy newcomer in town want now?"

"I'm sorry for my rudeness before. I cannot apologize enough." She released the grip on her skirts and extended her hand. "I'm Rosie Dalton and I would appreciate a ride to the Double M, please."

"Why?"

"Because the clerk told me you live there."

“No. Why do you want to travel to the ranch?” He sat stone-faced while he spoke.

“I have a question or two for the owner. And the hotel doesn’t have a room for me to rent.”

“Oh, he *has* a room. But he won’t rent rooms to single women traveling alone. Usually only ladies of questionable character do so.”

Rosie fumed inwardly at the erroneous supposition of her character, all the while feeling herself blushing profusely.

“I suppose you can stay at the ranch. Where’s your bag?” The fellow peeked around her at the sidewalk.

“My trunks remain at the general store until I send word to deliver them.”

His one eyebrow rose. “Trunks?”

Rosie held her head high. “I’m not leaving until I learn who I am.”

The cowboy whistled slow and low. “I’m sorry about that, ma’am. Never met anyone with amnesia before. Must be a mite troubling.”

“Oh. That’s not the problem.” Rosie shook her head. “I know my name. I don’t know my grandfather. He owns the Double M Ranch.”

“Grandfather?” The man’s face paled. “You think you’re related to my pa?”

Could they be related? Rosie considered he had reason to be concerned, considering how he’d been ogling her from head to toe a few minutes ago. “I don’t know. Who is your father?”

“A. J. McLennon.”

She blew out her breath. Thank goodness for that. “I am *not* your relation. My grandfather is Michael Miller, the owner of the Double M Ranch.” Her first question for Mr. Miller would be, what kind of man would leave a pregnant young lady to face certain disgrace and the challenges of motherhood alone?

The cowboy reared back as if she’d slapped him. “Then I know for a fact you’re a fraud. Michael Miller didn’t have any children. So there isn’t an ant’s chance in mud that you’re his granddaughter.” Without another word, he gently slapped the reins and the horses moved forward. The annoying fellow drove away, leaving her standing open-mouthed in a cloud of dust.

Rosie stood in shock as the fellow’s words registered in her mind. *Michael Miller didn’t have any children.* Didn’t? That statement could only

mean one thing, and the realization that her grandfather was deceased sent Rosie's emotions into a tailspin. An overwhelming sense of loss stole her breath and she staggered toward the hitching rail and reached out a hand to prevent herself from collapsing on the sidewalk. Her emotional reaction surprised her, considering she'd never known the man. But he'd been her grandfather and she'd entertained such high hopes of meeting him. Now, the one thing she'd looked forward to most during this trip was impossible.

Two women strolled by her, chatting happily while offering her a brief smile.

Rosie blinked back the tears that threatened to embarrass her in public. After a moment, she straightened and took a deep breath. She needed to keep a clear head. If this fellow believed her grandfather hadn't any children, were there other kin in Milestone she might talk to? Perhaps a sibling who'd be willing to shed light on the information contained within the diary entries? Were these McLennon people running the ranch for her grandfather's descendants?

How would she learn the truth about herself now? Had she traveled all this way for nothing? The situation had become much too confusing. She wavered on her feet again, standing on the wooden sidewalk, covered in dust.

Rosie sucked in her breath. "I've never felt so alone in the world," she muttered to herself. And considering her upbringing and childhood that was saying something.

A moment later, she burst into tears.

Chapter 2

Amanda Manning strode down the sidewalk on her way to the general store, hoping to arrive before closing. She clasped a list of required staples in her hand, knowing she would be late making supper for her husband if she didn't hurry. Employed as a town sheriff and keeping the peace in their small community, Sawyer Manning worked as hard as any man, and he deserved his supper on time.

As she approached the general store, she spotted a young woman standing on the sidewalk outside the hotel a short ways up Main Street. Amanda didn't recognize the fashionably dressed lady, but she could be new to town. Without warning, the young woman burst into tears and remained standing there, sobbing uncontrollably.

My goodness, whatever could have happened? Amanda scooted across the street and approached, touching her arm while taking note of her finely tailored traveling suit. She hailed from wealth. Why on earth was she standing in the middle of town, crying her eyes out?

"My name is Amanda Manning. May I help you?"

The girl lifted her head, revealing a tear-stained face beneath her decidedly rumpled feathered hat; some talented milliner's finely crafted creation had seen better days. "I... I... don't know what to do..." she blubbered.

"Has there been an accident?"

She shook her head. "The hotel won't rent me a room. And some horrible man insulted me and then left me standing here."

"Who would do such a thing?"

The woman appeared to search her memory. "I believe his name was Michael McLennon."

Amanda gasped and her hand covered her mouth. "You must be mistaken."

She shook her head again, loosening several strands of hair from the bun at the nape of her neck. "That's what the hotel clerk told me... Michael from the Double M Ranch. And the fellow told me his father was A. J. McLennon."

“I cannot believe Michael would ever do such a thing.”

“He did. And worse.”

“Worse?” Amanda’s question erupted from her mouth in a squeak. What on earth was going on?

The tears continued streaming down her cheeks while she replied, “He called me a... a liar... and I don’t know what to do. The hotel... won’t rent me a room... because I arrived in town alone. The man at the desk mistakenly believes I’m... I can’t voice the horrid word aloud.”

Amanda caught her meaning, knowing the hotel’s strict policies surrounding all proprieties. She reached for the woman’s hand. “You’d best come along with me...” She met her eyes waiting for an introduction.

“Rosie. Rosie Dalton.” She allowed Amanda to lead her down the boardwalk. “Do you know where Michael Miller is?”

“Yes, I do, Rosie,” Amanda answered without hesitation. “He’s in the Milestone Cemetery. He died over thirty years ago.”

The young woman stumbled along at her side. “Where is his family? Surely, he has descendants.”

“The closest thing to a descendant is A. J. McLennon on the Double M Ranch.” Amanda hooked arms with Rosie and waited for a wagon and team to pass by. When the dust settled, she crossed the street to the general store with the lady in tow, fearing the store would close before they reached their destination. “Michael Miller considered AJ a son.”

“How do you know all this?” Rosie almost crashed into Amanda when she abruptly halted outside the general store.

Amanda met her eyes and smiled. “Because A. J. McLennon is my father.”

* * *

After Rosie recovered from Amanda’s startling revelation, she helped Amanda collect the items on her shopping list. While paying her bill, Amanda conversed with Ray and arranged for the delivery of Rosie’s trunks to Amanda’s home. Intending to close his business the moment they completed Amanda’s sale, Ray promised to drop off the trunks as soon as possible.

“Are you certain I’m not putting you out?” Rosie accompanied Amanda the short distance to her house.

“Not in the least. Your only option would be one of the boarding houses in town, and I wouldn’t subject you to Mrs. Landers on a bet.” Amanda dashed into the kitchen and began preparing the evening meal.

Rosie paced the kitchen floor. “Are you certain there’s nothing I can do to help?”

Amanda waved off the offer. “Not at all. You’re my guest.”

A loud knock at the back door startled her.

“Come in,” Amanda called.

“Where do you want these?” Ray strained under the weight of her first trunk.

“Upstairs, first door on the left, please?” Amanda replied.

Soon Ray had both of her trunks deposited upstairs and he wished them a goodnight before leaving.

Amanda handed Rosie a jug of heated water. “Now, take this with you to your room and freshen up. Supper will be ready in twenty minutes. We’ll eat as soon as my husband arrives home.”

Rosie climbed the stairs to the upper level and discovered the guest room on the left as Amanda had indicated to Ray. Her trunks were lined against one pale yellow wall, opposite a double bed covered in a pretty floral-pattered quilt. A rocking chair and small table atop a rag rug occupied one corner near the window. A porcelain basin rested on the dresser to the right and she poured the water inside. Soap and towels sat beside the basin. Rosie shucked her traveling suit and almost groaned in relief as she washed up after days of travel since her last bath while en route. She dug a pale brown day dress, clean stockings and unmentionables out of her trunk, donned them all quickly, and restyled her bun.

Checking her appearance in the cheval mirror, Rosie shook her head, imagining the picture she’d made on the sidewalk outside the local hotel, travel weary and crying. But Amanda inquired what was wrong and hadn’t hesitated to help her. Had the situation been reversed, Rosie wasn’t certain she would have approached someone in her state. Certainly, Amanda’s actions were a testament to her character. Feeling like herself again, Rosie spotted an outhouse through the bedroom window and scooted downstairs to utilize the facilities.

Soon, Rosie returned to the kitchen, washed her hands at the washstand in the corner, and then dried them on a small blue towel. “Are you sure I can’t do anything?”

“Nothing at all. It’s ready.” Amanda waved Rosie toward the round table occupying the center of the room. The table was set for three and Rosie settled on the chair to the left.

A door opened and a masculine voice called, “I’m home.”

Amanda met the fellow in the doorway.

“Hello, my love,” he said and kissed her cheek.

The man of the house had arrived, Rosie reasoned.

“Come meet our guest.” Amanda made the introductions.

Sawyer seemed pleased to meet Rosie and she found the local lawman quite friendly and very much in love with his wife. Crossing paths with Amanda this afternoon had been the best stroke of luck imaginable. If it hadn’t been for Amanda and Sawyer Manning’s kindness in opening up their home to her, Rosie hadn’t any idea what would have become of her.

“Why don’t you tell us about your family and where you’re from?” Sawyer initiated the conversation over supper.

“I was born and raised in Boston in a well-established family. We lost my grandmother several months ago.” Rosie teared up while talking about the woman who’d played a very important role in her life: mentor, confidante, friend.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Amanda touched her arm. “I can tell how much she meant to you.”

Rosie nodded, blinking back her tears. “Then Father passed suddenly in February. The doctor suspected his heart was to blame. His untimely death threw his business affairs into chaos. Mother has been handling the paperwork involved, including all the fuss resulting from the reading of the will.”

“Again, please accept our condolences,” Sawyer added.

“Thank you. I haven’t the foggiest notion what all is involved in settling Father’s affairs, and thank goodness I’m not expected to contend with any of it.”

“I understand completely. I experienced several grief-stricken months a few years back when my mother passed. Reverend Fitzpatrick’s wife visited often and she helped me immensely while recovering from the loss.”

“We must carry on with life.” Rosie appreciated the shared compassion, shared grief offered by Amanda.

“My wife found a unique method to keep herself busy,” Sawyer hinted, smiling.

“Yes, I have. I opened a clothing store in town with my sister-in-law, and having my own business means the world to me.”

“My goodness. How brave of you.” Rosie hoped this trip would mean the world to her, and hopefully, she would learn something tomorrow.

After the delicious supper, Amanda accompanied Rosie upstairs to the bathing room. She’d appreciated the opportunity to wash up before supper, but almost swooned from shock when Amanda insisted on providing her with a hot bath. Afterward, Rosie donned the fresh nightclothes she’d dug out of her trunk. Being clean again, Rosie couldn’t have been more appreciative of her good fortune after enduring the dusty trip. She sat at the small vanity table in the spare room of Amanda’s home, tugging a comb through tangled strands of damp hair.

A soft knock on the door drew her attention from her musings. “Rosie, it’s Amanda.”

“Come in.”

She poked her head inside. “May I join you?”

“Of course.” Rosie waved Amanda inside.

“What a pretty satin nightgown. As a seamstress, I recognize a custom-made piece of clothing when I see it. That garment is exquisite.”

“Thank you.” Rosie scurried over to the bed to fetch the matching robe. She slipped her arms through the sleeves before returning to her seat at the vanity table. “I heard your husband draining the bathtub a while ago, as you promised he would. I do appreciate your thoughtfulness. That bath was exactly what I needed.”

“A home-cooked meal, a nice hot bath, and a good night’s sleep... Doc Bennett couldn’t have prescribed a better remedy after an arduous trip.” Amanda smiled and patted Rosie’s shoulders. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

Rosie waved her hand. “Goodness, no. You’ve been extremely generous, and I couldn’t possibly impose any further on your kindness.”

Amanda settled herself on the edge of the bed and peeked over at her guest. “Not even a hot cup of tea before you turn in for the night?”

“Well, maybe that.” Rosie smiled, reaching for her comb. “Will you join me?”

“Definitely. We can continue getting to know each other.” Amanda hopped up and gently took the comb from Rosie’s hand. “Let me do this.”

Rosie shifted on the vanity chair and stared into the oval mirror. “Was there something in particular you wanted to discuss?”

“Actually, yes. The reason for your trip to Milestone.” Amanda carefully worked the wide-toothed comb through the stubborn tangles. “I’m not certain what you have in common with the former owner of the Double M Ranch.”

Rosie inhaled a breath as she experienced another brief moment of loss, reminded that her relative had passed. “I recently learned that Michael Miller was my grandfather.”

Amanda’s hand stilled. “Mr. Miller never married. He certainly hadn’t any children. For that exact reason, he bequeathed the Double M Ranch to my father.”

“I firmly believe my great-grandfather purposely kept my grandmother and Mr. Miller apart. Michael Miller never knew he’d fathered a child.”

Amanda set the comb down. “A child who would be your...”

“My mother.”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Come in,” Amanda called.

Sawyer Manning strode into the room, carrying a large tray. “I brought the tea, sweetheart. But I won’t impose on your chinwag. You ladies take your time and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thank you, darling.” Amanda kissed her husband’s cheek and took the tray from his hands.

“How did you guess we wanted a cup of tea?” Rosie blurted.

He smiled. “Amanda brews herself a cup of tea every night before she comes to bed. Tonight would be no different.”

Rosie laughed. “A creature of habit, is she?”

“Most definitely.” Sawyer kissed his wife and caressed her hair. “I’m turning in now. Sleep well, my love.”

“Thank you. I’ll try my best not to wake you when I come to bed.” Amanda glanced at Rosie. “Retired Pinkertons wake up if an ant strolls across the bedroom floor.”

Sawyer chuckled. “You know I don’t mind when you disturb me. Besides, I’ll be asleep again before your beautiful head hits the pillow.” He kissed her lips and exited the room.

“Goodnight, Mr. Manning,” Rosie called.

“It’s Sawyer. And goodnight to you, too.”

Amanda set the tray down on the table by the window. “Rosie, the tea will steep for a few minutes, and I’ll be right back.” She followed her husband out the door.

Rosie sat for a minute, stunned. Where had Amanda gone? The tray contained a large teapot, china teacups, sugar and cream. Nothing missing that she could deduce. Rosie wandered over to the window and stared outside where she spotted a cat creeping across the backyard, perhaps prowling for mice. An owl hooted from a nearby treetop while a gentle spring breeze ruffled the lace curtains on the open window.

“I’m back.”

Rosie turned to discover Amanda standing in a long floral cotton nightgown covered with a matching duster, her hair flowing well below her shoulders.

“We’ll enjoy our tea and then I can quickly turn in without the bother of changing into nightclothes.”

“And there’s less chance of disturbing your husband,” Rosie speculated.

“There’s that also.” Amanda poured the tea and added cream and sugar to each cup before handing one to Rosie.

“Your matching night set is beautiful.”

“Thank you. I designed and sewed it myself.” Amanda glanced at her guest. “My store has clothing for the entire family. My dresses don’t remain on the racks for long, and the custom orders keep me quite busy.”

“Goodness, if the quality of this set is any indication of your talent, I can understand why. I’ll have to drop by someday.”

“Please do. My shop is called Amanda’s Clothing Emporium, and it’s located at the far end of Main Street across from the Milestone Bakery. Now, let’s get comfortable and you can tell me how you learned about Mr. Miller.”

Rosie sat on the bed and set her teacup down on the night table. “I need to share something with you.”

She reached for her grandmother’s worn leather journal. Soon both ladies were settled on the bed, their backs resting on fluffy, feather pillows propped against the iron headboard.

“What have you here?” Amanda pointed to the diary.

Rosie took a deep breath. She hadn’t shared her discovery with anyone, not even her mother. But for some reason, Amanda seemed the

ideal person to discuss her findings with. Perhaps an uninvolved third party could provide an unbiased opinion on the entire matter.

“First of all, I must tell you my childhood wasn’t particularly pleasant.”

Amanda gasped and a concerned expression creased her face.

“It’s true, but I didn’t share that with you to elicit sympathy.” Rosie clasped the book tightly in her hands and held it against her bosom, receiving strength from the soft covering. “My mother seldom found time for me, and my father completely ignored me at every turn. The only person who truly loved me and set aside her own agenda to spend time with me was my grandmother, Lucille Wentworth.”

“Surely, your parents must have—”

“Never,” Rosie interrupted. “Whatever you were about to say... well, it doesn’t matter. It wouldn’t apply to my family. My father absented himself from me from the day I was born until the evening he passed. My mother is alive, but for the most part, she remains aloof.”

“But not your grandmother?”

“Grandmother Lucille loved me with all her heart, and she told me so whenever we spent time together.” Rosie brushed a tear from her cheek. “I’m her namesake, Rosemary Lucille Dalton, but Grandmother called me Rosie for as long as I can remember.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“We had a special connection between us, but my grandmother passed away a few months ago.”

“I’m so sorry you lost such a special person in your life.” Amanda patted her hand.

“Thank you. Her passing saddened me terribly, but it prompted me to search through her treasures in the attic, and her clothes and whatnot in her room. I planned to secrete away keepsakes of her life before my mother had her belongings removed from the house and destroyed.” Rosie shrugged. “Mother and Grandmother tolerated each other at best. They were never what you would consider ‘close’, like some mothers and daughters. Neither is Mother close with me. Perhaps it’s a generational thing carried down.”

“Goodness, I can’t imagine growing up with such aloof, uninvolved people in my life,” Amanda blurted and then her face reddened and she gasped. “What a horrible thing to say. I’m so sorry.”

Rosie touched her arm. “No apology necessary. Your description fits them perfectly.”

“Still, I should think before speaking.”

“I appreciate your candor, Amanda. And frankly, I wish more people said what they mean instead of what they believe one wants to hear.” Rosie shook her head. “Gentlemen who abhorred Father attended his funeral service and extended their sympathies to Mother and me. *I’m so sorry for your loss.* Those men couldn’t have cared less about Father, before his passing or after. I cannot tolerate two-faced people. I far prefer truth, honesty and forthrightness, even to the point of risking hurt feelings in more sensitive folk.”

“Well, you’ll get nothing but truth from me.” Amanda sipped her tea.

Rosie nodded. “Good. We could become the best of friends.”

“Absolutely.” Amanda snuggled back against the pillows. “Tell me more about your grandmother.”

“I was getting to that. Grandmother Lucille wrote almost daily entries in several journals over the years, and I recently found them at the bottom of one of her trunks.” Rosie patted the book in her hands. “This one covers the year 1833 and early 1834, the year my mother was born.”

Amanda shifted on the bed. “Drink your tea or it will get cold.”

Rosie set the book down on the covers and reached for her teacup. “Thank you for the reminder.” She took a sip and then another. “I enjoy reading, writing short stories, and sketching. I’ve always been quite independent in my own way, and I’ve dreamed of perhaps writing for a newspaper one day. Of course, my mother considered the idea nothing more than foolish imaginings. She forbade me from even considering actual *work*, either for money or not. The idea bordered on social-standing suicide, and Mother protects her position in Boston society above all else. No daughter of hers would be *employed*.”

Amanda shook her head. “I cannot imagine...”

“Believe me, I’m not exaggerating. But until I read my grandmother’s diaries, I hadn’t any idea where I’d acquired my love of words and writing. Grandmother recorded everything of significance in her life and important events surrounding the lives of her family and friends.”

“Including you.”

Rosie nodded. “The initial entry in the first journal was dated on her thirteenth birthday, a young girl’s musings on pending womanhood.

Grandmother wrote something at least once a week, often daily, until her passing.”

“I cannot imagine such commitment.”

“Me either.” Rosie finished her tea and set the cup aside. “I rummaged through the trunk and sorted stacks of journals by date, then spent days reading them in chronological order. When I opened the diary dated 1833, I learned that was the year Grandmother met and married the man I’d always believed was my grandfather. I’d hoped through her own words to relive her joy when meeting the love of her life and share the happiness she experienced in becoming a blushing bride.”

Amanda’s eyes lit up. “Goodness, that must have been wonderful.”

“You would think so.” Rosie shook her head. “What I learned instead absolutely shocked me.”

Chapter 3

Rosie's eyes blurred with tears; the information she'd unearthed within the pages of this one diary remained hurtful in so many ways. But Rosie had come to grips with the truth weeks ago. Second thoughts wreaked havoc with her mind, but she set aside her misgivings and bravely traveled alone to Montana in pursuit of the truth and to discover her roots.

Amanda shifted forward on the bed. "What you learned? You mean that the man you believed all your life was your grandfather, was not?"

"I'd never questioned my mother's parentage for a moment. But I'd always wondered why Grandfather treated Grandmother so poorly. Never a kind word. Always critical of everything she did. And the unhappy, unpleasant ogre treated Mother and me in a similar fashion. He passed when I turned fourteen, but I remember my grandfather being the most disgruntled individual I've ever met."

Amanda shook her head. "Why would any husband treat his wife so shabbily? Or his daughter? Or granddaughter?"

"Because Grandfather wasn't Mother's father."

"You'd best start from the beginning. I'm getting confused," Amanda admitted.

"There's something you need to read. Actually, there are several items in Grandmother's diary that will explain what happened." Rosie grabbed the book and flipped through the pages. She scooted closer to Amanda. "Start here."

Amanda leaned closer and read over Rosie's shoulder...

August 17, 1833

The family returned home to Boston today with me in tears and fit to be tied. Father refused to even consider a courtship between me and Michael Miller, a gregarious young fellow with ambitious dreams of building a ranching empire near Milestone, Montana, a frontier town south of Butte where Father has completed his business dealings. I'm so heartbroken; I've fallen completely in love with this young man. But Father insists his only child

deserves someone more suitable. His opinion is certainly not mine. Mother keeps insisting someday another young man will turn my head and I'll recover from this heartache. But I know she's wrong. They're both so wrong. I'll never forget Michael or stop loving him for as long as I live.

“That is Grandmother’s first reference to Michael Miller,” Rosie explained. “And then only one week later, Grandmother recorded this...” She pointed to an entry on the corresponding page.

August 25, 1833

A personable young man named Brighton Wentworth who is employed by Father’s company came to supper tonight. Father instructed Cook on the menu, and Cook created and served a marvelous spread which Brighton complimented a dozen times, pleasing Father immensely, of course. Personally, I’ve never been that taken with lamb, and I saw right through Brighton’s act. Father claims the young man has an exceptional talent for business with a promising future in his company. I feigned interest in the fellow and I’m certain Mother believes Brighton is the key to mending my heart. I still cry myself to sleep every night, knowing I’ll love no other but Michael. I’m certain Father still believes he did the right thing refusing to permit Michael and me to pursue a future together in Montana. But I now suspect Father has inadvertently ruined my life.

“My goodness, that’s strong wording... *ruined my life.*” Amanda met Rosie’s eyes. “Do you suppose your grandmother suspected she was with child at that point?”

“She probably did. And frantic to keep the secret from her father, while grasping for a solution to her problem,” Rosie speculated, flipping pages. “And soon enough she found one.”

Rosie read aloud the entry written two weeks later...

September 9, 1833

Brighton and I certainly shocked Mother and Father at the dinner table tonight when we announced our engagement! Father seemed surprised at first, but he’s delighted Brighton will be

joining the family. Of course, Brighton proposed to secure his future with Woodley Enterprises, and I doubt he'll ever adore me as much as he's delighted with his rosy future at Father's company. I suppose time will tell how our agreement will work out, but I pray for a happy outcome.

Amanda gasped. "Your grandmother would require a heap of praying to achieve a happy ending to this situation. Their agreement seems no better than an arranged marriage. What happened next?"

"This happened a couple weeks later..." Rosie flipped another page and read aloud.

September 30, 1833

Thank goodness, this business trip came about for Brighton when it did. I doubt Father and Mother even noticed I'd accompanied my fiancé to New York. Completely unchaperoned. I'm chuckling at the thought: such a thing could ruin a young lady's reputation. We sent my parents a completely unexpected telegraph today, announcing Brighton and I have eloped and will remain in New York for a short honeymoon. All of Father's dreams of holding the society wedding of the year and walking me down the aisle have vanished. William Woodley may pass away from apoplexy. I'm certain Father's wondering, whatever was Lucille thinking? Mother will insist on holding a party for us upon our return. Keeping up 'the happy couple in love' appearances will be a challenge.

"Do I need to even guess what is coming next?" Amanda whispered.

Rosie shook her head. "This entry tops that last one, and only a month later..." She passed the diary to Amanda and she read aloud...

October 28, 1833

Goodness, we've surprised my parents again but I'm hoping in a good way. And what wonderful news it is! There's a baby on the way! Mother cannot imagine how this happened so quickly. Well, I certainly can. Mother could not be happier for all of us. I've always felt I've been a disappointment to them. Hopefully, being grandparents for the first time will please Mother and Father.

Amanda met Rosie's eyes. "Your grandmother seems to have covered her tracks so far. Does it all fall apart in the end?"

"Lucille Woodley Wentworth is far too astute for that." Rosie flipped over several pages. "And she may well have pulled it off if... just read these two entries."

Amanda set the book on her lap and started reading aloud...

November 18, 1833

I have finally stopped crying and can see the page clearly enough to write this entry. After dinner tonight, when my parents had turned in for the night, Brighton and I got into a horrible argument in the parlor. Brighton reminded me we only married for him to secure a partnership in Father's business. I insisted I didn't love him. He assured me he was quite aware of that and felt the same way about me. But Brighton refuses to even consider a divorce, insisting nothing has changed. We're staying married, as decided by the original agreement, to secure his future with Woodley Enterprises in exchange for providing my bastard (his word not mine) with a name.

November 19, 1833

I couldn't write another word last evening after seeing the truth in my own handwriting. 'Bastard' is such an ugly word. I pray my child never learns the truth, never discovers Brighton is not his or her father. Worst of all, Mother cornered me today and admitted she'd overheard our argument while she was on the way to the kitchen for a late night cup of tea. Of course, Mother realized the truth of the matter and scolded me for my inexcusable behavior in Montana. I didn't elaborate on the details, allowing her to stew about her foolish daughter misbehaving with 'that Michael chap'. I am beside myself with worry though. Father thinks so highly of Brighton, having forgiven us for the elopement. Mother promised to keep my secret, and I pray Father never learns about any of this for fear of what he might do.

Rosie sniffled and Amanda handed her a handkerchief off the bedside table. After a moment, Rosie tamped down her emotions, feeling her face reddening and knowing her new friend had learned her most embarrassing secret. Her mother had been conceived out of wedlock, a bastard. What did that make Rosie?

“These entries completely shocked me, but it also explained so much. I finally understood why Grandfather Wentworth was so uncaring to my grandmother and to Mother. As well as his aloofness toward me the majority of my life, despite the fact my father was a valued employee in his company.”

“He started his own company?”

“Goodness, no. Brighton inherited Woodley Enterprises from Great-grandfather when he passed.”

Amanda nodded.

“Mother loved me in her own way, I suppose, but she hasn’t a maternal bone in her body. She didn’t want children but after ten years of marriage, I suddenly appeared the year she turned thirty-four. Quite shocking and scandalous, according to Grandmother’s diary entries. There was even speculation in some social circles whether James was even my father. With this family, who knows? Maybe I’m a—”

“Don’t say it. Regardless of your parentage, it has absolutely no reflection on you as a person. None of this is your fault. You’re a lovely young lady.”

“Thank you, Amanda. I appreciate your lack of judgement.” Rosie shifted on the bed.

“Nonsense. People make mistakes, including your grandmother. Some folks are less affectionate than others, like your mother. You’re gracious and polite and friendly.” Amanda waved off her concern.

“Thank you.” Rosie touched Amanda’s arm. “Now as I was saying, while Mother completely ignored me at every turn, Grandmother treated me like a princess and provided me with everything any little girl would desire.”

“I’m happy about that.” Amanda covered her mouth with her hand and whispered, “Any more scandalous entries in that diary?”

Rosie chuckled. “You haven’t heard enough already? There is the day my mother was born.”

“Share it with me, please.”

“Of course.” Rosie clasped the book in her hands, flipped to the page, and read...

May 10, 1834

The baby was born early this morning at 2:15 a.m. Miss Anna Lucille Wentworth came into the world after thirty hours of labor, me screaming in agony and swearing I would never endure such pain again. I fear this loveless union between Brighton and myself is doomed, but it has never been a true marriage anyway. The baby is beautiful though and there are no words to describe my relief it's all over.

May 13, 1834

With a newborn in the house, I've barely had time to think, never mind write a single word until now. If Father is questioning my baby's early arrival, he hasn't voiced any suspicions. At only five pounds, my claim the little girl came six weeks early is slightly believable. But I suppose one sees what one wants to. When I became so big so early, Father had speculated a set of twins were on the way. When only one wee girl arrived, Father barely contained his disappointment and Brighton has hardly looked at the child. Perhaps if the baby had been a boy, they would have been more receptive. What will become of Anna? I worry about all our futures. And I have insisted on separate bedrooms, eliminating any pretense of a happy marriage. Mother is heartbroken, knowing more grandchildren are solely wishful thinking. Despite the agony I suffered bringing her into the world and my feelings toward Brighton, I do adore Anna. Hopefully, that child will never learn the truth of her parentage.

Amanda smiled. “I’m so happy you had such a wonderful lady in your life. I wish I’d known her. She must have been a remarkable person.”

“The best,” Rosie whispered and dabbed at her tear-filled eyes while Amanda rubbed her back. “Until the day she passed, Grandmother loved me. In truth, she seemed the only person in the entire world who did. And having found her diaries and read these entries after she passed, I now understand why that was.”

“I cannot believe Anna never loved you,” Amanda observed. “What mother doesn’t love her baby?”

“A mother who never wanted me in the first place.” Rosie shook her head. “The question that infuriates me most... why did Michael Miller not marry my grandmother? What kind of man wouldn’t marry a disgraced young lady carrying his child?”

“As you speculated, I would guess Michael Miller never knew your grandmother was with child. Lucille met Brighton a week or so after she returned from Montana. Only a month later, she married him.” Amanda noted each item on a finger as she spoke. “She wouldn’t know she was carrying you until several weeks after she returned home from the west, and then she instantly grasped at the first opportunity to cover her indiscretion with Michael.”

“Mother was definitely a five pound indiscretion,” Rosie whispered and then straightened. “You’re right about the timing and that would explain it. But why would Grandmother not send Michael a letter informing him she was carrying his baby?”

Amanda shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. Perhaps with her father being so adamant that she not be involved with Mr. Miller, Lucille might have determined that option not feasible and decided on a more suitable father for her child.”

“Possibly.”

“We need to talk to my papa. He knew Michael Miller better than anyone,” Amanda said.

“Truly?”

“As a young man, Papa worked on Mr. Miller’s ranch. He treated Papa like a son and Papa loved him like a father. When Mr. Miller passed away with no heirs, Papa learned that the dear fellow had bequeathed the Double M to him. Our family has lived on the ranch ever since, and Papa built the ranch up to the diverse success it is today to honor the man who entrusted it to him.”

“Your father sounds like a truly good person. Like his daughter. Thank goodness, you found me on the street. I don’t know what I would have done had you not approached me.” Rosie smiled as she spoke.

Amanda reached over and grasped her hand. “Milestone is a small friendly town, and someone would have come to your rescue. But I’m delighted it was me, and now we’ll become the best of friends.”

“I’d like that.” Rosie place her other hand atop Amanda’s and squeezed it gently. “I grew up in a home where we seldom entertained unless Mother planned an elaborate social event, and my schooling centered around a collection of tutors which limited interactions with other children. Except for a couple of girls whose fathers were employed by my grandfather’s company, I haven’t developed any friendships.”

“That’s rather sad.” Amanda hugged Rosie, impulsively. “But we’ll be friends. And I have a whole passel of sisters-in-law who’ll be friends with you also. And the ranch housekeeper, Mrs. Sheridan, is a dear as well. You’ll love her.”

“When will I meet with your father?”

“Get a good night’s sleep, and we’ll travel to the ranch in the morning.” Amanda added in a whisper, “Don’t mention this to Sawyer.”

“All right. I hope I’m not putting you out. The hotel wasn’t an option, but I could have stayed at a boarding house if one exists in Milestone.”

“I wouldn’t thrust Frances Landers on you. She runs a boarding house, but the woman is not the nicest person you’d want to meet.” Amanda patted Rosie’s hand. “Be thankful you’re with us tonight.”

“I couldn’t be more thankful.”

“Good. Now I’m off to bed.” Amanda gathered up the tea things and reached for the lamp. “I’ll take these downstairs to soak until morning. Get some sleep.”

“Thank you. I’ll try my best. But I’ve had so much information ricocheting through my mind these past weeks, sleep doesn’t come easily,” Rosie admitted, glancing at the other lamp on the night table. “I might write a few words in my notebook first. I fancy myself a bit of a writer, but I haven’t worked up the nerve to offer anything for publication.”

“How wonderful you’re a writer. But you’ve nothing to worry about. And talking with Papa tomorrow should answer most of your questions,” Amanda predicted. “Then you’ll be free to decide what’s next for you. And maybe you’ll discover your future should be spent with us in Milestone.”

“I never would have considered that a possibility when I left Boston, but now... perhaps it will be an option.”

A minute later, Rosie lay in bed surrounded by darkness, having forgone writing in favor of much-needed sleep. Perhaps she should have written down the questions racing around in her head, for fear of forgetting to ask something important tomorrow. On the way to the ranch she would

make some notes. For now, she needed to somehow fall asleep. And after enduring that seemingly never-ending journey, slipping under the covers in this wonderful bed removed any excuse for insomnia.

Tomorrow she would learn all she could about her grandfather, and her mind would be put at ease. Making this trip would be totally worth it. She refused to think otherwise.

Within minutes, relaxed and exhausted, she fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 4

Next morning, Rosie stared across the verdant Montana valley as she rode along in the buggy with Amanda. Their conveyance shifted from side to side and bounced across the uneven, often rutted land. Making notes was completely out of the question; she wouldn't be able to read a word she'd written. She would simply rely on her memory, and any spur-of-the-moment questions that popped into her head during the conversation with Mr. McLennon.

Rosie marveled at Amanda's competence in handling the rig. Since early childhood, Rosie rode Thoroughbred horses on her great-grandparents' estate in Boston. She'd become an accomplished horsewoman for pleasure riding, but she wouldn't know the first thing about handling a horse and buggy.

"Are you warm enough? There's a quilt under the seat if you feel a chill," Amanda offered.

"Truly, I'm fine." Rosie snuggled into her cloak and smiled. Having seldom traveled outside the city, she stared in disbelief at the towering mountain ranges, glimpses of the river wending its way along the mountain base, and the long stretches of valleys they passed through.

She closed her eyes and welcomed the warmth of the sun on her face and the pleasant scent of sage that drifted on the morning breeze. The troubling purpose necessitating the trip to the Double M would in all likelihood ruin this beautiful day, but she needed to learn some truths. She clasped her grandmother's diary in her hands. The yellowed pages within provided proof of her allegations about Mr. Miller, in case Amanda's father doubted her story. She'd wager disgruntled Michael McLennon would definitely have already spoken with his father on the matter.

"How are the nerves?"

Rosie opened her eyes and turned her attention to her friend. "Not too frazzled. But that's only because I'm distracted by the dozens of butterflies in my stomach."

Amanda laughed. "Relax. McLennons ensure our visitors feel right at home. You've nothing to worry about."

“Except what I’ll learn about Michael Miller.” Rosie touched Amanda’s arm. She’d come to Montana to discover everything she could about her grandfather, whether good or bad. “What if your father tells me something absolutely unspeakable about Mr. Miller?”

“Not possible. Papa loved him, and my father is an excellent judge of character.” Amanda shook her head. “There isn’t one skeleton in your grandfather’s closet.”

“There’s one... my mother.” Rosie met Amanda’s eyes. “And I fear that revelation will blindside your father and plant a blight on his memory of the man he loved so much.”

“Papa experienced a lot in his life, trials and triumphs. I doubt news of your mother’s birth is about to disturb him much.” Amanda steered the rig under a towering wooden sign with burnt lettering stating DOUBLE M RANCH.

“I suppose the ranch is called the Double M because his name was Michael Miller,” Rosie muttered aloud.

“I never considered it before now. But yes, I imagine so.”

They rode alone in silence for some time.

Amanda glanced at Rosie. “Papa thought the world of Mr. Miller, and he even named his youngest son after him.”

“Michael McLennon,” Rosie whispered, and then she gasped. Why hadn’t she put it together before? “Michael McLennon is your brother.”

Amanda nodded.

“The cowboy who drove away in the wagon and left me standing on the street.” Rosie turned on the seat. “The fellow who accused me of lying.”

“Apparently so, although I cannot for the life of me understand why Michael would do such a thing. Exactly what did he say?”

Rosie wracked her brain to recall the incident. She needed to convey the general meaning behind their brief conversation without unduly demeaning her new friend’s brother. No matter how deserving of her criticism. “I told your brother I was Michael Miller’s granddaughter. I believe his exact words were... *I know for a fact you’re a fraud. Michael Miller didn’t have any children.*”

“And then he just drove away?”

“Yes.” Rosie shook her head. “I couldn’t imagine anything so rude. And feeling more alone in the world than ever before, I burst into tears.”

“Then I noticed you stan, crying.” Amanda smiled. “And thank goodness, I did.”

“Grandmother often told me things happen for a reason.” Rosie chuckled. “Perhaps they do.”

“Well, don’t worry. We’ll also sort out the misunderstanding with Michael while we’re at the ranch.” Amanda shifted on the seat. “And we’ll learn as much as we can about Mr. Miller from Papa. And Mrs. Sheridan, our housekeeper, will prepare a most scrumptious noon meal once she learns we’ve arrived.”

“You make it sound like a normal family visit.”

“I suppose it is... for me.” Amanda chuckled. “A bit nerve-wracking for you, though. At least, you’ll receive some answers.”

“If your father has any. Or perhaps our conversation will result in more questions,” Rosie stated her fear.

“Then we’ll try to find answers to those questions, too,” Amanda promised, steering the buggy into the yard at the ranch.

Rosie startled when a black and white dog shot out from under the veranda and approached the rig. The hair on the dog’s back stood on end while he barked incessantly. Rosie wasn’t stepping one foot down from the buggy until someone had gotten that animal under control.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Amanda secured the reins and then climbed down from the rig. “Floyd. How I’ve missed you.” She wrapped her arms around the dog’s neck, apparently without giving a moment’s thought to her pretty rose-colored dress.

The dog stopped barking immediately and flopped onto his back, legs in the air and tongue lolling from the corner of his mouth.

“You old softie. Want a belly rub, do you?” Amanda chuckled, crouching down to comply with the canine’s request, vigorously rubbing the dog’s tummy with both hands.

Rosie stared in disbelief and then gingerly clambered down from the buggy, shaking out her skirts and waiting for the completion of her friend’s homecoming with what she decided must be the family dog.

“Amanda. Good to see you.” An older gentleman called from the veranda.

Rosie hadn’t noticed him stepping out of the house. He appeared in his sixties with gray hair and wrinkled complexion, and those twinkling blue eyes must be a family trait handed down to his children. The man could

only be A. J. McLennon. His smile radiated warmth and Rosie would definitely like the friendly fellow.

“Papa, how are you?” Amanda called as she abandoned her reunion with Floyd and hurried over to hug her father. “It seems ages since I’ve visited the ranch.”

“Being a new wife keeps you busy, as well as that store of yours.” Her father hugged her tightly and then turned his attention to Rosie. “And who have you brought with you?”

“This is Miss Rosemary Dalton from Boston. She prefers being called Rosie.” Amanda waved her forward. “Rosie, this is my father, A. J. McLennon.”

AJ stuck out his hand. “Miss Dalton, welcome to the Double M.”

“Thank you, sir. It’s lovely here. And please call me Rosie.” She shook his hand roughened from the elements and hard work.

“Forget that ‘sir’ business. Call me AJ.” Mr. McLennon stood tall and as muscular and virile as a young man. Confidence oozed from him and he would be a force to be reckoned with in any situation. Rosie prayed she could hold her own while conversing with him on the purpose of her visit.

She bobbed her head. “All right. Thank you for the lovely greeting, AJ.”

“Come in. Come in.” AJ waved them forward and led the way into the house.

* * *

From his perch on the top rail of the cattle corral, Michael peeked out from under the brim of his Stetson. He’d watched as his brother-in-law’s buggy wended its way along the trodden dirt path to the main house. Was he seeing things? He’d swear the person seated next to his sister was that uppity, lying easterner he’d encountered yesterday at the Milestone Hotel.

“What the devil is she doing here?” he muttered to himself.

Had she shared that cockamamie story with his sister? The one she tried feeding him until he’d realized she was nothing more than a fraud attempting to discredit a wonderful man like his namesake. Michael’s hands fisted. His father couldn’t have thought more highly of Michael Miller.

Michael removed his Stetson and slapped his leg with it, sending up a cloud of dust. Whatever that easterner was up to, she wouldn’t get away

with it. Not if he had any say in the matter. Rather unfortunate the auburn-haired girl with the stunning hazel eyes was so darn pretty. She might have caught his eye, if she been bred more a lady and less a liar.

Of course, Michael really hadn't anything to worry about. There wasn't a wiser man in all of Montana Territory than A. J. McLennon. His pa would spot a swindler a mile away. "Pa will catch on to her soon enough," he muttered aloud.

"Ya talkin' to yerself, sonny?"

Michael swung around and spotted Sourdough Sammy lumbering toward him. "No sense denying it. I'm my own best company," he teased the ranch cook who despite being in his early seventies was going as strong as ever. The old fellow wouldn't think of retiring, and goodness knows, his older brother and ranch manager, Jackson, suggested it often enough.

Soon as you find a feller who can cook biscuits good as me, I'll retire.

Michael smiled, recalling the familiar refrain he'd heard dozens of times. Sammy might retain his job until he turned a hundred if his infamous sourdough biscuits proved the deciding factor dictating his retirement. Everybody knew nobody within a hundred miles made biscuits to equal Sourdough Sammy's.

"What ya jawing about with yerself?" The cook stood holding a basket covered in a red-checked tea towel.

"Met an easterner in town yesterday, yammering about Michael Miller and spewing some tall tale about the fellow," Michael scoffed. "Now she's arrived on the ranch with Amanda."

Sammy glanced toward the house. "Amanda's here?"

"Just drove up in that rig." Michael shook his head. "I wonder if she mentioned to Sawyer that they were driving out to the ranch alone?"

The ranch cook chuckled. "Now we both know the answer to that question."

Michael smiled. "My sister has an independent streak as wide as the Bighorn River."

"Wider, I reckon. But she knows how to handle a rig. Guess there's no harm in it," Sammy reasoned. "Best get these biscuits up to Nellie before they're cooled off. She'll be especially pleased with them if'n she has guests for dinner."

"Tell her I might sneak up to eat with the family. I can better keep an eye on that easterner."

“Pretty little thing, is she?” The cook chuckled.

Michael shook his head. “Not interested in the least.”

“Wasn’t what I asked.” Sammy cackled and walked toward the house.

Didn’t matter what the girl looked like, she was up to no good in Michael’s books. And she best not show herself on the ranch again because sure as shooting Pa would be sending her packing two minutes after she tried to convince him she was Michael Miller’s granddaughter.

“Whoever heard of anything so crazy?” Michael jumped down from the corral rail. “Dang dumbest thing I can imagine.”

Michael slapped his Stetson on his head and grabbed his lasso. He needed to finish up his work and then hurry up to the house. He’d enjoy watching that easterner being sent back to town with her lying tail between her legs like a dog who’d been caught trying to steal another dog’s bone.

Yep, her comeuppance would prove the best entertainment he’d witness in ages.

Chapter 5

Rosie had stared in awe at the warm, welcoming home with the white-painted wooden fence surrounding the two-story log house featuring a stone chimney on one side. While climbing the wide wooden steps that led to the front entrance, she'd admired the beautiful stained-glass nature scenes in the transoms above the double front doors. She followed AJ and Amanda inside.

Rosie stood in the entryway where polished mahogany woodwork and silk-upholstered furnishings greeted her. The scent of fresh-baked bread wafted through the house and her stomach growled in anticipation of being offered a slice. A middle-aged woman strode down the hallway, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

"Amanda. Oh, my goodness, it's wonderful to see you." The woman wrapped her arms around Rosie's friend.

"Mrs. Sheridan, I'd like to you meet Rosemary Dalton, but call her Rosie." Amanda smiled at them.

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Sheridan." Rosie shook the housekeeper's hand as she recalled Amanda mentioning the woman.

"Hello, dear. It's so nice to have you visit us." Mrs. Sheridan's warm smile and firm handshake impressed Rosie. This was a genuine person, someone trustworthy and solid. She'd met so few people like Mrs. Sheridan in her lifetime, it was comforting to know they existed.

"Papa, we need to discuss a matter with you. Could we talk in your study?" Amanda immediately broached the purpose of their visit.

"Certainly, we can." AJ headed down the hall. "Call us when you have our noon meal ready, Nellie. And send word that my sons should come eat with us since their sister is here."

"I'll do that. Enjoy your talk," the housekeeper called on her way back to the kitchen, returning a few moments later with two rose-patterned teacups. "Dinner will be an hour." She closed the door behind her.

AJ seated each of them on a chair in front of his desk. "I've been working on my ledgers. Mrs. Sheridan just dropped in with the teapot minutes before you arrived. Worked out nicely." He poured three cups of

tea, added sugar and cream, and distributed them before taking a seat behind his desk.

“Thank you for your time,” Rosie began. “I apologize for just dropping in on you like this.”

“Don’t give it another thought. Amanda’s welcome here anytime. And so are you.” AJ leaned back in his chair. “Now, what has you two coming all the way out here to see me?”

“Rosie grew up in Boston and she discovered something about herself awhile back. Now, she’s hoping you can provide answers to a few questions.” Amanda reached out and squeezed Rosie’s hand. “Some people would consider what she learned a bit of a... sensitive matter.”

“Goodness, I admit I was a bit intrigued by your sudden visit.” AJ looked from one girl to the other. “Now you have me worried.”

“It’s in regard to my grandfather.” Rosie glanced at Amanda who nodded her encouragement to continue. “When my grandmother passed away a few months ago—”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” AJ interjected and leaned forward in his chair. “Losing a grandparent is hard for a young person.”

“Yes, especially when you loved her dearly,” Rosie agreed, trying her best to keep the tears in check. “And we were very close.”

“My condolences,” AJ repeated. “But I apologize for the interruption. Please continue.”

Rosie took a deep breath. “I started going through Grandmother’s clothing and all of her things stored in the attic before they were thrown out, hoping to secrete away a few keepsakes. One day, I stumbled across several journals at the bottom of an old trunk. I recalled Grandmother writing in a diary which she kept in a drawer by her bedside. She must have written a few words before bed almost every night, since I discovered several books.” Rosie glanced at Amanda then returned her attention to AJ. “Curiosity is a powerful motivation.”

“And you read them,” AJ surmised.

“Every one of them over several days,” Rosie admitted, holding up the journal she’d brought with her. “But I found the one most interesting was the diary from 1833 which was the year before my mother was born. I’d wanted to read what she’d written about becoming a mother for the first time.”

“Nothing more wonderful than the birth of a baby.” A broad smile appeared on AJ’s face. “When young Edward was born, my first grandchild... it was a day I’ll never forget. That young whippersnapper is the light of my life.”

“Oh, Papa, he’s a little sweetheart. And we all couldn’t love him more.” Amanda hopped off the chair and hugged her father. She turned her attention to Rosie. “Edward is my oldest brother’s son. He recently turned two and he is a bundle of energy and mischief. You have to meet him, Rosie.”

“Lily and Edward are visiting at one of the neighbor’s today. They’ll be home later this afternoon,” AJ explained.

Rosie couldn’t help but smile. She couldn’t wait to meet the little boy.

“Goodness, now I’ve interrupted you,” Amanda exclaimed, settling back on her chair. “Please continue your explanation.”

Rosie smiled. She’d finish the telling yet. Nothing was keeping her from finding the truth about her grandmother now that she’d traveled so far. “Where did I leave off?”

“What your grandmother wrote about your mother’s birth,” AJ replied.

“Yes, that’s right.” Rosie shifted in her seat. “The beginning of this journal has the first entry in April of 1833. And it regarded a trip to Montana that my great-grandparents and my grandmother had made. It was a business trip for my great-grandfather, but he’d brought the family with him as a bit of a holiday, I suppose. A few entries mentioned a young fellow named Michael Miller.”

AJ shifted forward in his chair. “Michael Miller from Milestone?”

“Yes. Apparently, Michael Miller and my grandmother had been introduced and become quite *enamored* of each other.” Rosie felt herself blushing but the description was appropriate. “When my great-grandfather insisted my grandmother return to Boston with them, she was forced to leave behind the love of her life.”

“I recall Michael telling me he’d only loved one girl his entire life, but that things between them hadn’t worked out.” AJ rubbed his chin. “I wonder if he was talking about your grandmother? He never did tell me the girl’s name.”

“My grandmother’s name at the time was Lucille Woodley.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell. Like I said, he never mentioned a name. I would have remembered if he had.” AJ shook his head. “Michael must have loved

her dearly. He never married. Hadn't any family that we ever knew of."

"No one at all?" Rosie whispered.

"None." AJ shrugged. "When he passed, he bequeathed his ranch to me. Don't know where I'd be if I hadn't stumbled onto this ranch that day back in 1848. I was looking for work and he took me under his wing. We took a shine to each other soon enough and he treated me like a son. Michael Miller taught me everything he knew about cattle ranching and business and being a gentleman. Loved that man like a father."

"Rosie and I were just saying last night that things happen for a reason," Amanda offered.

"You're right, my girl. Truer words and all that." AJ leaned back in his chair. "So, Rosie, you reckon your grandmother was the girl Michael let get away."

"He hadn't any say in it, as far as I can tell from this diary." Rosie opened to the page she needed. "Grandmother wrote *The family returned home to Boston today with me in tears and fit to be tied. Father refused to even consider a courtship between me and Michael Miller, a gregarious young fellow with ambitious dreams of building a ranching empire near Milestone, Montana, a frontier town south of Butte where Father has completed his business dealings. I'm so heartbroken; I've fallen completely in love with this young man.*" She met AJ's eyes. "I believe Michael and Grandmother would have married had her father not interfered."

"I agree, recalling the way Michael spoke when he talked about the girl he'd loved." AJ pointed to the book. "Anything else in there about Michael?"

Rosie felt her face redden. "More than you can imagine," she muttered, glancing at Amanda.

"Tell him everything," Amanda encouraged her. "Papa, prepare yourself. Some of this is quite scandalous."

AJ frowned. "I doubt it concerns Michael Miller, then. A better man never walked this Earth."

"Listen to what I learned in these pages, and then you can decide for yourself," Rosie suggested.

"Fair enough."

For the next twenty minutes, Rosie read the same excerpts that she'd shared with Amanda last night. AJ's expression had turned from surprise to confusion to outright anger by the end. Rosie hadn't any idea what his

response would be to her grandmother's words expressing her love for Michael Miller who'd fathered her mother. When she finished reading the final except concerning her mother's birth, Rosie closed the journal.

"As you can imagine, I have so many questions about my real grandfather. That's why I traveled here to Milestone to meet with him, only to learn yesterday that he'd passed away several years ago." Rosie's eyes welled with tears. "I cannot tell you the extent of my disappointment. I've even experienced an unexpected sadness and feeling of loss for this man I never met. But Amanda explained that you knew my grandfather better than anyone. Can you tell me what kind of a man he was? Tell me about his ranch? Tell me anything and everything you remember about Michael Miller?"

Mrs. Sheridan knocked on the door and then popped her head into the study. "Sorry to interrupt your meeting, but it's been a little over an hour. The food's on the table and the boys have come up from the barns. We're ready to eat."

"Thank you, Nellie," AJ replied, clambering out of his chair heading for the door. "Perfect timing."

Rosie glanced at Amanda who shrugged her shoulders. Was AJ purposefully delaying further discussion?

"Let's eat," Amanda whispered. "We'll talk with Papa again later."

Rosie nodded. "All right," she mumbled, unable to disguise her disappointment. She'd just have to wait to learn about her grandfather. But at least, she'd found the man who would help her discover her Montana roots. Perhaps her trip hadn't been a colossal waste of time after all.

Chapter 6

Rosie followed Amanda into the dining room where four young men were seated at the long wooden table set with white china and spotless silverware on a green tablecloth. Noon sunshine spilled through the windows, providing an extra glow to the homey relaxing décor. The family resemblance between the young men was unmistakable, especially those astonishing blue eyes, and she spotted Michael McLennon among them. Were all of these fellows Amanda's brothers?

Michael wore ranch clothes as before, but like the others, the Stetson was absent, suggesting the offensive man was versed in table manners at least.

Mrs. Sheridan and Amanda set platters of roast chicken, sliced ham, and hearty vegetables around the table; the food created a mouth-watering aroma in the room. Pitchers of milk and a pot of coffee accompanied the meal.

AJ pulled out a chair beside Michael and waved Rosie over. "Here you go, Rosie. Sit beside Michael."

"Hello again," she muttered as she reluctantly settled on the chair beside the frowning fellow.

AJ startled and exclaimed, "You two have met before?"

"Unfortunately." Michael shook his head.

Rosie straightened in her chair, head held high. "My sentiments exactly. I'm not accustomed to such rudeness."

"Now, let's put bygones aside," Amanda suggested, seating herself on Rosie's other side. "Misunderstandings happen."

Michael glowered at Rosie. "Nothing to misunderstand about her, Amanda. I see she's gotten you hornswoggled."

Rosie gasped. "I haven't the faintest notion what a 'hornswoggled' is, but I can assure you I've done nothing wrong."

"I agree." Amanda rose to her defense immediately. "Kindly reserve your judgement, Michael, until you've heard Rosie's story."

Michael scoffed. "I heard an earful yesterday. Won't be changing my opinion none."

“That’s enough,” Mrs. Sheridan interjected, standing hands on hips. “There’ll be no bickering at my table.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” Michael apologized immediately.

Rosie stood. “Perhaps I should—”

“Please sit down, young lady.” AJ waved her back into her chair. “This is my home and you’re more than welcome here. I don’t know why my son has a bee in his britches about you, but we’ll settle the disagreement after we’ve eaten.”

Rosie bowed her head while AJ recited the blessing, and then she ate the meal, only participating in the conversation with the gentlemen at the table when asked a direct question. AJ’s sons appeared interested in the purpose for her visit, and how she’d met their sister. She’d learned there were five sons, but only Jackson, Adam and Michael lived and worked on the family ranch. Simon was visiting from his own neighboring ranch, and Daniel was employed in Chicago as a Pinkerton agent of all things. That surprised her the most. She looked forward to meeting the married brothers’ wives, especially Willow who was currently birthing a foal, if you please. She’d never met a more interesting family. And of course, she wanted to meet little Edward. Despite this nerve-wracking repast, she hoped Amanda would agree to stay for supper.

Soon, fresh apple pie was served for dessert. Rosie continued to totally ignore the fellow on her left and exchanged pleasantries with Amanda and Mrs. Sheridan. The time passed quickly despite her being on edge, anticipating the unpleasantness to come. AJ might be miffed by her accusation that his son had been rude to her, but Rosie hoped the truth would prevail with Amanda on her side.

AJ stood and smiled at the housekeeper. “Mrs. Sheridan, that was an excellent meal, as always. But I’m taking a short nap before I discuss the matters that brought Rosie to us.” He glanced at his youngest son. “Michael, take Rosie for a short tour of the ranch in the meantime.”

Michael gaped. “But Pa—”

“That wasn’t a suggestion, son. Amanda and I will meet with you and Rosie after my nap.” AJ lumbered out of the kitchen.

Amanda leapt to her feet. “I’ll help Mrs. Sheridan with the dishes.”

Rosie glared at her new friend. Obviously, she was being deserted when she needed Amanda most. They met eyes and Rosie blinked back the

tears threatening to give her away. Amanda touched her arm. "It'll be all right. Go settle things with Michael."

"Might that include doing him bodily harm?" she whispered, teasing. Well, mostly teasing.

Amanda chuckled. "Only as a last resort."

"I heard that," Michael grumbled, shoving his chair away from the table. "Let's get this over with."

"Goodness, I'm so looking forward to the tour," Rosie muttered.

Mrs. Sheridan burst into laughter. "If you two aren't back in an hour, we'll send for the sheriff. Clearly, one of you will have some explaining to do."

"You're not funny." Michael shot the housekeeper a look.

Rosie shook out her skirts. "My apologies, Mrs. Sheridan, but I'll second that."

"Go on now." Mrs. Sheridan waved them toward the back door. "Whatever burr is under your saddle, Michael, sort it out with this young lady. She's a delight and I cannot imagine how you could have an issue with her."

"I know the whole story, Michael, and Rosie is not pulling the wool over anyone's eyes." Amanda poked her brother's arm. "Rosie has a valid reason for coming here. Papa listened to her story, and she has written proof of her claims. Listen to her."

Michael glanced heavenward and muttered something inaudible. "All right. Let's go." He headed for the door, grabbing his Stetson off one of the hooks on the wall.

Rosie considered taking an unchaperoned tour of the ranch was another one of these loosened proprieties out west that she'd been warned about. "I'll be back in a moment." She scooted to the front door and fetched her hat. She settled it in place with her hat pins and smiled into the gilded-framed mirror. A well-placed hat pin could dissuade an overly amorous young man, or at least, so she'd heard. She'd never found herself in a position to test the theory, but she wouldn't hesitate, if necessary. Especially if it involved the hide of the obnoxious Michael McLennon. She returned to the kitchen. "All right. I'm ready now."

Michael gazed at the feathered creation on her head. He snickered aloud. Regardless of his opinion, the millinery masterpiece was one of her favorites and she couldn't care less about his thinking on it.

“We’ll start with the gardens, then walk along the river for a spell, and finally take a peek at the corrals and check if we have a new colt or filly in the Morgan barn.” He held the door for her.

Rosie smiled despite herself. “Wouldn’t a new foal be exciting?”

“Heart-stopping,” he muttered.

She accompanied him through the gardens, admiring the perennials that had poked themselves out of the ground. The flowering shrubbery emitted the most intoxicating scent, and the trees had fully leafed. “This is stunning,” she exclaimed. “Our gardens back in Boston weren’t as impressive. Mother’s gardener has aged beyond competence and I’ve observed that he’s simplified the plantings the last several years. Mother hasn’t noticed, though.” Of course, her mother didn’t bother to observe much of anything beyond the arrival of invitations to local social events.

Michael shook his head. “Mrs. Sheridan and Willow do most of the gardening, both vegetables and flowers.”

“I must compliment them on the marvelous job they’re doing,” Rosie offered.

Next they walked along the river and Rosie glanced at the man walking alongside her. “Are we going to discuss what happened in town yesterday?”

Michael stared straight ahead. “Nope. I’ll leave it to Pa.”

“You still believe I’m lying?”

“Haven’t heard such a tall tale since Pa’s last fishing trip with his cronies.” Michael gently took Rosie’s arm and guided her around a large puddle on the dirt-packed path.

“Thank you,” she mumbled.

Despite enduring the company of her unpleasant companion, she couldn’t be enjoying the tour of her grandfather’s ranch more. She never imagined the beauty of the elegant house and surrounding gardens. The expanse of land encompassing the Double M that Amanda pointed out on their way here almost exceeded belief. Acres and acres of land surrounded by mountains and valleys with waterways running through the property in several places. And Amanda assured her they’d only crossed a small portion of it on their way here. Most remarkably, her grandfather had initially envisioned the entire enterprise decades ago when it was nothing more than barren frontier land. How she wished she’d known the wonderful man.

Nothing would be gained by arguing with someone who'd made up his mind about her, so she decided to take the high road. "Well, you're entitled to your opinion, but I've shown your father proof that I'm Michael Miller's granddaughter. So, we'll leave it at that and enjoy a pleasant stroll around this wonderful ranch."

Michael snorted but kept his thoughts to himself.

Soon, they arrived at the barn and stepped inside. Rosie paused for a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the interior. The scent of hay, leather, and horse reached her nose. Just like the stables on her great-grandparents' property back home.

"Willow," Michael called softly.

"I'm in the far stall," a female replied immediately. "Come and see what we've got back here."

Rosie could tell the woman was smiling by the sound of her voice. Michael strode down the center aisle with Rosie on his heels, and together they peeked over a half door into a stall. A pretty young woman dressed in trousers and boots stood patting a sable-colored mare while a miniature equine version of the mare nursed greedily.

"We have a new filly," the horsewoman announced.

Rosie gasped. "Oh, my, both of them are beautiful."

"Congratulations, Willow. Great job, as usual." Michael smiled at her and then glared at his companion. "By the way, this is Rosie Dalton. She's here from Boston."

Willow strode over to the stall doorway and dragged her hands down her trousers. "I'm pleased to meet you, Rosie. I'm Adam's wife."

Rosie nodded and shook hands with her. "And you deliver foals?"

"That's my job. Can't imagine any other line of work I'd enjoy more." Willow stood, hands on hips, gazing at the beautiful new filly.

"I'm in shock. I never would have believed it." Rosie grinned at Willow. "But nothing on this ranch surprises me."

Rosie believed her grandfather would have been delighted the McLennon family had continued his work and built the ranch into such a remarkable enterprise. AJ mentioned Michael Miller had considered him equivalent to a son, and AJ respected and loved this ranch as if he'd been carrying on a parent's legacy. Which proved there were still wonderful people in this world. Just not in Rosie's universe.

“Are you staying on the ranch or just visiting for the day?” Willow inquired.

“For the day,” Michael blurted.

Rosie glared at him. “I’m not certain what my plans will entail. I’m hoping to learn more about the ranch and its original owner from AJ, but nothing beyond that has been decided.”

“Enjoy your time here, whether just today or for an extended stay.”

“Thank you, Willow. I’d love for us to become better acquainted. But we’ll see.” Rosie glanced at the horses. “Do you suppose the mare would mind if I patted the filly?”

Willow considered the request. “I don’t think she’ll mind. Sunrise has birthed several foals, and she’s accustomed to people being around her babies.”

Rosie slowly entered the stall, stepping carefully to avoid horse droppings, and allowed the mare to sniff her hand. When Sunrise returned to eating hay, Rosie patted the filly’s neck and trailed her hand down her soft coat. “She is simply delightful. I love her coloring.”

“Sunrise produces wonderful offspring. And always a filly, it seems.” Willow shook her head. “She’s an excellent mother.”

The mare sniffed the filly where Rosie had patted it and then licked its coat.

“The filly found her feet and has been nursing. The placenta passed without any concern.” Willow wiped her brow with her shirt sleeve. “I believe I’ll grab a bite to eat at the cookshack now. I’ll round up Davie to watch them while I’m away.”

“Please, don’t let us delay you,” Rosie offered, stepping aside. “We’re due back at the main house anyway. AJ decided on a nap after lunch, but he could be waiting on us now.”

Michael muttered something under his breath and strode out of the barn, leaving Rosie to hurry along behind him.

Willow called instructions to Davie and then accompanied Rosie outside. “Enjoy your day and perhaps I’ll see you at supper tonight.”

“I would love that, but if I’ve left the ranch already, it’s been lovely meeting you.” Rosie chuckled and shook her head. “No one back in Boston will believe I’ve met a young lady who births foals.”

Rosie parted ways with Willow halfway to the house. She continued on alone since Michael must have raced the entire way and was nowhere in

sight. She walked around the side of the house and entered through the back door. "I'm back," she called, considering it prudent to announce her return.

"In the kitchen," Amanda called. "I've prepared a pot of tea and Papa is already in the study with Michael."

Wonderful. If he hadn't already, no doubt Michael was regaling his father with the story of their meeting in town yesterday. His version. Well, she would set the record straight if AJ questioned anything even slightly south of the truth.

Rosie wiped her shoes on the mat. Having spent so much time in one of the barns, she hoped she didn't smell of horse, especially after petting the new filly. Regardless, it couldn't be helped and more worrisome matters awaited her. She followed Amanda down the hallway to the study.

"There you two are," AJ exclaimed. "I've scolded Michael for not accompanying you back to the house, Rosie. I don't know what's gotten into him. He's been raised better than the manners he's demonstrated today."

"I'm certain his behavior has no bearing on you or your child-rearing efforts," Rosie commented, trying her best to suppress the threatening smirk.

AJ chuckled. "That's very gracious of you, young lady."

Michael rolled his eyes and slouched in his chair. "Can we get on with this? The sooner she's off the ranch, the better," he muttered.

"Rosie will leave the ranch when she decides to go, and not before." AJ glared at his son. "Now, mind your ps and qs."

Michael crossed his arms over his chest.

Rosie settled into the chair she'd occupied earlier today, hoping this second meeting with the McLennons would proceed as well as the first. Somehow, she doubted that would be the case with Michael present. But she had the truth on her side.

"Now... where were we?" AJ muttered to himself. "Yes, the matter of Michael Miller being your grandfather."

Rosie sat, quietly anticipating his reaction to the stunning revelation she'd dropped in her host's lap.

Chapter 7

Rosie sat open-mouthed, completely shocked.

AJ had reviewed everything they'd discussed this morning for Michael's benefit, and she'd even permitted Michael to read the entries in her grandmother's diary. Michael had appeared slightly less skeptical about her story than before, but he'd reserved his judgement until hearing his pa's opinion. Which AJ had just provided.

But Rosie couldn't have heard him correctly.

She met eyes with AJ and awaited his explanation.

"I've no doubt surprised you, Rosie." AJ leaned his arms on his desktop and glanced at the diary in front of him. "I've listened to everything you've told us. And I've re-read your grandmother's entries. Despite what is written here, I'm not convinced Michael Miller was your grandfather."

Rosie had counted on AJ to provide her with family history. Now, he'd informed her that he doubted she and Michael Miller were even related. Had she also fallen asleep after lunch? Would she awaken to discover she'd been dreaming?

"Papa. How can you say such a thing?" Amanda blurted.

Michael sat, one leg crossed over the other at the knee. The smirk on his face spoke *I told you so* as loud and clear as if he'd voiced the words aloud.

"I knew Michael Miller better than anyone, and he'd never compromise a young lady's virtue before marriage." AJ shook his head. "There's no possible way he'd have done such a thing."

"Then how do you explain..." Rosie found herself at a loss for words, feeling her face flaming.

"I'm not certain how to explain your grandmother's words, but there are several other possibilities. Someone your grandmother met shortly after her return to Boston. Perhaps someone else in Milestone compromised her prior to or following her introduction to Michael." AJ threw up his hands. "I might be grasping at straws here, but I will never believe such a thing possible of the Michael Miller I knew."

“I hate to say it, but do you suppose some fellow... forced himself on your grandmother?” Michael speculated.

Rosie gasped, hearing such an offensive accusation. “Never. Surely, Grandmother would have written about something so horrific in the private pages of her journal.”

Amanda reached for Rosie’s hand. “Perhaps not, if she believed there was a possibility of someone reading it.”

“She wrote about her indiscretion and the ‘early’ arrival of her baby. Would she include those entries if she hadn’t secured the journal safely away from prying eyes?” Rosie whispered, holding back her tears.

“You’re right. Such a thing seems very unlikely,” AJ agreed with her on this matter at least, glaring at his son for mentioning it in the first place. “Had that happened, I’d like to think your grandmother would have confided in her parents. Her father would have reported the scoundrel, the authorities would have been called, and suitable charges would have resulted.”

Michael gazed into Rosie’s eyes. “I apologize for suggesting it.”

“No, we can’t rule out any possibility,” Rosie conceded. “Although, I still believe my grandmother told the truth and Michael was the father. She obviously loved him dearly, despite only knowing him such a short time.”

“Never dreaming her father would insist she return home to Boston and she’d never see Michael again, would Lucille have allowed him to take liberties believing they would be married soon?” Amanda suggested.

“I would guess Michael asked her father for permission to court his daughter. Michael would never take liberties outside marriage with a lovely young lady from her social standing, no matter how willing.” AJ shook his head. “He lectured me endlessly about being a gentleman and not taking a young lady’s virtue until marriage. He wasn’t a ‘*do as I say, not as I do*’ type of fellow. He led by impeccable example in all things.”

Rosie glanced from Amanda to Michael. She still didn’t agree with AJ but she’d keep her opinion to herself.

“And Michael would never have compromised Lucille and then permitted her father to take her back to Boston, knowing a new life could be on the way. He would have followed her to Boston and courted her, ensured she wasn’t with child. Or married her immediately when he discovered there was a baby on the way.” AJ waved his hand. “No, there has to be another explanation.”

Amanda tapped Rosie on the arm. "Could you read the entry again about the baby's birth. I recall something in there that has niggled my mind with each reading."

Rosie handed her the book at the page. "Read that particular entry aloud for all of us, please."

Amanda's finger moved down the page as she skimmed the words. "Here it is... the place in the entry dated November 19 when she mentions her mother discovering her secret. What do you make of this? *Of course, Mother realized the truth of the matter and scolded me for my inexcusable behavior in Montana. I didn't elaborate on the details, allowing her to stew about her foolish daughter misbehaving with 'that Michael chap'.*"

Rosie stared at Amanda. "I'm not certain what you're concerned about."

"The part *I didn't elaborate on the details*. Could that mean Lucille's mother was mistaken about Michael being the child's father?" Amanda speculated. "But she let her mother *believe* she'd been intimate with Michael. What if '*the details*' mean her mothers' assumption was incorrect?"

AJ leaned back in his chair. "Makes sense to me, knowing Michael as I did."

Rosie shook her head. "I was certain Michael Miller was my grandfather. Otherwise, I never would have come here."

"Don't fret." Amanda wrapped an arm around Rosie.

"If Michael Miller wasn't my grandfather, then who was?" Rosie whispered, tears filling her eyes.

"Don't cry." Amanda rubbed her back. "We'll solve this mystery, one way or another. There has to be an answer. Someone has to know something."

"You think so?" Michael glanced from Amanda to Rosie. "This happened fifty-five years ago. I doubt any of the parties involved are even alive. Your great-grandparents aren't. Your grandmother isn't. Neither is Michael. Who else would have known what happened?"

"Maybe I'll never learn the truth," Rosie whispered, wiping the wetness from her cheek. "I just don't know what to think anymore."

* * *

Michael turned toward the doorway, stuffing his hands into his pockets. If he didn't leave soon, he might wrap his arms around Rosie to comfort the crying girl. His opinion of her had changed in the past few minutes. He certainly no longer believed her story centered on illegal motives, and he regretted accusing her of being a fraud.

She'd sincerely believed what her grandmother had written in the journals. And who wouldn't? He, too, had started to believe the entries held credibility. His father's declaration hadn't surprised him, but for a different reason than he'd expected.

"I should get back to work," he muttered to no one in particular.

AJ nodded. "Go ahead, son."

"We're not abandoning Rosie," Amanda insisted. "If we're to learn the truth, then having Rosie remain in Milestone makes the most sense."

"I agree," Rosie whispered. "But the hotel won't rent me a room—"

"Hotel?" AJ interrupted her. "Young lady, you're staying here with us at the ranch."

Rosie glanced at Michael. "I won't impose, and I certainly won't stay where I'm not wanted."

Michael shifted on his feet. "You should stay here. Pa can better help you solve this if you're close by."

"Absolutely. I don't believe you're Michael Miller's granddaughter, but then again, if I'm wrong about the man, perhaps you are his kin." AJ stood and looked Rosie in the eye. "I would never turn my back on family or someone who could prove as close to family as you might be. You're welcome to stay with us as long as you want."

"Thank you," Rosie whispered. "If you're certain I won't be a bother or cause a rift within your family, then I appreciate your hospitality."

Amanda clasped her hands. "Excellent. Michael, please fetch Rosie's trunks from the buggy."

Michael gaped.

AJ burst into laughter.

"Well, I suspected you'd invite Rosie to stay so we brought her trunks along with us," Amanda rationalized. "I knew Papa would send a ranch hand back to town with me if it was decided I'd be returning home alone."

"Oh, my girl." AJ shook his head. "Go fetch the trunks, Michael. Then find Davie and have him saddle his horse and tie it behind the buggy. He can accompany Amanda to town."

“Thank you, Papa. My husband is expecting his supper on the table by six.”

“Amanda, you’ll be the death of me,” AJ muttered.

Rosie chuckled. “At least you didn’t admit the only reason Sawyer put the trunks in the buggy was our story we were taking them to your store so I could renew my wardrobe with several new purchases.”

AJ laughed heartily and Michael snickered.

Amanda wagged a finger at both men in turn. “Don’t either of you ever breathe a word of that to my husband.”

“I promise,” AJ agreed immediately.

“I don’t know...” Michael began, grinning. “All right.”

“Thank you. Now, Rosie, enjoy your time on the ranch, and don’t worry about this situation with your grandfather. We’ll sort it out somehow.” Amanda hugged Rosie tightly before stepping back and meeting her eyes. “Promise me you won’t worry.”

“I’ll put my concern aside for now and enjoy my visit on this lovely ranch.”

AJ hugged his daughter. “Don’t you worry, Amanda. We’ll take excellent care of her.”

“Good. And spend some time with Michael. I think the two of you make a handsome couple.” Amanda chuckled. “When you’re not preparing to throttle each other, you should get along famously.”

Michael harrumphed and glared at his sister.

“No promises,” Rosie warned her new friend. “Especially the part about the throttling.”

Amanda winked at her. “Please practice restraint. He is one of my favorite brothers.”

“One?” Michael muttered. “Admit it... I’m your favorite.”

Rosie waved off the comment. “You’d still have four more,” she teased.

“True.” Amanda grinned at her and then burst out laughing. She leaned closer and whispered, “Rosie Dalton, you would make a wonderful sister-in-law someday.”

“Bite your tongue,” Rosie exclaimed, noticing Michael’s face had paled. He’d obviously heard what his sister said.

Marriage to any man was the last thing on her mind. Even if finding a prospective spouse lingered in her thoughts, after the way he’d treated her,

Michael McLennon would be relegated to the bottom of her list.

Chapter 8

The next few days flew by for Rosie while she enjoyed lazy hours spent on the Double M Ranch. She'd seldom had a moment to herself. Michael had been assigned to entertain her, leaving Rosie to wonder if AJ hadn't similar matchmaking thoughts as Amanda.

Despite being forced to endure Michael's company, Rosie loved touring the entire ranch.

He showed her the animals, and she especially enjoyed the new colts and fillies. She couldn't contain her laughter, watching the newborn calves kicking up their heels in abandon and racing about before settling on the grassland for a nap with their mothers close by. He'd regaled her with stories of the ranch and current and previous ranch hands. If she didn't know better, she might suspect he'd enjoyed himself as much as she had. He'd certainly kept a civil tongue when conversing with her. And she couldn't complain about a moment spent with him.

When not touring with Michael, Rosie occupied many hours of her new-found spare time in the kitchen, chatting with the housekeeper and helping with supper preparations. She and Mrs. Sheridan talked endlessly about so many topics, including Rosie's childhood and her mother. Only one thing the housekeeper suggested troubled Rosie. And she'd thought about it long into the night.

This morning, she sipped a cup of coffee and again contemplated Mrs. Sheridan's reasoning. In a way, the housekeeper's observation made sense. But it rankled Rosie's nerves even thinking about corresponding with her mother, especially considering how poorly she'd treated her. Most likely her mother wouldn't have even realized she left the family estate, if Rosie hadn't scrawled a brief, last-minute note.

Reluctantly, Rosie climbed the stairs to her bedroom. She settled herself at the desk by the window, picked up the pen, and opened the small pot of ink. Best she do this before she second-guessed herself.

May 18, 1889

Dear Mother,

After extensive soul-searching and an extremely generous dose of encouragement from someone I've recently met, I'm writing this letter. You are no doubt concerned where I've gotten to, my having left with only one brief note of explanation. I suppose 'Searching for my past. I'll be fine. Don't worry. Rosie' barely suffices. However, I'd made up my mind to leave and I wouldn't risk anyone attempting to stop me..

I discovered Grandmother Lucille's diaries in the attic, and I know the truth. I've traveled to Milestone, Montana Territory, where I'm pursuing information about Michael Miller, the man I believe was my real grandfather. No wonder I never felt Brighton loved Grandmother. I doubt he loved any of us. Perhaps that's painful to read, but I very much doubt you knew otherwise.

I do not plan to return east any time soon. I will write from time to time so you will know I am well. Be assured though, I will continue to pursue the truth about my biological grandfather and his very interesting life and remarkable legacy.

Don't worry about me, Mother. Frankly, I could not be happier. And I may have found a place where I truly belong.

*With my warmest regards,
Rosie*

For a moment, she considered scratching out the signature and signing the letter with the name her mother preferred she use. One more bone of contention between them for as long as she could remember.

But she hadn't felt like Rosemary since boarding the train in Boston, traveling west to discover her heritage. She enjoyed the simple ways of rural life she'd recently experienced on the ranch. No social mores and impossible standards to consider at every turn. No pretense. Just honest people with truthful opinions. Generous-hearted folks always eager to help. Despite the question of her family history still hanging in the air, Rosie Dalton felt more like a regular person than ever before.

She quickly folded the pages and sealed the envelope, leaving the signature as it was.

Chapter 9

June

Anna Dalton leaned back in the buggy, struggling to keep a civil tongue. She couldn't believe the rudeness she'd encountered since arriving in this backwoods Montana town yesterday.

When she inquired of the shopkeeper where she could acquire suitable accommodations, he'd delivered her to the boarding home of the most disagreeable woman she'd ever met in her entire life. Spending one night enduring the company of Mrs. Landers in her establishment would suffice for anyone. How that poison-tongued woman made a living providing a roof over anyone's head would forever remain a mystery to Anna. If the people on this ranch didn't offer her accommodations until she could arrange suitable transport for her daughter and herself back to Boston, Anna hadn't any notion what she'd do.

"How much farther?" Anna demanded of the driver. She intended to collect Rosemary and bring her back to Boston where she belonged. The girl turned twenty this spring, and she should be married before it was too late.

Anna silently thanked the three gentlemen who worked for Woodley Enterprises and offered to purchase the business from her following James' untimely passing in February. She'd never cared much for commerce of any kind, but her grandfather, father, and husband had almost worshipped the goings-on within the four walls of the family business. Investments, land purchases, mining rights, and a dozen other endeavors, none of which she understood one iota. But she had to admit, the generated profits had provided the family, her included, with a more-than-comfortable income over the decades. After the reading of the will, however, she couldn't wait to rid herself of the responsibility, indeed the utter nuisance, the company now represented in her life.

"Only a half hour more," Billy Turner from the livery muttered from the seat beside her.

Anna had forked over a pretty penny to convince him to close his business and bring her out to the Double M. At least, she hadn't been bored by mundane conversation; the fellow hadn't spoken a dozen words to her all morning.

A half hour more? Anna blinked back tears. Why had she decided to follow her daughter to this god-forsaken place? Rosemary's letter had shocked her to the depth of her core, reading the details of her journey. Believing some fellow in Montana was her grandfather. Such an absurdity. Where did the girl come up with such an outlandish idea? And claiming she'd discovered this nonsense in her grandmother's diaries? Anna wasn't even aware of any diaries.

Anna couldn't count the number of times her daughter had embarrassed her with some silly project or committed an inexcusable faux pas at a social event. She never knew what the girl would try next, but working her way up a single rung on Boston's social ladder had never been of interest to her. "Young lady, you've truly outdone yourself this time," she muttered aloud.

Anna had finally received the monies from the sale of the family business, and the funds had been deposited in her account at the bank just prior to her leaving. Now, she could negotiate a suitable husband for her daughter and see her married. This money would secure a bright future for Rosemary, as well as sustain Anna and ensure she retained her well-earned place in society.

Rosemary seemed a troubled child from the beginning. At least, it had appeared so to Anna. She'd never wanted any children, and by limiting her husband's visits to her bedroom and through learned methods of preventing such a thing from occurring, she'd been lucky. But she'd let her guard down once and look what happened? Being with child at age thirty-four had almost been the death of her. Literally. Had the doctor not been so well-trained, she may very well have succumbed to her complications from delivering the child. Fever. Bleeding. Anna shivered just thinking about the ordeal she'd endured. But thankfully, she'd survived. And what thanks did she receive from the child? Being forced halfway across the country to correct Rosemary's ridiculous beliefs about this invented grandfather and then return the silly girl home.

Anna closed her eyes. Images of a wooden cabin in the woods which lacked even the most basic of amenities flashed through her mind. Thoughts

of smelly animals in a rickety old barn falling in on itself added to her distress. What would possess her daughter to travel to Montana on this wild goose chase? She would never forgive Rosemary for her thoughtlessness. As if her husband's sudden passing hadn't been enough to contend with these past months, now she'd been forced to set out on this rescue. She could have ignored her friends who suggested she search for her daughter and simply left the child to pursue her own initiatives. But Anna might have appeared uncaring and selfish in the eyes of her upper-society peers, and that could never happen.

Anna jolted awake. She must have dozed off. "What did you say?" she muttered, straightening on the seat.

"We're here," Billy repeated as he drove the buggy up to a large two-story house.

Anna gaped at the structure surrounded by a short and sturdy-looking white wooden fence. She glanced around at the lovely gardens and the other well-maintained buildings in the immediate vicinity. "Where are we?"

"The Double M Ranch, ma'am." Billy pulled on the reins and the horses halted with a final jolt. "That was where you said you wanted to go."

"Yes... but... *this* is the Double M Ranch?" she exclaimed.

"That it is." Billy leapt down from the seat and reached out his hand. "Need some help out of the buggy, ma'am?"

Anna patted her head, ensuring her hat remained in place. She straightened the jacket on her traveling suit and stood. "Thank you. I would appreciate that."

Feet firmly planted on the ground a few moments later, Anna strode toward the front entrance of the house. A black and white dog popped out from under the veranda and darted toward her, barking furiously. "That will be enough!" she shouted at the creature.

The dog stopped dead in his tracks and stared at her.

"Go away." Anna waved her hand. "You heard me, you horrid beast. Go away."

The dog slunk back to where it came from. Anna took a deep breath, walked up the wide veranda steps, and knocked on the front door. She glanced at the driver.

"Got quite the way with critters, ma'am," he called, amusement evident on his face.

Anna ignored him and knocked again. "Obviously, they haven't a butler," she muttered, impatient with waiting.

Suddenly, the door flew open and a middle-aged woman stood smiling. "Goodness, do excuse the delay. You caught me taking my bread out of the oven."

Anna gaped at the woman. "Yes, well, I'm here to see Rosemary Dalton. I'm under the impression she's visiting here."

"Come in. Come in." The woman waved Anna inside as she glanced toward the buggy. "Do you plan on staying awhile? Billy's unloading your trunks and setting them on the ground."

"He's doing what?" Anna shrieked and stormed outside, clasp the veranda railing with a white-knuckled grip. "What do you think you're doing? Those are Louis Vuitton trunks and you've piled them in the dirt!"

"Gotta git back to town." Billy hefted the third and final trunk out of the back and set it beside the others. "Enjoy your stay, ma'am." He returned to the driver's seat, flicked the reins, and headed the rig back the way he'd come.

Anna stood, speechless.

"Appears you're staying with us awhile," the woman called from the veranda. "Come back inside and I'll have one of the boys bring those trunks in at noon."

Anna looked heavenward. At least, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. No chance of any rain ruining her expensive trunks. She returned to the house, removed her hat, and set it and her reticule on the table by the door. "Please summon Rosemary for me. We need to talk immediately."

Mrs. Sheridan waved a hand. "You'll have to wait. Rosie is out riding with Michael at the moment. Come into the kitchen and we'll have a cup of tea while we wait."

Anna straightened. She'd never shared tea with one of the servants in her life, and she didn't intend to start now. And certainly not in the kitchen of all places. "Thank you, no. I'll wait in the parlor." She offered one of her best smiles. "Which way would that be?"

"Who do we have here?"

Anna turned toward the male voice. A tall, gray-haired man with a striking physique for his age was walking toward her. She stuck out her hand. "I'm Anna Wentworth Dalton from Boston. I'm here to see my daughter, Rosemary."

The man shook her hand and then stood hands on hips. "I'm A. J. McLennon, owner of the Double M. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Thank you." Anna patted her hair. "This woman informed me my daughter, Rosemary, is out riding. I'm not certain what that means."

"She's riding with my son. On a horse. A lovely little mare. The both of them have taken a shine to each other. Rosie rides her almost every day."

"A horse?" Anna exclaimed. "Surely, you're mistaken. Rosemary doesn't ride horses."

"Actually, when she arrived she assured us she's ridden for years. Went riding with her myself one day. She's quite the accomplished young horsewoman." AJ chuckled. "Come into the parlor and we'll have a chinwag until Rosie returns."

"Rosemary," Anna corrected him. And she hadn't a clue what a chinwag was but she hoped it might be a cold drink. The buggy ride from Milestone had taken much longer than she'd anticipated and she was quite parched.

"Could you bring us some cold lemonade, Mrs. Sheridan?" AJ called as he strolled down the hallway.

"Be ready in a jiffy." The woman walked in the opposite direction.

Anna assumed Mrs. Sheridan must be the housekeeper or cook. Perhaps both. "If I may impose, my trunks are outside on the ground." Anna pointed toward the door. "Do you have a servant who might bring them inside? The driver assumed I'd be staying for a while."

AJ waved off her request. "Don't got any servants here, ma'am. Got three sons living here, though. The boys will bring them in later."

Anna heaved a sigh. Apparently, procrastination ran rampant in Montana. No one seemed the least bit concerned with the proper care of a guest's luggage. She couldn't tend to the chore herself, so she followed her host into the parlor and awaited the arrival of the cold lemonade. At least, the ranch owner intended to provide a cold beverage on her arrival.

The grandeur of his magnificent home surprised her beyond belief. No cabin in the woods here. "You have a lovely home, Mr. McLennon," Anna offered the compliment as she seated herself on a silk upholstered sofa.

"The previous owner built it and we've maintained the house over the years. Served my wife and me well, raising six children, and the first grandchild arrived a couple years back." AJ seated himself in a rocking chair beside the unlit fireplace.

“You’re married.”

“I’m a widower. Edna passed a few years ago.”

“My condolences. I’m a recent widow myself. My husband passed away suddenly a few months back.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” AJ leaned back in his chair. “Where was I? Oh, yes, I was telling you about my family. Two of my married sons and their wives live here, and another son lives on a neighboring ranch with his wife. Still another son and his wife live in Chicago. My daughter and her husband live in Milestone. Only Michael remains single. With so many of us under one roof, the house is full to the brim. Noisy most of the time, full of love always.”

“Remarkable. Our family has lived on my grandfather’s estate in Boston for generations also,” Anna remarked, leaving out any mention of the *full of love* part. That had hardly been the way of it with her family. She doubted there’d been one genuinely happy marriage in the lot of them.

The housekeeper arrived with a tray holding a large jug of lemonade and several glasses.

“Thank you, Nellie. I’ll pour our drinks.” AJ stood and took the tray from her.

“Dinner will be ready in a half hour,” she commented on her way out the door, calling, “enjoy your chat.”

“Thank you,” AJ replied. He poured two glasses of lemonade and handed one to Anna. “Here’s to your health.”

Anna smiled. “Thank you. And to yours.” She drank a third of the contents and then felt her face reddening. Very unladylike, but she’d been so thirsty she couldn’t have stopped herself at one sip if she’d tried. “Goodness, that is delicious.”

“Nellie makes the best lemonade.” AJ chuckled. “Of course, I thought that of Edna also. Seems women just know these things.”

Anna nodded and reserved comment. Having grown up in an estate house with servants her entire life, she wouldn’t know the first thing about making lemonade or anything else in a kitchen. “When do you suppose Rosemary will return?”

“Oh, should be any time now. Michael wouldn’t miss a meal on a bet, and Rosie loves Mrs. Sheridan’s potato salad which I recall hearing her mention was on the noon menu this morning.”

Anna glanced at the watch pinned to her traveling suit. *Eleven forty.* “Then I look forward to seeing my daughter again.”

“I don’t recall Rosie tellin’ us you’d be comin’ for a visit,” AJ observed.

“Well, this is a bit of a spur-of-the-moment trip.” Anna shifted in her chair, ignoring his insistence in calling her daughter that horrid nickname Rosemary’s grandmother had used. “A bit of a surprise for both of us, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt Rosie will be surprised.” AJ polished off his lemonade and set the glass on the small table beside the rocker. “Yes, sir, she’ll be quite surprised.”

“What do you mean?”

“From what she told us, you two aren’t... what’s the word?” AJ scratched his chin. “You aren’t that close. Not real motherly. Daughterly.”

“Well, I only recently received a letter from Rosemary, telling me about her little journey here. I thought I’d join her.” Anna smiled, clasping the glass in her hand. What had her daughter told these people? Surely, their dirty laundry hadn’t been shared with veritable strangers.

“Mighty thoughtful of you, ma’am.” AJ slid forward on his chair. “Comin’ all this way to ensure your daughter was well.”

“Yes, I thought so, too,” Anna blurted, then thought perhaps that sounded a bit boastful and haughty. “But what mother wouldn’t.” She added the last part to soften the comment in case AJ had misinterpreted it.

Anna heard a commotion in the hallway and she smiled when she recognized her daughter’s voice. “I believe Rosemary has returned from her ride.”

“So it would seem,” AJ muttered and strode toward the doorway. “Michael. Rosie. Come into the parlor, please.”

Rosie bounded into the room ahead of Michael and halted in her steps. She gaped at AJ’s visitor. “Mother. What on earth are you doing here?”

Chapter 10

Anna leaned against the back of the sofa and stared at her daughter, speechless.

Rosemary wore woolen trousers and a horribly faded shirt fraying at the sleeves. She held a battered old hat she'd removed from her head revealing her hair styled carelessly in a bun. The long strands had loosened from the pins during the day and barely remained together at the nape of her neck. For goodness sake, what had Rosemary been up to? And more importantly, thank goodness none of Anna's friends were here to witness this spectacle Rosemary was making of herself.

In her daughter's haste to leave home, she must have forgotten to pack a riding habit. If Rosemary even owned one. Anna hadn't been aware her daughter rode horses in Boston. A rather unladylike activity in Anna's opinion and something she would have forbidden had she known.

"Hello, Mother," Rosemary offered. "I apologize for my outburst, but you were the last person I expected to see today."

"Yes, well, I've clearly arrived not a moment too soon. Whatever are you wearing?" Anna waved her hand, dismissively. "Go to your room and change into something suitable immediately."

Rosemary glanced down at her clothes. "Did no one tell you I'd gone riding?"

"Well, it has been mentioned," Anna huffed. "I'd expected to see you return wearing a proper riding habit, not looking like a... a common..."

"Careful, ma'am." AJ turned and faced his guest. "My daughters-in-law and daughter wear trousers and boots when they're riding. I don't see anything your daughter's wearing that you should find fault with. Fancy riding habits are for pleasure riding, but when helping out around the ranch, our womenfolk dress accordingly."

"Goodness sakes, Rosemary certainly wouldn't have been working." Anna laughed at the very idea.

"Mother, I accompanied Michael while he checked on new calves to ensure they were doing well. He permitted me to help him and I loved it." Rosemary smiled at AJ. "AJ, I have never had so much fun in ages. Those

calves are absolutely adorable. Thank you so much for suggesting I go riding today.”

Anna gasped.

AJ smiled. “I thought you’d enjoy learning firsthand what my sons do on the ranch.”

“I couldn’t have had a more delightful day,” Rosie gushed.

“It was my understanding my daughter’s here after wrongly interpreting some outlandish words she read in a decades old diary.” Anna waved her hand at Rosemary’s outfit and then glared at her host. “So *this* is your doing?”

“Mother, don’t be so rude. AJ has been extremely gracious.” Rosemary glanced at Michael and then his father. “Please accept my apology on Mother’s behalf. Clearly, she must be exhausted after her travels.”

“No need to apologize. Your mother’s behavior in no way reflects upon your character.” AJ touched her arm. “You’re a lovely young lady, even dressed for the barn and with your hair coming out of the bun. Reminds me of Amanda when she’d help her brothers, and then rush into my study to tell me about the exciting time she had. And I’m happy you enjoyed your day. Go spruce yourself up for dinner and don’t give your mother’s poor manners another thought.”

Anna gasped. “I won’t be insulted by this man.”

Rosemary smiled. “Good. That means you won’t be staying. Find your way back to town, Mother. Safe trip home to Boston.” She turned on her heel and strode out of the parlor.

Anna’s hand flew to her mouth.

AJ chuckled. “Your daughter’s quite the spirited young lady.”

“I’ve never been so mortified.” Anna patted her hair, feeling her face reddening. How could Rosemary speak to her like that, and in front of a total stranger no less. Rosemary had been headstrong her entire life, but her treatment of her own mother today was unforgiveable.

“From what I said? Or from your daughter’s dismissal?” AJ quirked an eyebrow.

“Both.” Anna straightened in her seat. “If Rosemary thinks I’m leaving already, after traveling all this way... well, she has another—”

“Mrs. Sheridan will show you to an upstairs room.” AJ smiled. “Of course, you’ll stay with us. I’m as interested as anyone in solving this

matter of identifying your father. Although, I'm afraid at this point your daughter and I hold differing views on the matter."

"My father?" Anna blurted. "My father was Brighton Wentworth."

"Well, ma'am," AJ said, shrugging. "If those entries in your mother's diary hold any water, then..."

"Then what?"

"She claimed Michael Miller was your father. Of course, I'm not believing that for a minute, so there must be some other explanation. Which we'll get to the bottom of in good time. For now, settle into your room and freshen up before dinner if you like."

"You've admitted you don't believe this rubbish for a minute, and I most certainly agree with you." Anna stood and straightened the skirt on her traveling suit. "The entire idea is preposterous."

"Doesn't put your mother in a good light. But don't mean there ain't some truth to what she wrote." AJ headed for the door. "Of course, it's not our intention in any way to shame your mother or her memory. But the words are there in her own handwritin' according to Rosie. For now, we're just goin' by what's in front of our noses."

"I would appreciate all of you poking your noses in someone else's business, and leave them out of mine," Anna blurted. "I've never been so humiliated. What Rosemary is claiming would mean I was conceived outside of marriage. Father must be rolling in his grave at the very idea."

"I suppose it depends on which father you're referring to," AJ muttered on his way to the kitchen, leaving Anna standing open-mouthed in the hallway.

Soon, Anna found herself in a lovely upstairs guest room with plenty of light amid a stunning pale blue and lilac décor. She slumped onto the edge of the bed, the weight of the world on her shoulders. How would she ever face her friends if Rosemary's claim was proven true? Could she succeed in containing the information to the few people in Montana who might become apprised of the name of her true father? Should the man be proven someone other than Brighton Wentworth? No one in her social circle in Boston could ever learn such a thing. She'd become a laughing stock. Fooled all these years. And by her own mother no less.

Anna splashed cool water on her face from the basin on the vanity then changed from her traveling suit into a dress more suitable for dinner. Finally, she re-styled her hair in a bun and pinched her cheeks. She wasn't

certain if someone would summon her when the meal was about to be served, or should she return to the parlor for an aperitif before being escorted to the dining room? Montana's western social habits couldn't be more foreign to her.

Just then a loud knock drew her from her thoughts. She hurried over and opened the door, discovering Rosemary standing there wearing a lovely pink and green floral dress. And her daughter had washed her face and fixed her hair again.

"Rosemary, you look lovely," Anna exclaimed.

Her daughter stood staring. "Is... is that what you're wearing to dinner?"

Anna glanced down at the blue silk gown with the flowing skirt. "I wanted to look my best my first meal here."

"It's a bit... fancy for... never mind. Dinner will be on the table if we don't hurry." Rosemary turned and strode toward the stairway.

"Goodness, is there a fire?" Anna called, hoisting her skirts and hurrying after her daughter. "Do walk in a more ladylike fashion."

"Sorry. I'll shorten my stride." Rosemary descended the stairs, as demurely as if arriving at one of her mother's infamous evening balls hosted solely to impress her society friends. "Do you suppose someone will announce us?"

"Now you're teasing me," Anna scolded her, following her daughter into the dining room.

Anna stopped in her tracks and glanced at the collection of young people at the table. These must be the sons and the daughters-in-law the ranch owner had mentioned. "Hello, everyone. My apologies for arriving late."

"Not late at all, ma'am," AJ offered and proceeded to introduce everyone.

Anna's mind buzzed with names and how everyone was related to him. Jackson and daughter-in-law, Lily. Adam, a twin son, and wife, Willow. Other twin son, Simon, and his wife, Violet, were visiting today from their Triple C Ranch which adjoined the Double M. And youngest son, Michael, who'd been riding with Rosemary. Goodness, even the housekeeper was permitted to eat at the same table as the family. Was that common practice in the west? Anna certainly had a lot to learn about customs and whatnot in these backwoods.

“I’m delighted to meet all of you, and I’m certain in time I will remember all of your names,” Anna admitted to her shortcoming. Usually she forgot names as quickly as she heard them, purely from lack of interest. She needed to remember these people, however, to remain on the good side of the ranch owner.

AJ assigned Jackson to bless the food, and then Anna enjoyed the simple meal. Everyone ate robustly; there wasn’t another word for it. She’d never witnessed the disappearance of food so rapidly in her life. Montana men possessed the most voracious appetites she’d ever seen.

“What’s for dessert, Mrs. Sheridan?”

Anna wracked her brain until she recalled the fellow’s name was Adam, in charge of horses, if her memory served.

“Apple pie. And ice cream made this morning.” The housekeeper began clearing dishes and Anna almost fell off her chair when Rosemary popped off her chair and helped the other women with the chore.

“Everyone wants pie, I assume. Would you like a slice, Mother?” Rosemary inquired, her hands filled with empty plates and cutlery.

“Yes... thank you... that would be lovely.” Anna smiled at her daughter who promptly disappeared into the kitchen.

The sound of a crying baby caught Anna’s attention.

The woman she’d been introduced to as Lily chuckled, balancing several platters in her hands. “Edward allowed me to eat my entire meal before interrupting, but please excuse me. It appears I’ll be having my dessert in the kitchen.” She hurried out through the door closing it behind her.

Anna gaped, shaking her head. “The baby is kept in the kitchen?”

AJ laughed heartily. “Edward sleeps in a crib while his mother helps prepare meals. Lily will feed him and then have her pie afterward.”

Anna couldn’t think of a single thing to add. She’d relied on her daughter’s nanny and a wet nurse to care for her child, freeing Anna from the responsibility. Which had suited her just fine. Apparently, a wet nurse wasn’t the habit out here in the west. Of course, she hadn’t a clue how old the child was.

“Here we are,” Rosemary called as she entered the room with a tray filled with dessert plates each holding a slice of pie and generous scoop of ice cream. “Mrs. Sheridan will be in with the rest of them in a minute.”

“Did she get to Edward first?” AJ inquired.

Rosemary chuckled. "She's doing the changing before Lily feeds him. Perhaps I'd better fetch the rest of the plates before a scuffle breaks out among your sons."

AJ chuckled. "Might be wise."

"Surely, you're joking," Anna blurted.

"Don't get between my boys and their food. You might lose an arm." AJ winked at her.

Anna leaned back in her chair. "Now, I know you're joking."

"No, ma'am. If Mrs. Sheridan's pie is on the plate, I'd gnaw your arm off clear to the elbow," Michael teased.

Everyone burst into laughter, including Anna who was seated beside Michael.

"AJ, may I please be assigned a different seat for the next meal?" Anna played along.

"I'll see what I can do," he promised, winking at her again.

Anna was slightly put off by the teasing. Meals at her home in Boston were sedate affairs, where proper manners ruled and only the most mundane topics were discussed. Never strictly forbidden topics such as politics or religion, of course, or her mother would have scolded the person initiating the discussion. Her father would discuss particularly interesting happenings in the city or at work on occasion. The family ate in silence the majority of the time, everyone lost in his or her own thoughts. And the servants would never be invited to sit with them.

The pleasant camaraderie among the friendly rural family seated around the simply set table was totally unexpected. Perhaps the novelty of the idea fascinated her daughter and led to her comment about enjoying her visit here. Anna wasn't certain how she felt about these people, so different from herself. Her goal had been to return Rosemary to their Boston home at the earliest convenience. Now, she considered it prudent to learn more about the outlandish claims regarding her parentage. Surely this ranch hadn't been the place of her conception. But if what her mother wrote in her diaries was to be believed, then these McLennon people became owners under false pretense. If indeed she was proven the daughter of this Michael Miller person, hadn't a miscarriage of justice occurred? Wouldn't it mean Anna should have been the rightful person to inherit the Double M and not some ranch hand her father had employed?

Anna excused herself after the meal and returned to her room for an afternoon nap. She'd given herself a headache, running all these questions and possibilities through her mind. She might have been this man's daughter, and if that were proven the case, the ranch should have been hers. But Anna would have to come to grips with the fact she was conceived out of wedlock. A bas... She couldn't even think the word. She'd worry about all of this once she'd learned more.

After tossing and turning for more than an hour, she drifted off to a restless sleep and dreamt about huge, angry, long-horned cattle chasing her as she stumbled through a meadow. She awoke with a start, heart pounding.

"Why would anyone willingly live on a ranch?" she muttered.

Chapter 11

Next day, Rosie accompanied her mother into the study to discuss the situation in more detail. AJ poured everyone a cup of coffee from the pot Mrs. Sheridan had set on a nearby table. Rosie suspected dozens of questions buzzed in her mother's mind, but Anna demonstrated respectful restraint so far. In fact, they'd enjoyed a pleasant evening together last night. But the moment AJ settled into the rocking chair across from the sofa they shared, her mother leaned back and glared at him.

"Please tell me about this Michael Miller fellow," Anna demanded, taking a sip of the hot brew.

AJ slowly swirled the contents of his cup for a moment and then blew on the beverage. He raised it to his lips and took a sip. "Mrs. Sheridan makes the best cup of coffee. Sam Perkins should take lessons. You need to chew the stuff he serves at the cooperage."

Rosie glanced at her mother who sat patiently waiting. Anna's outward composure didn't fool Rosie for a moment. Silent fuming lurked behind her mother's passive expression.

AJ's hands rested in his lap and he stared at the cup he grasped. "I'll start by saying there wasn't a better man born. Michael Miller would give a total stranger the shirt off his back if the man needed one."

Anna waved her hand, dismissively. "I would imagine the same could be said of hundreds of men."

"You're right," AJ conceded. "But there were several layers to the man. Generous. Hard-working. Spiritual. Fair-minded and non-judgmental. He respected everyone, no matter whether the fellow was one of the richest men in the copper mining industry or a Chinese immigrant who barely spoke a word of English but worked endless hours without complaint. All men were of equal worth in his eyes."

"He sounds like someone who'd be well-liked," Rosie commented.

AJ nodded. "And respected by all in return. But the man had a wicked sense of humor, and he loved nothing better than a good prank."

Rosie slid to the edge of her seat. "Tell us some of them."

“Well, let’s see now. One night Michael snuck into the bunkhouse. It was summer and hot without a breath of air. Every ranch hand was asleep, down to their barely covered, if you get my meaning.”

Rosie felt herself blushing, knowing what he meant.

“Michael gathered up the fellows’ shirts and tied all the sleeves together ending up with one long row of shirts which he hung out on the clothesline, stretched from one end to the other.” AJ chuckled. “His ranch hands had a dickens of time in the morning, me included. First, finding where our shirts were and then attempting to get them all untied.”

Rosie smiled, imagining their confusion. “Michael was quite the fellow.”

“Great sense of humor. But a stubborn streak also. One year Michael set his heart on breaking this particular wild stallion he’d captured. Totally black, the most beautiful horse you’ve ever laid eyes on. Well, Michael tried his best, but you’ve never seen a fellow covered in more bruises and cuts. Only time I ever heard Michael cussing, when he tried over and over again to tame that horse. I’d reckoned that stallion would kill Michael before he’d ride him. After months of trying, Michael finally came to the same realization. He admitted defeat and returned the horse to the wild.”

“You must have had so many humorous times on this ranch,” Rosie suggested.

“We surely did. And it wasn’t always planned or plotted.” AJ chuckled. “One night everyone on the ranch woke up to a terrible ruckus coming from the henhouse. Everyone reckoned a skunk or a fox got in there and was killing the chickens. So, us ranch hands all grabbed our pistols and stumbled out of the bunkhouse. And we see Michael hightailing it across the yard from the main house toting a gun in his hand. A couple of us throw open the door and shine a lantern in there. Michael’s figuring on shooting this critter killing his chickens.”

Rosie caught herself holding her breath. “Which was it? A skunk or a fox?”

“Neither.” AJ burst into laughter. “We found one of the ranch hands curled up sound asleep in the corner. Dozens of angry hens are cackling and their wings are aflappin’, mad as all get out that this feller invaded their house and disturbed their sleep. Hens are flying from roost to roost, and there’s drunken Charlie passed out in the corner, sound asleep and snoring up a storm.”

“No,” Rosie exclaimed.

“A couple of the fellows hefted Charlie to his feet and hauled him out. Charlie’s muttering, complaining bitterly that he’s being dragged from his bed, figuring he’d crawled into the bunkhouse.”

Rosie covered her mouth with her hand, giggling. “My goodness. I’d wager he never lived that down for a while.”

AJ chuckled, nodding. “Michael gave him the nickname Henhouse, and we called him that for years. Charlie has passed now, buried up on the hill with Edna and a few others, but some of us who were here back then still mention that night from time to time. A bit of nostalgia.”

Rosie leaned back on the sofa. “The poor fellow.”

“This is all very entertaining,” Anna interjected, waving her hand. “Could we return to my questions? How did Mr. Miller start this ranch?”

Rosie glared at her mother, disapproving of her rude interruption, but their gracious host didn’t miss a beat.

“Well, Michael shared his personal history with me soon after I started working for him.” AJ leaned back and slowly rocked as he spoke, the chair emitting a soft squeak with each movement. “Despite the age difference, Michael and I became the best of friends from the beginning, and we enjoyed a good chinwag right here in this room every evening after the chores were completed.”

Rosie noticed the wistful expression on AJ’s face. “You miss him to this day, don’t you?”

AJ smiled and shrugged. “It’s that obvious?”

“Very much so,” Rosie replied, smiling.

“Michael was like a father to me. I figured growing up in Texas, I’d been around ranching enough to have soaked up every bit of knowledge I needed.” AJ chuckled. “Couldn’t have been more wrong. Taught me everything he knew about cattle ranching in Montana. Dealing with the northern weather alone set me back a peg or two. Until I faced that first life-threatening blizzard, I didn’t understand how powerless I’d feel against Mother Nature’s fury.”

“We’ve suffered through winter weather in Boston,” Anna stated, waving off AJ’s comment. “I suppose it’s equally miserable for people living in this region of the country.”

“I reckon you holed up in a cozy home sipping brandy in front of a blazing fire. Looking through a window watching the pretty snowflakes

falling. Wondering what the staff are preparing for your supper.” AJ shook his head. “Our cowhands might have found themselves miles from shelter surrounded by nothing but snow-covered grassland and several hundred head of cattle. So cold they couldn’t feel their feet. Worried they’d freeze to death seated on a horse standing in snow up to its chest and barely able to move from the spot.”

Rosie gasped. “Surely, you’re exaggerating.”

“Wish I were. Over the years, we’ve sadly lost a few ranch hands caught out in a storm.” AJ met eyes with Rosie. “We have a few line shacks on the ranch outfitted with grub and woodstoves to temporarily shelter ranch hands or strangers alike. Anyone finding themselves suddenly caught in a storm.”

Anna sat speechless. A situation Rosie had seldom witnessed.

Rosie slid forward in her chair. “Do your ranch hands frequently endanger their lives during inclement months while checking on your stock?”

“The ranch hands read the skies and usually know when to expect a storm. Sometimes, we’re fooled and the weather takes an unexpected turn for the worse, but we plan ahead for storms.”

Rosie shifted on the sofa. “What do you do?”

“Well, the cattle know enough to seek shelter out on the range. In the barns, a couple ranch hands stay with the horses or cattle. We have areas set up with small woodstoves, cupboards filled with canned grub, and bunks for sleeping. The men feed and water the stock until the storm blows itself out.” AJ chuckled. “Sometimes a storm will rage for two or three days. If the men entertain themselves with cards, could be a friendly handshake or fisticuffs depending on who’s the victor by the time the weather improves.”

Rosie laughed.

Anna cleared her throat and glared at AJ. “Would you please answer my question? What kind of man was Mr. Miller?”

“Sorry, ma’am, wasn’t my intention to ignore your question.” AJ halted his rocking and met Anna’s eyes. “Michael was what some folks would call a dreamer. A lot of fellers have fanciful ideas and outlandish vision, but Michael wasn’t anything like them. Michael Miller dreamed big, but he wasn’t a stranger to hard work and he made his dreams come true.”

“Like starting this ranch,” Anna suggested.

“Exactly. He worked in mining and made a small fortune. He partnered with others in mercantile stores selling supplies directly to the miners. He partnered with other cattle ranchers in joint ventures to share the profits or minimize occasional loses.” AJ smiled. “When it appeared mining would be controlled by a few industry kings, he sold the majority of his interests. Took his money and moved on to his next dream, including owning his own cattle ranch. By then he’d found the perfect location, and he built this huge home, planning to marry a lovely woman and raise a whole passel of young’uns one day.”

“So, he did marry,” Anna interjected.

AJ shook his head. “Never. Told me once long ago he’d met the woman for him, but it never worked out.”

“*It never worked out* is how he explained away my mother?” Anna huffed, eyes blazing.

“He never mentioned the woman’s name. She could have been Lucille Woodley.” AJ leaned forward, placing his arms on his thighs and tenting his fingers. “I’ve thought about this long and hard. Knowing Michael, he definitely would have respectfully asked Mr. Woodley to court Lucille. I reckon a wealthy feller like Woodley refused Michael’s request, intending to take his family back to Boston.”

“If his business affairs had been completed by then, he wouldn’t leave his daughter on her own and simply return home,” Rosie speculated. “If Lucille had insisted on marriage or if she’d eloped, Grandfather wouldn’t have had any choice but to leave Lucille in Montana.”

AJ leaned back and smiled at Rosie. “Would have changed both of their lives in every way if that had happened.”

Anna gasped. “I would have been raised on a ranch?”

Rosie reached for her mother’s hand. She’d permitted her mother to read the diary entries last night. Afterward, her mother had climbed the stairs and returned to her room without a word.

AJ shook his head. “I don’t believe you’re Michael’s daughter. If he couldn’t court your mother, he would have stepped away immediately. And he certainly wouldn’t have compromised her virtue before she left.”

“But he did,” Anna argued. “I was born nine months following Lucille’s return home. Although she insisted my arrival was several weeks premature.”

“True, but that doesn’t prove Michael was your father,” Rosie said. “Grandmother could have met someone during the journey home. Or had an affair with a man immediately upon her return to Boston.”

“You believe your grandmother was a girl of loose morals?” Anna scoffed. “Doesn’t say much for your opinion of her character.”

AJ leaned forward. “No one is suggesting anything of the sort, and we certainly don’t think poorly of your mother. Any number of circumstances could explain why she found herself with child.”

Anna’s face paled. “Surely, you don’t believe someone forced himself on her?” she exclaimed, her question accompanied by a horrified expression.

“Mother, you must keep an open mind. Anything is possible. But if that happened, then Grandmother certainly was not at fault.” Rosie squeezed her hand and placed her other arm around her mother’s shoulder.

AJ shrugged. “We don’t know one way or the other.”

“I refuse to accept such a thing.” Anna shook her head, vehemently. “I will never believe myself the result of...” She left the thought hanging.

Rosie sympathized with her mother. Believing yourself the result of such a heinous act, would deeply injure anyone’s sensibilities. “I agree with you. Nothing of the sort happened. Had such a horrid thing occurred, Grandmother would have hinted at it in her diary entries.”

AJ finished his coffee. “You’re right. We’re simply speculating at possibilities. Even the most unlikely things need consideration. There’s a reason you were born, Anna, but I truly doubt Michael Miller fathered you.”

“We’re simply going by what Mother wrote in her diary, and what she claimed her father told her. He refused to allow Mr. Miller to court her. Mother was returning home to Boston and there would be no future for the two of them,” Anna summarized.

“Exactly.” Rosie met her mother’s eyes. “But how did Grandmother come to be with child?”

“And why would Mr. Miller bequeath his ranch to you?” Anna glared at AJ. “That part has me stymied. You were no more than hired help to my way of thinking.”

“From the beginning, Michael Miller and I shared a bond. When I arrived here, I was fleeing a bad situation in Texas. A situation of my own making, mind you. I was stupid and left when I should have faced the

consequences. But the matter was resolved in my favor a few years ago.” AJ smiled.

Anna glared at AJ, her expression erasing any need for words.

Rosie gleaned her mother’s poor opinion of the man, especially after hearing his confession.

“I don’t have regrets. Had things not happened as they did, I never would have come to Montana and met Michael or learned so much from him. We didn’t become like family, we *were* family. On his deathbed, Michael begged me to look after the ranch, having no idea what was coming. I reckoned the property would be sold or a relative would assume ownership. When the lawyer told me I’d inherited the ranch, I couldn’t believe Michael’s generosity.”

“And no other family ever came forward?” Anna blurted.

“Not a single soul. Sourdough Sammy had worked on the ranch with Michael from day one, and Sammy confided that Michael had recognized potential in me and seen my desire to excel and succeed. I believe Michael knew he hadn’t any heirs and he groomed me as his successor.”

“You didn’t inherit this wonderful ranch by chance,” Rosie blurted. “You worked hard and Michael wrote his will specifically naming you to carry on his vision.”

“But only because Michael had never been told he’d fathered a child,” Anna insisted.

“If that’s proven true.” Rosie reminded her mother.

AJ nodded. “I honored Michael’s wishes and I’ve never let him down. I married a good woman. Edna came to Milestone and taught school for a couple years. She was thirteen years younger than me, but we fell in love anyway. We married and raised six wonderful children who are hard-working, honest citizens. We built the ranch to the success you see today, leaving a legacy for generations to come.”

“Only because Mother never told Mr. Miller he’d fathered an heir.” Anna stood. “I’ve heard enough.” She turned on her heel and stormed out of the room.

Chapter 12

AJ leaned back on the buggy seat and glanced at the woman beside him. Well-dressed, every hair in place, back straight as a poker, Anna Dalton appeared as majestic as royalty. Her unbending attitude matched the image perfectly.

Anna firmly believed herself the daughter of Michael Miller, and so far there'd been no convincing her otherwise. AJ flicked the reins and the horses moved forward, after their brief rest by the river.

"We'll carry on along now." AJ couldn't be more frustrated with Anna's close-mindedness in the matter of her parentage, but he wasn't giving up on his own beliefs. Learning who Anna's true father was had become his sole goal, and he couldn't be more thankful Jackson had taken over management of the Double M a few years back.

While Rosie Dalton had proven herself a delight since the moment she arrived, AJ couldn't wait to see the end to Anna's visit. He'd gladly load her in the buggy and drive her to the train in Butte, instead of taking her on a tour around the ranch. But that wouldn't help him achieve his mission to discover the woman's true parentage.

"Are we traveling to town?" Anna inquired, gazing straight ahead.

AJ chuckled. The woman was facing north. "No, we're traveling in the opposite direction. We'd reach Butte before we'd arrive in Milestone."

Anna's head pivoted. "I believe you're right. The sun is setting in the west, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am. Tends to be the way of it, every night. Whether working out on the land or pleasure riding around the ranch, a fellow best be mindful of directions at all times. Wouldn't want to find yourself too far from home at the end of the day, or totally lost and unable to find your way back to the house." AJ flicked the reins to encourage the aged gelding to continue on a little quicker. Given the opportunity, old Mick would trot toward home, knowing his feed was waiting in his stall.

"Tell me more about this ranch." Anna placed her hand on AJ's arm.

He heaved a sigh. This day seemed endless, but at least, he could try to enjoy the ride. "Well, at last estimate, we've got close to six thousand head

of cattle on the land. We suffered substantial losses two winters ago, but we've built up the numbers again."

"Losses? The cattle roamed away?"

"No, ma'am. Severe weather the winter of '87. The cattle perished from blizzards, frigid temperatures, and lack of available feed. We figured on a hard winter and reckoned we were prepared, but even we were caught short."

"How horrible."

"Some of the smaller outfits lost all or most of their herds and were totally obliterated. Many tucked tail and returned east or traveled back to Europe. We bought out a few of them, sending these fellows and their families home with a few dollars to their names, at least." AJ shook his head. "Sad to see a man's dreams shattered like that. His will too severely broken to continue. But everyone's mettle was equally tested."

"You had the resources to survive, though."

"That's true." AJ smiled. "Experience paid off and we read the signs, suspecting a severe winter might be in the making."

"That was fortunate," Anna muttered, her gazing roaming the view.

AJ visualized the cogs turning in the woman's head and wondered what she might be thinking. He probably wouldn't approve; she certainly wasn't anything like her daughter. But hopefully, she'd tire of her visit and head back to Boston and her own way of living. She certainly wasn't cut out for the hard life of ranching: complaining constantly, not rising in the morning until ten o'clock or later, and dressing every day like she was heading off to a fancy evening in town. She constantly ordered Mrs. Sheridan to do her bidding, often complaining to him that his help was disobedient if she had to wait for something. If Anna didn't leave soon, AJ feared Mrs. Sheridan might poison the woman's food or plant a rodent in her bed. He forgot himself and laughed aloud at the latter thought.

"Is something funny?"

"Sorry. Just recalled an incident with one of my sons awhile back," he lied without a moment's hesitation while patting her hand in reassurance. He turned the rig around. "We should be heading home now."

* * *

Anna had never endured such bleak landscape in her entire life. The ranch appeared nothing more than endless acres of grass and scrub and trees, surrounded by mountains and a river. Not to mention the hundreds of cattle they'd encountered during their outing. The wind hadn't been in their favor and words failed her; she wouldn't have imagined such a horrific stench. She'd overheard one of the ranch hand's comments—this land is heaven on Earth—when she and AJ stopped to say hello during the tour. Why would anyone believe such a thing?

A breeze suddenly whipped up. "I'm looking forward to a hot bath when we return," she muttered to herself, turning her head to avoid her face being battered by a blast of dust and dirt.

"Won't be a problem," AJ replied.

Anna sat in silence on the bench seat beside her host. Watching the back end of a horse all afternoon wasn't her idea of a wonderful time, but she hadn't much choice. Her thoughts wandered while they rode back to the house. She'd almost toppled off the seat when AJ told her how many acres of land the ranch spanned. Over a dozen times the size of the family estate in Boston which she'd considered substantial. What would the value of the ranch be? She couldn't ever wager a guess.

Perhaps there'd been a reason for making the arduous trip to this no man's land after all. If she could prove herself the previous owner's child, she might possibly overturn the decision to bequeath the ranch to A. J. McLennon by having herself declared the rightful benefactor. If the sale of the property netted her a tidy sum, she could live the remainder of her days exceptionally comfortable. And without a doubt, an even fatter bank account would guarantee her movement up another rung or two on Boston society's ladder.

But how would she accomplish such a thing? Several ideas raced through her mind and by the time the rig pulled up outside the main house, she'd decided on her next move.

Anna touched AJ's arm and met his eyes. "Do you suppose someone could drive me into Milestone tomorrow?"

Chapter 13

Rosie glared at her mother. “You cannot be serious?”

“I most certainly am. AJ has been lying to you.” Anna raised her chin, defiant and resolved to her own way of thinking. “There’s only one reason he’s working so steadfastly to convince everyone Michael Miller wasn’t my father. AJ is fully aware of the fact he inherited this ranch under false pretenses.”

Rosie laughed. “Mother, you couldn’t be more wrong.”

“Am I? You read the truth in your grandmother’s own words within those diary entries,” Anna insisted. “Michael Miller was my father. And if your grandfather hadn’t insisted Mother return to Boston... then Michael, Mother and I would have become a family.”

Rosie stood, speechless.

“I’m so angry with Mother for not telling me any of this.” Anna paced the guest bedroom floor. “Mother kept the truth from me my entire life. Even on her death bed she never breathed a word of it.”

“She would have been embarrassed or ashamed...”

“She shouldn’t have listened to her father. She should have stood up for herself and pursued a life with Michael,” Anna argued.

“Well-bred young ladies never questioned their fathers.” Rosie shivered at the very thought. She never possessed the audacity to disobey her own father.

“Michael spurned Mother, and by doing so he ruined my life.”

Anna sounded so bitter Rosie experienced a moment of sympathy. Although she didn’t agree with a single word that had come out of her mother’s mouth. “He never knew Grandmother Lucille was with child.”

“He should have known it was a possibility.”

“But Great-grandfather didn’t believe Michael would make something of himself. He was twenty years Mother’s senior, and when Lucille met him, Michael hadn’t much to show for himself except big dreams. Lucille’s father refused Michael’s request to court Grandmother, wanting a better life for his daughter with someone of equal stature in society. Michael respected that decision, despite his love for her.”

“If he was such a loving, respectful man why did Michael compromise her innocence?” Anna touched Rosie’s arm. “He would have ruined Mother’s entire life had she not married Brighton Wentworth. Considering Mother’s loveless marriage to Brighton, Michael Miller did ruin her life. I know what I’m saying is true. My own marriage hasn’t been much better. Your father was more interested in your grandfather’s business than me.”

Rosie had suspected as much; her father hadn’t had much use for her or her mother, always preoccupied with business. His obsession with Woodley Enterprises sent him to an early grave, having passed recently from issues with his heart, or so his doctor claimed. “I still believe there’s a good possibility Michael was not your father. What about the entry *I didn’t elaborate on the details*? That could mean Great-grandmother was mistaken in her assumption, and Michael Miller wasn’t responsible.”

“I’m convinced Michael fathered me.” Anna smiled. “And I’m going to ensure a mistake is righted.”

Rosie gaped. What was her mother up to now? “How do you mean, a mistake?”

“I’ll see that Michael is declared my legal father, and the proof is in that diary.”

“And what if it’s proven that he isn’t?” Rosie glared at her mother. “What if you learn that your father was someone else? Perhaps a drunkard? Or a gambler?”

“That couldn’t be possible. Mother never would have consorted with such a lowlife.” Anna shook her head. “Michael Miller was my father and he would have bequeathed this ranch to me had he known.”

“Mother, you’re basing your belief on pure speculation. There’s no possible way to prove any of this.” Rosie touched her mother’s arm. “Mr. Miller has passed. Grandmother also. We’ll never know for certain what happened between them, if anything.”

“I’m what happened. Hopefully, no one in Boston ever learns the truth of my scandalous conception. But I know the end result of Mother’s trip to Montana.”

“And you’re determined to prove it,” Rosie summarized.

“I most certainly am.” Anna wagged a finger at her daughter. “And any competent lawyer would agree with me.”

Rosie’s jaw dropped. “You’re taking this matter to a court of law?”

“Definitely. And I’ll win.” Anna stood, nose in the air.

“Win what?”

“My birthright. My father’s legacy. This ranch which should have been mine all along.” Anna beamed. “I’m going to town tomorrow to hire an attorney. Before you know it, I’ll be declared the rightful owner and I’ll see that every McLennon is banished from my ranch.”

“Mother.” Rosie’s eyes filled with tears. “You can’t do that.”

“I can and I will.”

“Over my dead body,” Rosie blurted and rushed from the room.

* * *

Michael looked toward the house and almost toppled off the corral rail when Rosie raced out the front door, down the steps, and across the yard toward the garden. What happened to cause her to rush from the house at top speed?

One word came to mind.

Anna.

What had her mother done now? Michael hopped down from the railing and strode toward the garden, catching up to Rosie in no time at all.

“What’s the matter?”

Rosie shook her head. “Nothing,” she whispered, tears streaming down her face.

“Nothing doesn’t cause a young lady to cry.” He wrapped her in his arms before he realized what he was doing. Too late to change his mind now, he held her tightly. Besides, she fit into his embrace perfectly as if she was meant for him. He shook his head, startled the ridiculous idea had even popped into his mind. He rested his chin atop her head. “Tell me what happened.”

“It’s mother,” she whispered.

No surprise there. “What did she do?”

“She’s insisting Mr. Miller was her father.”

Michael leaned back and gazed into her eyes. “We know that’s a possibility, despite what Pa believes.”

“Yes, but Mother plans to consult with a lawyer tomorrow. Using grandmother’s diaries, she intends for a judge to rule Michael Miller was her father.”

Michael tipped Rosie's chin up. His gaze settled on her luscious lips and he almost kissed her but caught himself in time. "She'll be admitting to the world that she was conceived out of wedlock. If it wasn't for Brighton Wentworth's generous heart, and I suppose conniving motives, your mother would have been born a bastard... Well, you know what I mean."

"And so does Mother." Rosie sniffed and looked him in the eye. "She has a motive of her own."

Michael wracked his brain. What more could Anna want besides the truth? Wouldn't most respectable women suppress such a realization if at all possible? "I don't understand?"

"Mother wants... She's hoping a judge will grant her ownership of what she believes should have been bequeathed to her, had Michael known the truth."

"You mean this ranch?" Michael felt the blood drain from his face. "You're joking, right?"

Rosie slowly shook her head. "She's seriously pursuing this. She's traveling to town tomorrow to hire a lawyer."

Michael blew out his breath. "Well, Jamieson Davies will laugh himself silly once he hears your mother's tale. There's no way he's going to represent Anna against the McLennons. Jamieson has been Pa's lawyer for decades."

"I'll be certain to tell Mother. And, hopefully, she'll drop this ridiculous idea." Rosie wiped her eyes with an embroidered handkerchief.

"Whether she does or she doesn't has no bearing on you." Michael smiled at her and touched her face. Soft as satin and warm. He couldn't believe he was about to say this. "Now that I've gotten to know you, I trust you completely."

"Odd turn of events considering we got off on the wrong foot when we first met," she reminded him.

"My opinion of you has changed for the better. You're remarkable. I'd planned to ask your mother's permission to court you." He trailed his fingers down her cheek.

Rosie gasped. "And now?" Her hand reached up and rested atop his.

"I'm not certain what to think about your mother. But I'm not letting her misplaced intentions dissuade me from the courting," Michael vowed. "I definitely see you in my future."

Before he realized what he was doing, he leaned down and caressed her lips with his in a quick, feathery kiss that surprised them both. "I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't have done that," he said, softly.

"You probably shouldn't have." Rosie giggled and peeked up at him, smiling mischievously. "But you could do it once again to be certain."

Michael laughed. Oh, how she tempted him, but reason won out over longing. "No, ma'am. I'm going back to work."

With that said, he strode toward the corral, leaving Rosie standing alone in the garden. McLennon men respected the women they hoped to marry one day. And he wasn't certain, but he suspected he might have found that woman.

Chapter 14

Rosie wandered into the kitchen the next morning after tossing and turning and getting very little sleep. She would never forgive her mother for her conniving scheme to selfishly declare herself the rightful owner of the Double M. Especially now, after the decades' worth of improvements the McLennon family completed which obviously increased the property's value since the day AJ inherited it back in 1855.

"Good morning," Lily greeted her. "You look worn out and it's barely eight o'clock."

"I feel limp as a washrag," Rosie muttered, slumping onto a kitchen chair. She couldn't imagine how she would ever explain what her mother had in mind. "Is Mother here?"

"Actually, she's not." Lily glanced at Mrs. Sheridan.

"She stormed into the kitchen around seven o'clock, dressed like it was Sunday morning and she was late to services," Mrs. Sheridan explained. "She demanded I find someone to drive her to Butte, which I did."

"Butte?" Rosie exclaimed. Her mother must have altered her plans after Rosie warned her the lawyer in Milestone wouldn't represent her.

"Yes, to Butte. Anna never mentioned if she'd be returning tonight or what her plans were. Jackson sent a less experienced ranch hand with her so it won't matter if the fellow's waylaid in Butte for a day or two." Mrs. Sheridan poured Rosie a cup of coffee and placed it in front of her. "Drink that, miss. You look like you need it."

Rosie felt her face flaming. So that was her mother's intentions. If the local lawyer wouldn't help her win the ranch away from AJ, as Rosie had informed her last night, Anna would move farther afield to succeed in her ploy. Rosie sipped her coffee. She couldn't believe how devious her mother had become.

Why had Rosie ever written that letter informing her mother where she'd traveled to and the reason for the trip? All of this nonsense could have been avoided if she'd kept her mother in the dark. But Rosie never considered her mother capable of such underhandedness.

"I'm furious with Mother. You wouldn't believe her intentions." Rosie wrapped her hands around the cup to warm them. She shivered slightly, chilled to the bone from lack of sleep. Or from embarrassment. Or devastation.

"Nothing would surprise me," Mrs. Sheridan muttered, standing at the woodstove and preparing a plate of eggs for Rosie and Lily.

"Try us?" Lily added. "What is she planning?"

Rosie heaved a sigh. "She's convinced Mr. Miller fathered her, and she's taken it into her head that had he known, he would have bequeathed the ranch to her, and not *some insignificant ranch hand* as she referred to AJ."

Mrs. Sheridan chuckled. "That's a stretch if I've ever heard one."

"I agree. That estate was settled decades ago." Lily occupied a chair beside Rosie. "I doubt any judge would overturn a decision made over thirty years ago."

"My thinking, too. But Mother won't hear a word of it." Rosie shook her head. "I'm so embarrassed by all of this. And I've no idea what is motivating such blatant greed."

"There's no explaining some folks' thinking," Mrs. Sheridan said, sounding every bit the wise sage.

Rosie whispered, "When I talked with Mother last night, I even confided my feelings for Michael. That he told me he intends to court me."

Lily gasped. "That's wonderful," she exclaimed, beaming. "Oh, I pray that it works out between you two."

"I couldn't be more pleased about this." Mrs. Sheridan served both young ladies their breakfasts.

"Well, even the prospect of having me become a part of the McLennon family and living on this ranch the rest of my days wasn't good enough for Mother. She went so far as to declare *I want every last McLennon off my father's ranch*." Rosie brushed at the tears slowly sliding down her cheeks.

Mrs. Sheridan gasped.

Lily shook her head. "What is that woman thinking?"

"I'm so afraid Michael will turn his back on me if she succeeds in pursuing this." Finally at age twenty, Rosie had found someone she could love. Someone who'd remain true and shared similar feelings as her. There'd been a reason for her trip to Montana and she firmly believed meeting Michael and falling in love with him had been the purpose. Now,

like Grandmother Lucille, would she lose the man of her dreams due to parental interference? The thought of such misfortune angered Rosie more than she would have believed possible. She silently vowed to attempt anything to prevent such a tragedy.

“I’ve seen how that young man looks at you. There isn’t a doubt in my mind... he’s completely smitten.” Lily reached out and grasped Rosie’s hand. “Whatever happens, Michael McLennon would never desert you. Unless I miss my guess, he’d be more than willing to team up against your mother if you asked him.”

“I’m totally on AJ’s side.” Rosie met eyes with each lady in turn. “My mother wouldn’t know a Hereford from a ground hog. Why would she demand ownership of a ranch?”

“To sell it,” Lily and Mrs. Sheridan answered in unison.

Rosie gasped. “No.”

Lily nodded. “Oh, yes.”

“Why else?” Mrs. Sheridan added. “She obviously has no use for the land or the animals or the people living and working here. She would sell the place in a heartbeat, high-tail it to Boston with a newly fattened bank account, and never look back.”

Rosie swallowed hard, bile rising in her throat. “We cannot allow such a thing to happen,” she whispered. “Poor AJ would be devastated. All of you would.”

“Absolutely.” Lily leapt off the chair. “We need to talk to AJ and Jackson about this, and the sooner the better.”

“I don’t doubt Michael has discussed the entire matter with them already, after we talked yesterday,” Rosie speculated. “He’d be foolish if he hadn’t given them a warning.”

“That would be my guess. Now sit down and eat your breakfast, ladies.” Mrs. Sheridan stood, hands on hips. “Not ten minutes after your mother left, AJ and Michael saddled up. Told me they were headed to Milestone and wouldn’t be back before supper at six.”

Rosie blew out her breath and collapsed back on her chair. “I pray they stop Mother before this entire matter gets out of hand. No one deserves to live on this ranch more than AJ and his family. No one.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Lily peeked at her son, sleeping peacefully in his crib before returning to her chair.

“Even if your mother somehow proves Michael Miller was her father, the poor man will be rolling in his grave if she so much as attempts to overturn his last wishes and remove this family from the Double M.” Mrs. Sheridan whipped off her apron and tossed it onto the kitchen table. “I need to take a walk and calm down. This foolishness isn’t good for my heart.”

Rosie gasped. “Do you have a bad heart?”

“Not that I know of, but I’m not taking chances,” Mrs. Sheridan quipped, winking at Rosie. “Besides, I should pop in and say hello to Sammy. He’s always coming up here and dropping off biscuits or something. Baked a cake this morning, and I believe I’d like to share a piece with him.”

“It’s only eight-thirty in the morning,” Lily exclaimed, stuffing a forkful of eggs into her mouth.

“Is there a rule that you can’t eat cake at eight-thirty?”

Lily met Rosie’s eyes. Rosie shrugged, enjoying her own breakfast.

“Didn’t think so.” Mrs. Sheridan slid the cake plate off the counter and took it out the door with her. “Be a couple dears when you’re done eating, and wash the breakfast dishes for me, please.”

“All right,” Lily called as the door closed behind her.

“You wash. I’ll dry,” Rosie suggested, always happy to lend a hand. “At least, she could have left each of us a slice of cake.”

Lily grinned. “Mrs. Sheridan and Sammy are quite smitten with each other. They’re always exchanging recipes or bringing each other little tidbits and treats. There’s over twenty years difference in age between them, but it doesn’t seem to matter one iota.”

“Over twenty years?”

“Sammy is seventy-three, I believe. Jackson has hinted Sammy should take it easy, but as ranch manager, my husband hasn’t had any luck finding another cook.” Lily filled the kettle and placed it on the woodstove to boil, adding a log to the fire as she spoke.

“Goodness, I wouldn’t imagine Mrs. Sheridan is much past fifty,” Rosie offered a guess.

“Fifty-one. But keeping house for the family is enough for her to handle. She’s not cooking for all the men down in the cookhouse as well.” Lily fetched the dishwashing tub and placed it on the table before pouring the steaming water into it. “Let’s get these dishes done before Edward wakes up and wants his breakfast.”

“And let’s hope Simon and AJ have a successful day in Milestone,” Rosie added. If the McLennon family were forced off the Double M Ranch, she would never forgive herself for ever reading her grandmother’s diaries and putting this miscarriage of justice in motion.

Chapter 15

Michael gazed at the darkening sky in the distant north. Rainstorm on the way, he reckoned. Might miss them here in Milestone and on the Double M, but Butte would see some wet weather today. He hoped Rosie hadn't taken it into her head to go riding today. Best if she remained at home safe and warm and dry. Why his mind had immediately wandered to the pretty easterner's well-being, he hadn't a clue. Or so he hoped to convince himself. He suspected he'd be thinking about her quite frequently, now that he'd realized the depth of her character and her true intentions for showing up at the ranch.

He'd shared Rosie's story with his pa last night, and they'd considered it wise to consult with Jamieson Davies. AJ insisted they meet with the lawyer as soon as possible to counter any action Anna planned to initiate in her pursuit to overturn Michael Miller's bequest. After Anna departed from the ranch, AJ accompanied Michael to town.

Michael rode his mare down Main Street, riding alongside his pa. The two of them tied their horses' reins to the hitching rail outside the DAVIES LAW OFFICE, and then without exchanging a word, they wandered inside.

"Good morning, Agnes," AJ greeted Jamieson's aunt who worked for him.

Agnes Davies stood when they entered the office. "Good morning, AJ. You, too, Michael."

"What is Jamieson doing this morning? We'd like to speak with him, if possible."

A few moments later, Agnes showed them into her nephew's office and the three of them discussed the matter in question at great length. After he and his father finished presenting the issue to Jamieson, Michael sat holding his breath and waited for the lawyer's opinion.

"That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," Jamieson decreed. "What's the dang woman thinking?"

"I suppose Anna truly believes her interpretation of Lucille's version in her diary is correct," AJ suggested.

“Greed,” Michael blurted. “Even Anna’s daughter, Rosie, told me her mother has no interest in the ranch except for the value it represents. If she succeeds in acquiring ownership of the Double M, Anna will sell the ranch in a heartbeat and return to city life without a moment’s hesitation.”

“City gal, you say? I’d wager you’re right in that thinking, Michael.” Jamieson leaned back in his chair.

“I refuse to believe what’s written in those diary entries.” AJ sat, arms crossed, in the chair facing the lawyer. “I won’t stop until I prove the wording false. I don’t believe Lucille was deliberately lying, but she didn’t divulge the entire truth either.”

Jamieson met his eyes. “How do you mean?”

“Knowing Michael Miller as I did, there’s no possible way he’d compromise Lucille Woodley. No chance at all. When I was a young man, Michael lectured me on respecting ladies. Don’t matter how old I was, he’d have blistered my tail feathers if he’d caught me dishonoring a young lady’s virtue. And Michael wasn’t a man to preach one thing while he partook of another.”

Jamieson leaned across his desk. “I was well acquainted with Michael Miller in his later years, and I believe you.”

“Some other fellow is Anna’s father. No one will convince me otherwise. And I’m not inventing tales to protect my inheritance of the Double M, as Anna claimed when she talked over her intentions with Rosie.”

Michael heard his father’s conviction in his voice, and his determination to search out the truth couldn’t be more evident on his face. His father would never stop trying to prove the accusation against his youngest son’s namesake. His pa would stake the ranch on his opinion being the correct one, and his father wouldn’t make the wager lightly. Mind you, if Anna had her eye on winning the Double M for herself, Michael supposed in a way his pa was actually betting the ranch he was right.

“Well, AJ, if you don’t believe Michael Miller fathered that gal, then who do you reckon it was?” Jamieson ventured.

“That’s a damn good question.”

“And we need to find an answer before that blasted easterner steals your ranch out from under you.” Jamieson pointed a finger at AJ. “I’m not sitting by and allowing that to happen.”

“Be warned, Rosie’s mother left for Butte this morning to hire herself an attorney,” Michael chimed in. “No idea who she has in mind, but we’d best be prepared for anything.”

“There are only a few attorney’s in Butte, and I’m friends with most of them.” Jamieson scratched his chin. “I’ll send off a telegraph to a few of the more prominent ones like Kenneth Sturgeon and Randolph Barnes. Then I’ll wait to hear if Anna has retained anyone.”

AJ stood and extended his hand. “We appreciate any help with this you can provide, Jamieson.”

The lawyer shook his hand. “AJ, I won’t allow this damned easterner to steal your ranch.”

“Thank you. That can’t happen,” Michael added, glancing at his father. “That ranch is my pa’s entire life. If he lost it...”

Jamieson clasped Michael’s hand tightly. “He won’t. I promise you. I’ll stop that from happening or find someone else who’ll do it.”

“You always win your cases. We know you’ll handle this matter the best way possible.” AJ stuck his Stetson on his head. “We’ll be back in town on Friday, and we’ll drop by to see if you have any news for us.”

“Should know something by then,” Jamieson suggested, holding open his office door. “You folks take care and I’ll see you in a few days.”

Michael led the way outside and paused on the sidewalk. “Do you reckon he’ll prevent Anna from succeeding in her plan to claim the ranch as hers?” His voice caught on the last few words, unable to hide his fears from his pa.

AJ slapped his son on the back. “Don’t worry, son. No one’s stealing the Double M from the McLennons. Not as long as there’s breath in this old body.”

“Pa, I surely hope not,” he muttered. “I’m plenty fond of my home.”

“Same here, son. I’ve spent most of my life building up the Double M to the success it is today. No one’s claiming everything I’ve worked so hard for, as theirs.” AJ spoke his conviction with a strong, determined voice.

Michael nodded. Keeping his namesake’s bequest in the family meant everything to him. Born eight years after Mr. Miller’s death, Michael had never known the man who’d been such a powerful influence on his pa. But he’d heard stories of the wonderful man his entire life, and Michael wore his namesake’s moniker proudly.

“Let’s head home, son. We’ve got a ranch to run, and I predict the Double M will remain in the family for decades to come.” AJ untied his horse’s reins and mounted up.

“Pa, you’ve always told me to never turn your back on a mama bear, especially one with a cub. Keep your eye on her or likely as not, you’ll regret it.” Michael mounted up.

“Are you comparing Anna to a mama bear?”

“Could say that. We need to keep a lookout for the enemy’s next move.” Michael didn’t trust that conniving woman, not for a moment.

“And two sets of eyes are better than one,” AJ agreed. “I reckon on outsmarting this mama bear. To do so we’ll need all the sets of eyes we can rustle up.”

“I’m right fond of that mama bear’s daughter. And I know she’ll be keeping an eye on her mother, same as us.” Michael rode alongside his pa out of town, silently praying they could prevent any disaster ensuing.

He hadn’t admitted to his pa how hard he’d fallen for Rosie, but he couldn’t imagine life without her. What would happen to them if Anna succeeded in winning the ranch from his family? He hoped his and Rosie’s feelings for each other proved strong enough to weather this storm. And trying every way possible to stop Anna in her pursuit couldn’t hurt. Especially with Rosie on their side.

Chapter 16

Anna suffered an exhausting trip by buggy driven by the ranch hand from the Double M who'd been assigned to accompany her. Still miles from their destination, buckets of rain had pummeled them and the wind whipped her parasol right out of her hands, sending it flying into the air and out of sight in seconds. With no protection from the elements, she'd arrived in Butte, drenched to the skin and madder than a wet hen.

Shortly after finally reaching their destination, Anna settled into her accommodations at the Copper City Hotel. Resembling a half-drowned cat on arrival, Anna considered it a wonder she hadn't been refused a room. Thankfully, there'd been a suitable one available.

Every bone in her body had hurt, and every muscle had ached. The hot bath provided by the hotel and the change of clothes had saved her life. She partook of a delicious supper in the hotel dining room, and after inquiring about the name of a reputable lawyer—Randolph Barnes came highly recommended by the hotel clerk—she returned to her room.

Being in a more amicable mood this morning, Anna strode down the sidewalk, intent on consulting with Mr. Barnes at his office. With any luck, she would successfully retain his services for her fight to see justice done regarding her late father's ranch.

She'd dressed in her best traveling suit complete with the stylish feathered hat she'd bought just prior to leaving Boston. She wasn't certain if the ladies residing in Butte followed the latest fashions, but she intended to present herself in the best possible light.

Clutching her reticule in her hands, she strode down the sidewalk, and her buttoned boots tapped out a steady rhythm as she searched for the office. She slowed her pace when she spotted the sign BARNES AND SON LAW OFFICE painted on the side of a brick building up ahead. As she approached, an identical sign on the front of the building ensured her she'd found the fellow's place of business. Anna took a deep breath before entering through the heavy wooden door. A bell tinkled above the transom as she entered.

A gray-haired, middle-aged woman, seated at a small oak desk, looked up. “Good morning. How may I help you?” she inquired, smiling.

“Good morning. I’d appreciate a few minutes of Mr. Barnes’ time. I’ve a matter to discuss with him.” Anna strode to the front of the desk.

“May I have your name, please?”

“Mrs. Anna Wentworth Dalton. From Boston. I’m in Montana regarding... a personal matter,” she hedged. She’d long ago learned that offering the string of surnames attached to her identity often ensured better service.

“Wait here, please. I’ll speak with Mr. Barnes and inquire if he’s able to spare you a few minutes.” The woman disappeared down a long hallway.

Anna gazed around the office, noticing several plants blooming profusely, lined along a wide windowsill. Heavy, leather upholstered chairs filled the waiting area. The woman’s desktop appeared neat and organized, and a floor-to-ceiling wooden document file box stood along the far wall. Judging by first impressions, Anna considered the law office well run.

“Mr. Barnes will see you right away,” the woman informed Anna.

She startled. Lost in the examination of her surroundings, she hadn’t heard the woman return. “Thank you. I appreciate him accommodating me without an appointment.”

The woman led the way down the hallway again, her step quite spritely for someone her age. She stepped aside, permitting Anna’s entrance to her boss’s office. “Here we are,” she announced in a singsong manner.

Anna stepped across the threshold and felt her jaw drop. The gentleman behind the desk appeared eighty years of age if he was a day. He peered at her over a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles, squinting slightly. “Good morning, Mrs. um...”

“Dalton. Anna Dalton,” she reminded him. Surely, he should recall her name if the woman at the desk told him a minute ago. Unless, she hadn’t mentioned it.

“Mrs. Dalton,” he greeted her as he attempted to clamber out of his chair.

“Please, no need to get up.” Anna waved him back into his seat.

The old fellow pointed to the chair across from him. “Please sit down and tell me why you’ve dropped by the office.”

“Certainly. Thank you.” Anna settled herself on the ladder-backed chair and rested her reticule on her lap. She’d traveled with a considerable

sum of cash and thanked herself for the forethought, now that it appeared she'd be hiring a lawyer.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?" the woman inquired.

"Thank you, but none for me." Anna replied immediately.

The woman turned her attention to her boss. "Mr. Barnes, would you like something?"

He waved his hand. "No, Dorothy. Please close the door behind yourself."

The woman nodded and left them alone.

"Now, Mrs. Dalton, how can I help you?" He leaned back in his chair, resting his clasped hands on his rotund middle, appearing quite comfortable.

Anna considered it prudent to rush through her explanation for fear the old fellow dozed off during the telling. "I'm here about a misjustice concerning the settlement of an estate. I've recently discovered the name of my biological father, and I believe someone else inherited property that should rightfully have been mine." She continued with her explanation, revealing all that had occurred concerning Michael Miller during the early days of the Double M Ranch. She also elaborated on the issue of her mother's involvement with Mr. Miller, despite the embarrassing confession that would confirm her conception out of wedlock. But the fellow appeared professional and sharing the sensitive information couldn't be helped.

Mr. Barnes remained silent throughout Anna's entire explanation which bordered on a diatribe as she failed to contain her emotions. She couldn't suppress her anger, but she would ensure justice was served for her father's sake. And her own, of course. And for Rosemary's best interests whether she realized it or not at present. Having almost worn herself out with the extensive description of events surrounding the situation, Anna hoped her attempt at relating the facts was sufficient to convince Mr. Barnes to represent her.

The old fellow continued to squint at her from behind the desk. He hadn't taken a single note or scribbled one word on the papers in front of him while she'd spoken, and considering his possible questionable memory concerning her name, Anna wasn't convinced she wouldn't be repeating the entire story again.

"Do you have any questions?" she ventured softly.

Just then the office door opened and Anna turned to see who had dared to barge in without knocking, interrupting an attorney and client visitation. She stared at the man standing there, a younger version of the fellow behind the desk. The dapper gray-haired fellow had to be Mr. Barnes' son, and she would wager he'd be nearing sixty.

"Hello, I'm Randolph Barnes. I see you've met Father." The fellow strode into the room, extending his hand.

Anna shook hands with him, speechless.

The fellow stood, smiling.

"*You're* Randolph Barnes?" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I understand from Dorothy your name is Anna Dalton, visiting from Boston."

She nodded, mindlessly. "If you're Randolph Barnes, who have I been talking to?" she blurted.

"This is my father and the founder of this law firm. Richard Barnes."

Anna thought for a moment and recalled she'd asked to speak with Mr. Barnes, not specifying that she wished to consult with Randolph Barnes. Stupid of her. And totally her own fault. She recalled the sign on the building stated Barnes and Son.

"I'm sorry. I'd intended to speak with you. I was given your name last night by the desk clerk at the Copper City Hotel. He recommended the services of Randolph Barnes. Highly recommended you, in fact," Anna blathered, completely discombobulated by her blunder. If the old fellow hadn't been so well-dressed, she could have been explaining her situation to the janitor. She needed to take greater care during important consultations.

"That's always good to hear. I'll have to thank him for recommending our law office." Randolph smiled at her again. "What exactly have you discussed with Father?"

"She's initiating a lawsuit regarding an estate," senior Mr. Barnes chimed in.

Anna sat dumbfounded as the old fellow related every single detail she'd shared with him surrounding her position on the matter. Reciting names and dates with complete accuracy, not missing a single syllable of her story. She wouldn't have believed it had she not witnessed in person the flawless regurgitation of facts. She'd heard of people with remarkable recollection for detail but she'd never experienced it herself. Perhaps remembering something as mundane as a person's name wasn't of sufficient

importance for someone with his talent. Or his secretary simply had failed to mention it.

“My, that story certainly sounds like a challenge. Especially since so many years have passed since the original settling of the estate. And if Mr. Miller wasn’t aware of any heirs at the time, then the execution of his Last Will would be completely binding.”

“And her claim that she’s Mr. Miller’s daughter seems pure speculation,” senior Mr. Barnes added. “The entire claim of paternity is based on diary entries by her deceased mother. Entries which I would wager are subject to interpretation three ways from Sunday. Since Mr. Miller has passed, there’s little chance of proving he was indeed her father.”

“From what you’ve told us, Father could be right.” Randolph Barnes met Anna’s eyes. “I don’t suppose you’ve brought this diary with you.”

“Oh, my goodness. I completely forgot.” Anna produced the diary from her reticule. “I took it from my daughter’s room early this morning, and I must return it as soon as possible. But you’re welcome to read it in its entirety in the meantime.”

Randolph’s eyebrows rose. “You stole this from your daughter’s room?”

“Well, I... I don’t know if *stole* is the correct term...” Anna felt her face warming.

“Removed it without her knowledge?” the old fellow reworded his son’s question.

Anna nodded, somewhat reluctantly. “I suppose so.”

“She stole it,” the old fellow muttered, shaking his head.

“Since it’s in your possession now, we’ll read it as quickly as possible and make notes regarding the contents. We’ll have it back to you in a day.” Randolph tucked the book under his arm.

Anna’s heart lifted. “You’re taking my case?” she exclaimed, holding her breath.

“Perhaps. Give us today to discuss the entire matter and read the diary, before making a final decision.”

Anna stood and shook out her skirts. “Should I leave a monetary retainer with your secretary?”

Randolph waved his hand. “No need for that. Wait until we decide to take your case... or not,” he ended in a whisper.

Anna's spirits fell, realizing the possibility remained they'd turn her down. "All right. I'll drop by again tomorrow morning. Thank you for giving this your immediate consideration. I do appreciate it."

"You're welcome, Mrs. Dalton." Randolph waved her toward the door. "Let me walk you out."

For the sake of appearances, Anna bid Dorothy a polite goodbye. Soon, Anna found herself standing on the sidewalk outside the law office, praying at least one of these Barnes gentlemen would agree to represent her. She shouldn't have mentioned removing the diary from Rosemary's room, but it was too late to erase that blunder now. Stealing the diary, as the two fellows considered she'd done, didn't paint her in a good light. But she required the journal as evidence to prove her case. She prayed Rosemary wouldn't notice it missing before she could put it back. But even if she did, surely Anna was equally entitled to read her own mother's musings.

She gazed up and down the street, considering how she would while away the hours until she would meet with the lawyers again tomorrow. She craned her neck, spotting a ladies' wear store on the opposite side of the street. Perhaps the day would prove pleasant for a number of reasons. She set out to investigate the local offerings of ladies' fashion before returning to the Copper City Hotel for lunch and an afternoon nap.

She couldn't wait until tomorrow morning.

Randolph Barnes' decision could alter her entire future.

Chapter 17

July

Michael lingered beside his pa at the corral attached to the main horse barn, watching the lone rider moving closer and closer. The fellow didn't appear in any particular hurry, and Michael wondered what the man's intentions were. He couldn't glimpse the fellow's face shaded by the wide-brimmed hat. The horse resembled Hermes, one of Billy's rentals from the livery, but Michael could be mistaken.

Rosie hurried to his side and smiled. "How did it go with the lawyer?"

"Jamieson Davies is working on it. He promised to continue helping us." AJ rested his hand on Rosie's shoulder. "Don't worry, young lady. We aren't losing this ranch."

"I hope not," Rosie whispered. "If that happened..."

"It wouldn't be your fault," Michael insisted, knowing his pa was in complete agreement. Michael slipped his arm around Rosie's middle before he realized what he'd done. She hadn't pulled away. A good sign, especially with his pa watching.

Rosie followed AJ's gaze. "Who's that?"

"No idea," Michael muttered. "Maybe you should head up to the house."

AJ touched the pistol in the holster at his side. "We'll be fine. I don't think the man intends us any harm or he would be sneaking onto the ranch not moseying along like he is."

Michael kept his eyes on the stranger as he approached.

AJ craned his neck. "I think I know that fellow."

"You do?"

"Looks like Iris's brother."

"Eric Lake?" Michael blurted, tightening his hold on Rosie.

"Who is he?" Rosie whispered.

"An older brother to Daniel's wife, Iris," AJ explained.

Michael glowered. "I thought his thieving behind was in jail."

AJ shrugged. "Appears the fellow's been released from the Montana Territorial Prison at Deer Lodge."

"Or he escaped," Michael suggested.

AJ shook his head. "Wouldn't be coming back here with a Pinkerton in the family, if that had happened."

"Why on earth was the fellow in prison?"

"It's a long story, Rosie, which I'll tell you one day." Michael brushed her hair with a quick kiss.

The man waved and dismounted. He walked the last several feet toward them. "Hello. Don't know if you folks remember me," he began.

"Eric Lake." AJ stuck out his hand. "What brings you here?"

"Got released from prison a few weeks ago. Served my time. Earned myself a few honest dollars and then traveled here to see my sister." Eric nodded toward the horse. "Rented old Hermes here at the livery. Not certain why, but he appears to be coming up a bit lame for some reason, so I haven't been traveling too fast."

"I'll summon Willow," Rosie called, escaping Michael's hold and racing toward the horse barn and disappearing inside.

Michael glared at Eric who stood looking somewhat dumbstruck. Had the fellow expected to be met with pistols pointed at him? Had he expected to be run off the ranch the moment he opened his mouth?

AJ cleared his throat. "You looking for Iris?"

"Yes, I am. Hoped to let her know I was released. Not surprising, Pa's still behind bars and will be for some time to come. His attitude toward the law hasn't mellowed, and it hasn't done him any favors while he's been locked up. Judges keep tacking on more time."

"Good place for him," Michael muttered, recalling the trouble Eric and his father, David Lake, had caused a lot of people, including his sister-in-law. "Surprised you're not still in there with him."

"Now, son, Eric's paid his debt to society," AJ admonished Michael. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Just wanted to say hello to my sister and then I'll be looking for work somewhere." Eric shrugged. "Wasn't certain she'd be interested in seeing me, but I reckoned I'd try."

"Iris lives in Chicago now. Did you know she married my son, Daniel?" AJ added.

“Yeah, she wrote me about the wedding. Didn’t know they’d moved though. I guess Daniel must be a Pinkerton if they’re in Chicago.” Eric blew out his breath. “He was fixing to become one last I heard.”

“We’re all very proud of my son. He’s doing good work as a Pinkerton,” AJ explained, sounding mighty pleased with his second son’s accomplishments.

Michael agreed with his pa. Daniel had fulfilled his lifelong dream. But what Eric was doing here he hadn’t a clue. Michael reckoned the man might as well keep moving on. Nothing but trouble with a capital T, in his opinion.

AJ stood hands on hips. “What sort of work you looking for? Maybe we got something for you here on the ranch.”

Thankfully, Michael wasn’t still mounted, otherwise he might have tumbled out of the saddle, hearing that last part. What in the dickens was Pa thinking offering this fool a job?

Eric smiled. “Well, I thank you kindly, sir. But I’m not much for ranch work. I ain’t particularly fond of smelly cattle. No offense intended.”

“None taken.” AJ frowned. “What you looking for then? No easy money to be made on a ranch.”

“Or anywhere else if you’re looking to make an honest dollar. I learned that lesson.” Eric sighed. “I was cooking in the prison kitchen, and I enjoyed that a mite. Learned a lot while fixing meals for the prisoners. And it made the time pass quicker.”

“Cooking?” AJ exclaimed.

“Yes, sir. I wouldn’t mind doing some cooking in a hotel or an eating place. I’m done with thieving and I’m straightening out my life.” Eric met eyes with Hermes who snorted. He patted his neck. “Sorry, Hermes. Maybe these folks will take a look and see what’s troubling you.”

Just then Rosie returned with Willow.

“I was told there’s a horse needs some tending.” Willow glanced at AJ and then spotted the horse and stranger. She hurried over. “This is Hermes from the livery.”

“Yes, ma’am. I hired him for the trip out here, but he’s taken to limping once in a while.” Eric handed over the reins.

Willow led the horse away. “Might have picked up a stone. I’ll check his hooves.”

“Dang it. I didn’t think to do that,” Eric muttered. “I ain’t much of a horse fellow either.”

“I can see that,” Michael muttered, shaking his head. “What fool wouldn’t think to check a limping horse’s hooves?”

“Well, I warned your pa he wouldn’t want me working for him,” Eric defended himself.

“Ain’t a feller to work with cattle or horses that we need.” AJ scrubbed his face with one hand. “So you’re a fair cook?”

Eric leaned back in his boots and chuckled. “Well, fair to middling, I reckon. Ain’t poisoned nobody yet.”

Michael rolled his eyes and Rosie poked him in the ribs.

AJ chuckled. “That’s one thing in your favor.”

“Just joshing with you, sir.”

“I figured that. We could use a cook’s helper. Need a fellow to lend old Sourdough Sammy a hand. Maybe move you up to ranch cook if you work out and we can convince Sammy to retire,” AJ suggested. “Would you be interested?”

“Pa, are you sure?” Michael blurted. “He’s a con.”

“Ex-con, son.” AJ looked Eric in the eye. “Every man deserves a second chance. But if’n you try anything of an illegal nature, something goes missing and we can peg you for it, Eric, you’ll be off this ranch before you can blink an eye.”

“Hear that?” Michael added, slipping an arm around Rosie again. “You step out of line just once and you’ll be off to town for Sheriff Manning to deal with your sorry behind.”

Eric straightened and looked AJ in the eye. “I’ll take the job. Just to prove I meant it when I said I’m done with thieving. Could still learn a few things from another cook, no doubt.”

“Then you’re hired,” AJ proclaimed. “Let’s get you settled in the bunkhouse and I’ll introduce you to Sammy.”

“My gear’s in my saddlebag which rode into the barn with Hermes. I’ll go fetch it.”

“I’ll come with you.” AJ headed off with Eric in tow. “That little gal who’s tending Hermes is our head horse wrangler, and she’s Adam’s wife. I’ll introduce you.”

“A lady horse wrangler. Who’d a guessed it?” Eric exclaimed. “Course, some fellers reckon cooking is women’s work, so who am I to

talk.”

AJ burst into laughter. “On my ranch, as long as the job gets done and done right, I don’t rightly care who’s doing it.” He slapped Eric on the back and the two of them walked inside the horse barn through the side door.

“Guess time will tell if Eric works out or not,” Michael muttered.

“He sounds sincere.” Rosie touched Michael’s arm. “I’ve been dying for details... what all did the lawyer say?”

Michael took Rosie’s hand and led her toward the garden. “I reckon it went as well as we expected. Jamieson Davies sent those telegraphs to a few lawyers in Butte to inquire if your ma hired any of them. Jamieson says she contacted Randolph Barnes, so we’ll wait and see what comes our way before we can decide how to defend ourselves.”

Rosie’s eyes filled with tears. “I’m so sorry. I should never have come here. If I’d only let matters be when I found Grandmother’s diary.”

“Don’t cry, sweetheart.” Michael wiped a tear off her cheek with his thumb. “This is not your fault.”

“But it is. If I hadn’t come—”

Michael silenced her self-criticism with a warm kiss, right there in front of Mrs. Sheridan who’d been tending the garden. He didn’t care one iota who saw them. Seeing the girl he was falling in love with, crying, ripped a gaping hole in his heart. It pained him terribly hearing her feeling so poorly about herself.

“McLennons stand together during troubling times. Don’t worry. We’ll overcome this. It’ll require more than one greedy easterner to snag this ranch from Pa’s hands.” Michael’s breath caught when he realized what he’d said. He met Rosie’s eyes. “I’m sorry if that sounded—”

“I couldn’t agree more. What Mother is attempting is horrible. I’m completely on your family’s side.” Rosie stood on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Don’t ever doubt my loyalty to all of you.”

Michael almost blurted *that’s why I love you* but caught himself in time. Looking into her beautiful brown eyes, he could see her sincerity and something more that he couldn’t put words to. Admiration? Should he dare to believe he saw his love for her reflected back at him? He couldn’t deny it a moment longer; he loved Rosie dearly. Did she share similar feelings for him?

“I believe you, sweetheart. Trust me when I tell you, we’ll sort this out. Nobody is moving one foot off this ranch.”

“Except my mother, if she dares to show her face here again.” Rosie’s hands fisted. “I’m fed up with her conniving, greedy ways. She cannot return to Boston soon enough.”

Michael looked deep into Rosie’s eyes. “I’d gladly drive her to the stagecoach myself.”

Chapter 18

That night, Rosie sat opposite AJ in the study wondering why she'd ever traveled to Milestone. What had begun as a wonderful adventure in search of the grandfather she'd never known, had turned into a peck of trouble for this remarkable family who'd welcomed her into their fold and treated her so well.

This was definitely all her fault.

AJ met her eyes. "Rosie, no one blames you for your mother's actions. We're all going to let your mother be. Given time, she might see reason. Anna lost her husband not long ago and a devastating loss like that sets a person back on their heels for a long time. No one knows this better than me."

Rosie shrugged. She'd heard about the wonderful marriage he'd shared with his wife until she passed several years ago.

"I cannot tell you the emotional mess I found myself in after Edna passed." AJ shook his head. "Heck, I couldn't have even admitted such a thing for years afterward. But I know now how devastated I was, losing that woman."

"But you didn't turn to stealing from folks when you had no right to anything of theirs."

"No, I didn't. But grief affects folks in different ways. I turned inward on myself. I wouldn't talk to my family or my friends. Reverend Fitzpatrick tried his best to reach me, but I shut everyone out of my life. And it lasted for months and months until one day I turned a corner in my grief and everything became a little brighter, a little more hopeful. Day after day, things slowly improved in my mind until I joined the human race again." AJ smiled at Rosie. "Could be your ma experienced a bad day. Maybe several of them. What happened hadn't been real to her until something someone said or something she did brought everything a little clearer. Then everything came crashing down around her ears. She finally realized her husband is gone and he's not coming back."

"Perhaps," Rosie conceded. "But their marriage wasn't much of a... a partnership. They barely tolerated each other. I doubt she's terribly

heartbroken that he's passed."

"Still, the man had been there if she needed him. I figure he provided a comfortable living for his family, and she wanted for nothing. Now, perhaps to her way of thinking, she's all alone in the world. Her parents are gone. Her husband, too. You've come here, leaving her completely on her own."

"She hasn't been much of a parent either."

"I believe you. But Anna might be acting in a way she wouldn't otherwise... if her world hadn't been turned upside down."

"You're giving her too much credit." Rosie shook her head. "She's consumed with money. She's lived a privileged life since birth. I believe pure greed is responsible for what she's doing."

"Maybe you're right. You know your mother much better than I do." AJ held up his hands in surrender. "But consider the possibility there's more than just greed driving this obsession to lay claim to what she believes her father would have wanted her to inherit."

"I cannot believe you're such a compassionate, understanding man."

"Your mother won't win her case, so I'm not particularly concerned about her shenanigans," AJ said, touching Rosie's arm. "Too much time has passed and there isn't substantial proof, to my way of thinking at least. So, don't you worry none. We'll find a solution to this."

"Goodness, I hope you're right. I pray this all works out." And not only settling the ownership of the ranch. She hoped with all her heart that things between her and Michael worked out also.

AJ nodded. "So do I, Rosie. So do I."

* * *

Rosie stood waiting for Davie to saddle old Mick. After her discussion with AJ, Rosie needed to clear her mind and the best possible method she'd discovered had been a long ride. Nothing she loved more than the breeze on her face and the sun warming her body while she inhaled the sweet scent of sage and listened to birdsong on the wind.

"There you go, Rosie. Need a leg up?" Davie inquired.

Rosie smiled at the personable ranch hand. "Thank you. But that's not necessary." She leaned back and stuck her boot into the stirrup and hoisted herself into the saddle. Wearing her denims and boots, there was no need

for a side-saddle today. "I'll be back in a couple of hours. And I won't venture too far."

"Very wise, ma'am. Don't do anything foolish." Davie waved her off.

Rosie sat tall in the saddle, pleased with her talents as an experienced horsewoman. Even Michael had praised her abilities. Much to her mother's dismay. Nowhere on earth had Rosie found more peace and tranquility than while riding a horse. Feeling the strength of a well-muscled animal beneath her as they flew across the miles together, freedom theirs with every hoofbeat. Worry left behind in a trail of dust or carried away on the wind with every exhalation of breath. Soon, she'd become calmer already, her anger at her mother's unreasonable opinions dissipating.

Rosie pulled on the reins and slowed old Mick to a walk. "A fellow your age requires a rest from time to time," she crooned to the aging equine.

For several minutes they loped across the valley, Rosie deep in thought. She hadn't a clue as to her mother's plans. Michael had insisted they take a wait-and-see stand and not ruffle her mother's feathers with accusations or waste time on what could prove useless speculation. Sitting around and doing nothing seemed a poor strategy to Rosie, but she hadn't any experience with someone plotting to steal anything of great value from her. All things considered, perhaps she should simply listen to Michael and AJ and follow their lead.

"Ready to race, Mick?" she called to the horse.

The gelding snorted.

"All right, time to head for home anyway." Rosie kneed the horse's sides and the gelding raced down the valley.

Wind in her face and more worry-free than she'd felt in weeks, Rosie laughed aloud, catching herself smiling for the first time in days. Could she hope this feeling might belong to her forever? Living here on the Double M Ranch? Someday becoming Michael's wife? "Wouldn't that be absolutely marvelous?" she shouted aloud.

Suddenly, a doe bounded out from a cluster of bushes only a few feet ahead, startling Mick. The gelding veered sharply to the right. Caught off guard, Rosie sailed out of the saddle, landing hard on the valley floor. Pain raced up her leg and she couldn't catch her breath. Something warm ran down the side of her face and she reached up touching her cheek. When she removed her hand, she gasped at the sight of her own blood.

“What have I done?” she whispered, her vision blurring and wooziness overtaking her. Would anyone come looking for her? She blinked and attempted to stand but the pounding in her head forced her to lie back on the ground.

A moment later, everything went black.

* * *

Michael strode toward the horse barn. He’d spent the last half hour looking for Rosie and finally Mrs. Sheridan informed him she’d seen her heading toward the barns some time ago.

“Rosie,” he called as he strode down the center aisle, peeking into each stall as he progressed to the back.

“She’s not here,” Davie called. “Went riding Mick about twenty minutes ago.”

“Riding? Alone?”

“Yes, sir. Promised she wouldn’t do anything foolish. Planned to ride close to the ranch so she wouldn’t get lost.”

Michael paced the floor, dragging one hand through his hair. Should he trust that Rosie knew her way around the ranch now? She’d been out riding more times than he could count, but always with him or AJ or Willow. Never alone before.

“Saddle Brick for me, please. I’m going to check on Rosie,” Michael instructed Davie, suspecting the ranch hand could saddle his gelding quicker than he could, especially in his current state. His heart pounded, his palms sweated, and his mind was consumed with concern for Rosie. Hopefully, his condition proved needless worry, but he required assurance he wasn’t being overly cautious.

“Will do. Give me a couple minutes.” Davie raced for the tack room.

Minutes later, Michael raced across the valley attempting to guess which direction Rosie would have chosen. She enjoyed nothing better than a breakneck race across a verdant valley and Mick always complied with her request. A responsible and considerate horsewoman, Rosie rested the old fellow frequently, and she couldn’t have ventured too far away. Perhaps she’d even started back toward the ranch by now.

He rode onward keeping a vigilant eye on his surroundings. Movement up ahead caught his eye and he kneed Brick into action. He spotted Rosie

and Mick some distance ahead and he would catch up in a matter of minutes. Suddenly, Mick veered to the right. Michael's heart almost stopped when he watched in horror as the woman he cared for flew out of the saddle, landing on the ground. Well-trained, Mick stood nearby and bent down to sniff his rider. As soon as Michael reached them, he kicked his feet out of the stirrups, leapt out of the saddle, and raced to Rosie, dropping to his knees at her side.

"Rosie, are you all right?"

Eyes closed, she remained motionless and silent.

Michael's heart lodged in his mouth. She couldn't be... He refused to even consider something so horrible. He leaned his cheek on her chest and heaved a sigh when her chest rose and fell with her breathing.

"Rosie. Rosie. Wake up, Rosie," he called, frantic with worry.

A large gash on her forehead bled profusely and blood flowed down her cheek. He removed the bandana from around his neck and pressed it to the wound. He remembered Doc Bennett telling him head wounds often appeared worse than they were, considering the amount of blood shed. He prayed this was the case now.

Rosie groaned and slowly moved her head from side to side. "What... what..."

"Shh. It's all right," Michael whispered to her, hoping to allay her fears. "You fell off Mick. Do you hurt anywhere?"

"My... my foot...hurts bad," she stammered, her eyelids fluttering. Finally, she opened her eyes and looked at him. "What happened?"

"You fell off Mick. You flew out of the saddle."

"I remember. A deer dashed out of the bushes."

Michael realized what had startled the horse. "Let me help you onto my horse. I'm taking you to the ranch. We'll send for Doc Bennett."

Rosie nodded slowly and then she passed out again.

Michael had a dickens of a time getting an unconscious Rosie into the saddle and then mounting up himself without her toppling off Brick before he'd settled behind her. Finally, after a couple attempts, he succeeded in his mission and reined Brick toward the ranch. Mick trotted behind them, anticipating his evening feed waiting in his stall in the barn. Michael prayed for a positive outcome all the way back to the ranch. Rosie never regained consciousness.

The minute he rode up to the corral, he spotted Davie. “Davie, saddle up and head to town. We need Doc Bennett as soon as he can get out here.”

Without a word of argument or pausing to utter an inquiry, Davie raced into the barn and in no time at all he flew by Michael, riding his horse out of the barnyard and heading for town. Dang it. Michael cursed his stupidity. He should have asked for help dismounting to ensure he didn’t hurt Rosie. Just then Willow wandered out of the barn.

“Any idea where Davie is off...” she began until she spotted Michael. “Oh, my goodness. What happened to Rosie?”

“Fell off Mick. Come and help me get her into the house.”

Willow spotted Mick drinking at the water trough. “He’ll be fine.” She hurried over and held Rosie in place while Michael climbed out of the saddle. He reached up and gently took Rosie in his arms. “Could you tend to Brick and Mick for me, please?”

“Of course. Take care of Rosie.” Willow waved him toward the house. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“Davie’s off to town to fetch Doc Bennett.” Michael called over his shoulder. “Make sure Doc’s horse is taken care of while he’s here.”

“Will do,” Willow called, leading Brick toward the barn.

Rosie moved in his arms, slowly regaining consciousness. “Michael,” she said, her voice croaking.

“I’m here. I’ve got you. We’re back at the ranch,” he explained as he climbed the front veranda steps. He put the boots to the front door and waited for someone to come. “I need help out here,” he shouted.

“Land sakes, what are you...” Mrs. Sheridan gasped. “What happened to Rosie?”

“She fell off Mick when a deer startled him.”

Mrs. Sheridan wrung her hands. “Bring her up to her room. We should send for Doc Bennett.”

“Davie already left. She has a nasty gash on her head. We need to stop the bleeding,” Michael instructed as he moved upstairs, clutching Rosie to his chest. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt in that moment, he couldn’t love her more.

He gently laid Rosie on her bed. Mrs. Sheridan arrived a minute later with a bowl of steaming water, several cloths, and the medical kit AJ kept at the ranch for minor doctoring.

Michael stood by as Mrs. Sheridan removed his bandana from around Rosie head. Her beautiful hair had escaped the bun and lay matted on the pillow.

“Appears the bleeding has stopped. We just need to clean up the blood and dirt, and then bandage the wound. Doc Bennett can tend to it properly when he arrives.” Mrs. Sheridan carried out her intentions while Michael paced the floor. “This goose egg on her head troubles me a mite. Seems she took a nasty fall.”

“I saw the whole thing happen. She flew out of that saddle and landed hard.” Michael stood over Rosie, watching her slow, even breathing, praying she’d come to soon. “She maybe hit her head on a rock or something. I hope she hasn’t concussed herself. The way that ankle is swelling worries me more. I hope she hasn’t broken it.”

Mrs. Sheridan completed her ministrations and then patted Michael’s hand. “All we can do now is wait for Doc Bennett. I’ll clean up some of the blood on her face in the meantime. Once he’s checked her over, I’ll wash her and get her into a nightgown. She’ll be fine. You tend to whatever you need to do.” She shooed him out of the room and closed the door.

Michael stood in the hallway, contemplating exactly what it was he should be doing. Worrying at the bedside of the woman he loved dearly seemed the most logical thing, but Mrs. Sheridan had taken that duty away from him when she’d banished him from Rosie’s bedroom. Footsteps drew his attention and Michael turned to discover his father climbing the stairs.

“I just heard about Rosie. How is she, son?” AJ called from the landing.

“Unconscious. Goose egg on her forehead. Might have broken her ankle or sprained it good.” Michael dragged his hand down his face. “A deer spooked old Mick. She fell out of the saddle. Landed hard.”

“Dang it anyway. That girl has the worst luck.” AJ shook his head. “Davie should be back with Doc Bennett soon. He’ll fix her injuries. We just have to pray she’ll be all right.”

Michael nodded. He hoped all the praying he’d done on the way back to the ranch would prove of some worth.

Suddenly, Mrs. Sheridan poked her head out of Rosie’s bedroom. “She just came to, and she’s cleaned up. Is Doc here yet?”

Michael shook his head. “I’ll send him up the moment he arrives.” At least, Rosie had regained consciousness. He raced down the stairs and out

onto the veranda. He inhaled deeply, the cool evening air hitting his lungs.
Hurry, Doc. Hurry.

An hour later, Doc Bennett and Davie rode up to the ranch house. Both dismounted and Davie lead the two lathered geldings toward the horse barn.

Doc lumbered toward the front steps. "I hear Rosie took a spill."

"Mrs. Sheridan is with her now." Michael huffed out a breath and raked his hand through his hair. "Cleaned a gash on her forehead. Rosie might be concussed and there's something wrong with one of her ankles, too. She finally regained consciousness a half hour ago."

"Thank you for that thorough explaining. More words than I've heard from you in one sitting as long as I've known you. Miss Rosie means a lot to you, I'd reckon." Doc chuckled and strode into the house with Michael on his heels.

"You reckon right, Doc. I plan to marry that girl someday. And I'd appreciate it if you kept her in one piece so I could carry out my plan."

Doc chuckled. "I'll do my best, son. You look in a worse way than Rosie likely is. Never seen a fellow so worried and concerned about his gal." He climbed the stairs and disappeared into Rosie's room.

Michael collapsed on the stairs and dropped his head into his hands. Rosie had to recover. He couldn't love her more, and he wouldn't be more worried about her if she already were his wife.

Chapter 19

Rosie lounged on the sofa beside the parlor window, watching birds flitting between the treetops. She admired today's vibrant blue sky and longed to return to the barn to help Willow with the new foals. And, of course to ride Mick again.

Doc had assured her that the gash on her head would heal without a visible scar since the wound was hidden by her hairline. She hadn't concussed herself despite the nasty fall. But she'd managed an admirable job of spraining her ankle, and Doc insisted she remain off it for at least two weeks. Michael carried her downstairs every morning and upstairs every night so she wasn't confined to her bedroom. She enjoyed the change of scenery and appreciated taking her meals with the family. Occasionally with Mrs. Sheridan's help, she hopped on one foot into the kitchen and spent pleasant hours seated at the table and talking with the cook while she worked. She helped peel potatoes and a variety of other minor jobs she could easily manage while sitting.

She tired of being confined to the house every evening with only her books for company or a bit of needlework. She'd written in her journals, relating her adventures while riding the innumerable acres comprising the Double M. She derived greater pleasure from her written musings more and more, to the point she'd been seriously considering writing for the local newspaper. She promised herself, one of these days she'd muster up the courage to make inquiries with Richard Green at the *Milestone Weekly Gazette*, in hopes such a thing would be possible.

Rosie craned her neck, staring out the parlor window. She gaped at the familiar rented buggy pulling up to the ranch house. Was she seeing things? Billy Turner from the livery hopped down from the bench seat and offered Anna his hand. The moment her feet hit the ground, her mother strode toward the front door while the driver began unloading her trunks.

"No, no, no. Mother, you are *not* staying here," Rosie muttered. "Mrs. Sheridan. AJ," she shouted, hoping to catch someone's attention and prevent her mother from entering the house. When no one replied, she clambered off the sofa and hoisted her skirts, planning to half hop and half

hobble toward the front entryway to intercept her mother and put an end to her intentions. Immediately, hot pain stabbed her foot from the ankle injury and she slumped back onto the sofa.

“Rosemary, how lovely to see you again,” her mother greeted her, smiling broadly as she swept into the room.

“What are you doing here?” Rosie demanded.

“It shouldn’t be any surprise. I’ve returned to spend time with my daughter.”

“You cannot be serious,” Rosie scoffed. Considering her mother had ignored her the majority of her life, the statement sounded completely ridiculous. Her mother had ulterior motives for returning to the Double M; Rosie would wager any amount on it. But what could she possibly hope to accomplish by coming back? No one wanted her here. Least of all, any of the McLennons.

“Of course, I’m back. You’re here. Where else would I be?” Anna gaped at her. “Why is your ankle bound? Whatever have you done to yourself?”

Rosie waved off the questions. “Return to Boston. That’s where you should be.”

“Only if you’ll accompany me home when the time is right.” Her mother settled beside her on the sofa and attempted to examine her ankle more closely.

When the time is right? After you’ve robbed the McLennons of their ranch? Not a possibility. “I’m *never* moving back to Boston, Mother. My future is here with Michael, with the McLennon family.” Rosie waved off her mother’s attempt to argue. “I sprained my ankle, but it’s fine.”

“Fine. I very much doubt that.” Anna shook a finger at Rosie. “It’s bandaged. Whatever did you do?”

“I... I fell off the horse I was riding,” Rosie admitted in a whisper.

“What? You could have broken your neck,” Anna exclaimed. “I forbid you to ride one of those smelly animals ever again.”

“Mother, it’s nothing and horses don’t smell bad,” Rosie huffed. “Now, I suggest you return to Milestone or Butte or Boston. Any place but here.”

“Nothing?” Anna screeched. “Was a doctor summoned? What did he say?”

“You relinquished your right to lay down rules for me years ago. I’m grown now and I’ll do as I please, and that includes riding a horse whenever

it suits me.”

“So this will be your future? Falling off horses? Hurting yourself? Or worse? You should leave here immediately and return to Boston. Surely there’s one fellow in the entire city you could be happy with,” Anna pleaded.

“You’re attempting the same thing Great-grandfather did to Grandmother.” Rosie shook her head, her conviction matching her contempt for her mother’s attempted interference in her life. “I’ve discovered where I belong. I’ve found the gentleman for me, and I’m not going anywhere.”

AJ strode into the room. “Ladies, is there a problem?”

“Mother has returned. Considering what she’s planning, I’ve informed her she is no longer welcome here.”

“AJ, please... I only want to spend time with my daughter,” Anna pleaded. “Especially since you’ve allowed Rosemary to injure herself. Completely irresponsible of you.”

“Mother, my accident certainly wasn’t AJ’s fault. No one was to blame... it was an accident.” Rosie winced slightly with the additional pain acquired from her foolish attempt to stand on the foot. “If you refuse to return to Boston, you could rent a room at Mrs. Landers’ boarding house in Milestone.”

“No, that won’t be necessary. Spend time with Rosie, Anna.” AJ waved away Rosie’s concerns. “I’ll have one of the boys bring in your trunks. You’re welcome to stay.”

“AJ, what... what are you... what are you thinking?” Rosie stammered.

He patted her arm. “It’s quite all right if Anna stays with us. She sounds genuinely concerned about you and your injury.”

“But—”

“She’s your mother and we never turn away family.”

“She’s *not* your family. I barely consider her part of *my* family.”

“Rosemary, what a hurtful thing to say to your own mother,” Anna scolded her.

AJ shook his head. “Anna will stay with us. There’ll be no further discussion about it. Anna, supper is at six.”

Rosie threw up her hands as AJ exited the parlor. Whatever could AJ be thinking? The old idiom *keep your friends close and your enemies closer* popped into her mind. Perhaps AJ decided the best way to learn what Anna

might be planning was having her staying under the same roof with his family. That made sense. Rosie promised herself she'd remain vigilant and inform AJ of any suspicions she might develop. No matter how insignificant they seemed. Just in case.

"All right, Mother. It appears you're staying."

A knock on the door interrupted her. A young man stepped inside, one of her mother's smaller trunks hoisted onto his shoulder. "Where do you want this, ma'am?"

Anna smiled. "Follow me, please." She led the fellow out the door.

Rosie promised herself she'd ensure AJ was told about her mother's plans the moment Rosie became aware of anything suspicious. If there was any possibility things worked out between her and Michael, she might as well begin acting like a future McLennon and watch out for the family's best interests.

Starting today.

* * *

Her mother had lived on the ranch for over two weeks now, and Rosie hadn't noticed anything that would indicate all wasn't as it should be. Her sprained ankle had healed nicely and she could walk on it for short periods of time again, as long as she didn't overdo.

Her mother's physical condition appeared another matter. Mrs. Sheridan sent up Anna's meals on a tray to her room, following her mother's instructions. Except for the occasional stroll around the back gardens, her mother seldom left her room. And her mother wouldn't talk to anyone. Even her daughter whom she claimed she'd returned to the ranch to spend time with. Definitely a lie. Rosie hadn't a clue what to make of it all. Was her mother simply too embarrassed to face the McLennon family? Or was she plotting something? There must be a reason for her malaise. Or was it simple standoffishness?

Perhaps Rosie should insist her mother leave. If her mother masterminded some plan that harmed the McLennon family from right here under their noses, Rosie would never forgive herself. She slowly climbed the stairs to the second floor and knocked on her mother's door.

"Mother, I know you're in there. Please open the door." Rosie stood, waiting. "I'm not leaving. Open this door."

A moment later, the door cracked open and her mother peeked around the corner. "What do you want?"

Rosie rudely pushed her way inside. "Talk to me, Mother."

Anna brushed her hair off her face. Rosie gaped. Her mother's hair resembled a rat's nest; she mustn't have brushed it for days. Her wrinkled nightgown suggested her mother hadn't dressed for some time either.

"What on earth is wrong?"

Her mother shook her head and flopped down on the bed. "Nothing," she whispered.

"You normally appear for breakfast dressed appropriately for a day with your lady friends in Boston. Look at you. What caused this turnaround?" Rosie settled on the bed beside her mother.

"I...I don't know." Anna heaved a sigh. "It's all too difficult."

"Difficult? What is?"

"All of it. Being at home. Being here. Having my entire life turned upside down." She stood and crossed the floor, then gazed out the window. "I'll never forgive your father for leaving me alone."

"Mother, he really hadn't any choice in it. He died," Rosie reasoned. She suspected her father's death had finally caught up with her mother, and the finality of being left behind had sunk in. Exactly as AJ had warned her. Rosie didn't dare say the word 'grief' aloud knowing her mother would deny the suggestion, considering it an accusation and a sign of weakness in her character.

Anna crossed her arms and glared at her daughter. "Your father worked himself to death. All he thought about was business. Being a success. Making money. And more money and more money. Outdoing the other fellow in every business dealing."

Rosie couldn't have offered a more accurate summation. "Father and every man I've ever known was the same. Grandfather was no different. I'd wager Great-grandfather also."

"I know. That's why I sold Woodley Enterprises. Not for the money, although that will ensure I've the funds to see me through the rest of my days." She slumped onto a chair near the window. "I hated that company. I couldn't wait to rid myself of it."

Rosie peeked over at her mother. "And the realization you didn't have the foggiest notion about business probably factored into the decision."

A small smile twitched at the sides of her mother's mouth. "Yes, I suppose you're right about that."

"Of course, I'm right. None of the women married to gentlemen who owned or worked for Woodley Enterprises have possessed even a hint of business sense. And why should any of them? I cannot fathom the almost insane preoccupation with such things as investments and properties and the like."

"Men definitely see the world in a different light than we do."

"That's one thing we can agree on." Rosie frowned. "Although what you're planning to do to the McLennon family... we will never see eye to eye on that matter."

"No, I suppose not." Anna dragged a hand through her tangled locks. "I need to pull myself together. I'll hear from Mr. Barnes any day now, I'd imagine. I haven't a clue what he'll tell me, but I'm hoping he'll agree to handle this matter for me. I cannot wait to settle this issue of my true father."

"You're going about it the wrong way. I'm not convinced at all that Michael Miller was your father. I pray someone can shed some light on who the man may have been." Rosie stood and shook out her skirts. "Meantime, I'll see you downstairs for supper tonight. Everyone is away at some community event in Milestone. As far as I know, only AJ and myself will be at the table tonight. Please, Mother, come and join us."

Her mother nodded. "I will. I promise. And I'll keep a civil tongue in my mouth. I won't mention anything but the weather."

Rosie chuckled. "Mother it has rained for several days and we're sick of it."

"It has?"

"Mother, I'm just teasing. It's lovely outside. You should take a walk after supper."

Anna wagged a finger at her. "You're a very naughty girl."

Rosie let the comment be, knowing she wasn't the problem. She walked downstairs to converse with AJ until supper was served. Whatever her mother hoped to accomplish would destroy the lives of the entire McLennon family, should she succeed. No, Rosie wasn't naughty in comparison to Anna.

Rosie almost stumbled on the stairs, her ankle still weaker than normal. Could she dare hope this Mr. Barnes fellow would realize the

futility of her mother's case and refuse to represent her?

Perhaps there was still hope for a good outcome.

Chapter 20

Michael accompanied Rosie for a walk following supper, having surprised her by appearing at the table despite her belief everyone but AJ had attended the event in town.

“I smile every time I recall the look on your face when I walked into the dining room tonight.”

“I thought I was seeing things.” Rosie swatted his arm. “You should have said something this afternoon.”

“You never asked if I was going with the others.”

“That’s true. A person shouldn’t make assumptions.”

“Exactly.” Michael reached for her hand and they continued strolling among the apple trees. “I was surprised to see Anna at the table. She didn’t appear too well.”

Rosie heaved a sigh. “I believe the realization that Father is truly gone finally registered. She hasn’t left her room in days, and she appeared in a terrible state when I pushed my way into her bedroom this afternoon.”

Michael stopped in his tracks and met her eyes, concern evident in his gaze. “Was she ranting? Did she hurt you?”

“No, no, nothing like that. The exact opposite. Close to... what’s the word I learned awhile back... catatonic. Not herself at all. She hadn’t even dressed or brushed her hair. Mrs. Sheridan told me Mother’s been like that for days and barely touches any food on the tray when she brings her a meal. Mother and I talked. I hope sharing her thoughts with me will help Mother through these sad times she’s mired in.”

“We’ll summon Doc Bennett if necessary. She’s not my favorite person right now, but if she’s ailing...”

Rosie patted his arm. “Thank you for your concern. I appreciate it, and I’ll keep an eye on Mother. She might be fine now. She mentioned hearing from Mr. Barnes soon.”

“I’d love to be a fly on the wall that day.”

“Wouldn’t we all?”

They continued to walk, each lost in their own thoughts. Rosie couldn’t imagine what the lawyer would suggest for her mother’s next

move. Hopefully, this Mr. Barnes fellow possessed the common sense to realize that the folly of pursuing the matter of her mother gaining ownership of the Double M bordered on lunacy.

“I’ve got my plan ready. I’ll be coming up to the house and asking for your help tomorrow.”

“What plan?”

“A little something to help with your mother’s misguided intentions.”

Rosie gasped.

“Not saying anything yet. But I’m really hoping it helps.” Michael took her hands in his and then kissed her tenderly. “None of this is your fault. And if my plan doesn’t work, then we’ll think of something else worth trying.”

Rosie’s pained expression wounded his heart. “I’d die if she succeeded in taking the ranch from your father. From your family.”

Michael embraced her tightly. Loving her more every day, especially seeing how loyal she’d become to him and his kin. “Don’t worry. We won’t allow that to happen. We’ll learn the truth, one way or another.”

“I pray you’re right.” Rosie glanced at him sideways. “Meantime, what do you have up your sleeve?”

Michael laughed. “Just my arm, darling. Just my arm.”

Rosie chuckled. “I know there’s more. And I wish you the best of luck with whatever you’ve planned.”

Michael silenced her with a kiss, wrapping her tightly in his arms, feeling her warm body against his. She fit perfectly in his embrace, and she returned his kiss with equal fervor. He leaned back and smiled at her, needing to catch his breath. Someday he’d make this wonderful young lady his wife. She didn’t know it, but as a future McLennon, Rosie had an equal stake in saving the ranch from her mother.

“Keep your fingers crossed.” Michael linked arms with her and started back toward the house. “And perhaps a bit of praying wouldn’t hurt either.”

* * *

Next afternoon, Michael grasped the reins, praying for patience during his outing with Anna in the buggy. If his plan worked, perhaps the uppity easterner would head back to where she belonged. Because she sure as heck wasn’t suited to ranch life.

Anna Dalton never appeared downstairs for breakfast before ten o'clock according to Mrs. Sheridan. The kindly housekeeper always kept a plate of food warmed and waiting for the woman, no matter how long it had been since everyone else finished breakfast. Even Rosie enjoyed spending time in the gardens or down at the horse barn with Willow by nine o'clock. She frequently helped Mrs. Sheridan prepare breakfast for everyone before that. Michael couldn't believe how badly he'd misjudged Rosie Dalton that first day they'd encountered each other in town at the hotel. It shamed him still, thinking he'd actually considered the kind-hearted girl a fraud. Well, he wouldn't make that mistake again. Not since he'd gotten to know her.

"Are you warm enough, ma'am?" he glanced at his passenger.

Anna sat bundled up to her neck in quilts. With only a slight breeze in the air, Michael couldn't imagine how the woman was cold, but he considered it kindly to inquire.

"I'm fine, thank you," she muttered. "Where are you taking me?"

"For a tour of the ranch. Same as the McLennons do for all our guests." Michael almost choked on the last word. He considered the trouble-making easterner anything but a guest. And he'd attempt any means possible to rid his family of her.

"Your father took me on a tour awhile back," Anna offered.

"I know, ma'am. Thought I'd show you a few more areas," Michael replied.

They rode along in silence for a half hour before the rig topped a valley. Looking down on the verdant grassland below, Michael spotted what he'd been searching for: several white-faced, red-coated cattle.

Anna covered her nose with the quilt and Michael almost laughed aloud. Even the wind was cooperating in his plan, coming from the right direction for the full effect. If Anna couldn't abide the scent of manure, why did she desire ownership of a ranch?

"These are Herefords, ma'am," he explained and continued to relate the history of the breed and their origins in Europe. He expounded on their care and breeding, their favorable traits as beef cattle.

Anna appeared bored to death, exactly as he'd hoped.

"Of course, in spring we're out here all hours of the night ensuring the calves are birthed without any problems. Every animal is of value on a ranch."

Anna's mouth dropped open. "In the middle of the night?"

Michael nodded. "If you're successful in your bid for ownership of the ranch, I'd wager you'll be eager to witness all this for yourself, even at two o'clock in the morning. In a freezing rain. Or with snowflakes falling as happens on occasion. Owners need to ensure their ranch is being operated properly and all."

"Are you serious?" she exclaimed.

Michael nodded again. "Of course, I am. Known some ranch hands to rustle stock from the owners. Sell the cattle and make a tidy sum for themselves. Unless a ranch owner keeps their hand in the day-to-day operations, he or she opens themselves up to substantial losses."

Anna sat in silence.

Michael continued the tour, covering only a portion of the expansive land that made up the Double M Ranch.

"Our ranch hands are up at the crack of dawn, sometimes earlier. Rule is... chores are completed before the men eat, usually around eight o'clock. Your daughter is wonderful about working in the barns, especially with our female horse wrangler. Rosie and Willow have become very good friends, and Willow loves teaching Rosie about delivering foals and what to watch for if a horse is ailing."

Michael glanced at Anna.

Her face had paled, almost to the point of worry. Almost.

Only a slight twinge of guilt gave him pause. He enjoyed Anna's obvious discomfort at hearing everything her society daughter had been exposed to while staying at the ranch. And the fact Rosie was loving every minute of it must irritate the woman no end.

"Of course, if you successfully win ownership of the ranch, you'll be expected to learn every job and duty of the men working for you," he continued his litany.

"I very much doubt that," Anna scoffed. "I'll be selling the ranch, and I don't care what duties are involved in the operation of the Double M."

Michael wasn't one bit surprised to learn Anna's intentions. All the woman saw was dollar signs when she gazed upon the land that meant so much to his family.

"I suppose you could sell. Providing you find someone willing and able to buy. This ranch is worth a pretty penny. Don't rightly know if there are many folks with that much money available to invest in a huge ranch like this one," Michael warned her.

Anna's mouth dropped open.

Michael relished the brief moment of satisfaction knowing she hadn't considered the possibility a buyer wouldn't come forward. He prayed fervently she wasn't successful in her lawsuit, which would make selling the Double M a moot point. If she won the ranch and sold it out from under his pa, Michael feared what the shock might do to his father's heart. A lifetime of work for nothing. Handed over by some judge to a greedy woman who, to his reckoning, wasn't entitled to one acre.

Michael slumped in his seat. Anna sat beside him, back as rigid as her demeanor. He'd failed miserably. It appeared he hadn't convinced Anna that ranch life wasn't for her by introducing her to the hard work and responsibilities that ownership of the Double M would entail.

Indeed, all he'd likely accomplished was solidifying her intention to sell.

Chapter 21

Rosie's hands fisted at her sides as Michael related the tale about his tour with Anna earlier this afternoon. Rosie couldn't believe her mother's disregard for the land that meant so much to this wonderful family. It irked her that Anna couldn't appreciate the decades of hard work that had gone into making the ranch the unequivocal success it represented today.

Of course, why would her mother recognize the results of the toil, tears, blood, and sweat that had built the Double M? Her mother hadn't undertaken or completed a single day's work in her entire privileged life.

Rosie strode up to the main house, her mind a jumble of disconnected thoughts. She couldn't decide if she hated her mother's callous treatment of the McLennons the most. Or if she felt sorry for her mother's learned, shameful behavior having been brought up in a loveless home with cold, unfeeling people as her only examples of humanity. Or did she find her mother's greedy, opportunistic tendencies the least forgivable sin?

"Why isn't what you've been given ever enough, Mother?" she muttered as she climbed the stairs to the second floor and pounded her fist in a very unladylike manner on her mother's bedroom door.

After a few moments, the door swung open. "How dare you... Oh, Rosemary, it's you." Anna stepped aside and Rosie stepped across the threshold before turning on her mother.

"Why do you insist on pursuing this ridiculous idea that you deserve the Double M?" Rosie stood hands on hips.

Anna closed the door and settled herself on the vanity chair. She picked up a brush and proceeded to fix her bun. "It's quite simple... because I do deserve it. Michael Miller would have wanted his own child to inherit his ranch. Really, I don't understand why people cannot comprehend something so obvious."

"You aren't his daughter. AJ told you that. The entries in the diary hinted as much. Why do you refuse to see it?" Rosie threw up her hands. "And even if you are his daughter, what about the thirty years of hard work the McLennons have put into this ranch? The blood, sweat and tears. They

deserve this ranch. AJ was like a son to him. What you don't understand, Mother, is hard physical work. You've never worked a day in your life."

Anna huffed.

"The truth in those diaries couldn't be more obvious."

"Not to anyone who can read. Mother mentions Michael Miller several times in her written musings. Mr. Miller was my father." Anna finished fixing her hair and swung her legs around on the chair. "Now, enough of that. Let's talk of something else we'll certainly also disagree on. I heard from young Michael that you've been helping in the barns."

"Yes, the horse barn with Willow."

"Really, that isn't necessary. And frankly, I find it quite beneath you." Anna waved her hand. "You will stop this silliness immediately. If you wish to ride one of the horses, have a groom saddle the beast for you. Although, I cannot for the life of me understand why you enjoy such a thing."

"Whenever I wish to ride, I'll saddle my own horse. And care for him again when I return. AJ introduced me to a lovely aging fellow named Mick, and I'm permitted to ride him whenever I choose. He's the most adorable old gelding. Very well-mannered and he enjoys our outings as much as I do." Rosie caught herself smiling. She truly enjoyed living on the ranch and working alongside Willow and the others. And her mother would never convince her to stop doing what she found extremely enjoyable and relaxing. "Time spent with Willow couldn't be more companionable, Mother." Rosie clasped her hands. "I've found a true friend for the first time in my life."

"A female horse... whatever they're called. You actually consider her a friend?" her mother blurted, appearing horrified at the thought.

"Wrangler. A female horse wrangler." Rosie smiled. "She's extremely talented. Grew up on a Thoroughbred ranch in Texas. Oh, I so envy her upbringing. Working alongside her father and brother with the most magnificent racing horses imaginable."

Anna's face paled. "You envy her?"

"Oh, Mother, I've never been more serious about anything in my life." Rosie paced the floor. "Talking with Amanda about her years growing up on the Double M with her father and mother and her brothers. Her parents loved all their children, and they loved each other so much. I can't fathom such a thing. Everyone in our family tolerated each other at best."

Anna remained silent, and Rosie knew she hadn't a leg to argue on. Not one couple in the Woodley, Wentworth, or Dalton connection could boast a happy relationship or fulfilling marriage. Not a one. Rosie hoped she and Michael would break the curse from her side of their relationship. She couldn't love Michael more, and she suspected he felt the same way about her.

She'd truly come to Montana for a reason. And it appeared Michael was it. She couldn't imagine living the rest of her life without him by her side.

"Mother, I refuse to sit by while you destroy the life's work of a wonderful man like AJ, and the future legacy of his beautiful family." Rosie stood her ground. "Please leave the Double M and return home to Boston. You've caused enough of a rift here as it is."

"If AJ orders me off the ranch, I will leave and find accommodations in town. Until then, I feel obligated to remain here and keep an eye on you. You're my only child and you've travelled halfway across the country to live with strangers."

Rosie burst into laughter. "Mother, you expect me to believe you're suddenly overpowered with maternal feelings of responsibility toward your grown daughter? Where were you when I was a child and actually would have welcomed your concern?"

Anna's pursed lips told Rosie she'd hit a sore spot. Rosie's grandmother had scolded her daughter innumerable times for ignoring her child and her needs. Her mother hadn't taken heed of the warnings, and Rosie considered her grandmother her main source of affection and guidance into adulthood. She missed her grandmother's presence in her life every single day. When Anna returned to Boston, Rosie doubted she'd miss her at all.

"Consider what I've said, Mother. Clearly, you're not welcome here." Rosie turned to leave and then paused. She met her mother's eyes. "And for the record, I'm completely on the McLennons' side in this ridiculous lawsuit you're attempting to initiate. After thirty years you don't deserve anything, and besides, no one will ever convince me you're Michael Miller's daughter."

Rosie stormed out of her mother's bedroom; she couldn't more clearly state her position on the matter. Her mother stood firmly by herself concerning her parentage and wanting the ranch for herself. And so be it.

With any luck at all, the truth would win out in the end.

Chapter 22

For hours, Rosie paced the parlor floor while she reviewed for the hundredth time the contents of her grandmother's diaries. She feared a hole might appear in the beautiful Axminster rug, a visible accusation and viable proof of the time she'd wasted dwelling on an impossible situation.

They were missing something within those words, but she couldn't imagine for the life of her what it might be. Some hidden meaning that they'd overlooked. Surely, her grandmother would have written about the true father of her baby somewhere within those pages if the man hadn't been Michael Miller as AJ believed. Rosie had read every word within all of the journals, some of them several times, but Lucille Woodley Wentworth's secret had gone to the grave with her. Grandfather, who were you?

The family returned home to Boston today with me in tears and fit to be tied. Father refused to even consider a courtship between me and Michael Miller.

Obviously, Grandmother Lucille had been attracted to Mr. Miller and fallen in love with him. And the feeling had been mutual according to AJ. And Mr. Miller never married, heartbroken over losing the only woman he would ever love or consider marrying.

I'm so heartbroken; I've fallen completely in love with this young man. But Father insists his only child deserves someone more suitable. His opinion is certainly not mine.

Rosie laughed. If only her great-grandfather could see Mr. Miller's legacy. The majestic ranch with the stunning family home, the magnificent horses, and thousands of cattle in the Double M herd. And all the talented people who worked and lived together on these acres of land which produced an exceptional livelihood for all of them. Family and workers

alike. Would her great-grandfather still believe he'd saved his daughter from a less deserving man?

Mother keeps insisting someday another young man will turn my head and I'll recover from this heartache. But I know she's wrong. They're both so wrong. I'll never forget Michael or stop loving him for as long as I live.

But her great-grandfather ruined any possible chance of happiness for her grandmother. He hadn't realized the intensity of Michael's and Lucille's feelings for each other. Their shared forever love. He'd ignored his daughter's pleadings, insisting he knew best. How wrong he'd been. Especially considering the consequence of his daughter's time in Montana.

Mother realized the truth of the matter and scolded me for my inexcusable behavior in Montana. I didn't elaborate on the details, allowing her to stew about her foolish daughter misbehaving with 'that Michael chap'.

Tears blurred Rosie's vision. She loved Michael McLennon so much. If her own father were alive and insisted she return to Boston, predicting she'd marry a Boston aristocrat with a promising future in business or commerce one day, she couldn't endure the heartbreak. She would never forget Michael ever existed. How had her grandmother survived, especially after learning she'd conceived a child? It all seemed beyond comprehension.

But those six simple words *I didn't elaborate on the details* kept Rosie awake at night, tossing and turning in her bed attempting to decipher their meaning. *Didn't elaborate*. What did Grandmother mean by that? *Elaborate*. The one little word that could prove that her mother's belief Michael Miller fathered her was actually a fallacy, and in truth, another fellow was to blame for her grandmother's predicament. If her grandmother had taken the time to elaborate, they would know the true meaning behind her words.

"Will we ever learn the truth?" she muttered. Only the parlor walls witnessed her plea and they couldn't offer an answer. Rosie gazed heavenward. "Grandmother, how I wish you could tell us what happened."

Rosie swiped at the wetness on her cheeks and then pinched them for color. Supper should be ready and she refused to present herself in a weepy state. She would prove her mother wrong and prevent her from stealing this precious ranch from the McLennons, if it was the last good thing she ever accomplished in life. And she refused to lose the man she loved so dearly due to her mother.

“Grandfather, who were you? There has to be an answer,” she whispered aloud as she closed the parlor door behind her.

Rosie discovered everyone, even Mrs. Sheridan, already seated at the table when she strode into the dining room. Thankfully, her mother hadn’t put in an appearance, and most likely requested a tray be sent to her room. “I apologize for being late.”

“We hoped you’d join us. No one seemed certain where you’d wandered off to,” AJ observed, waving her toward the chair beside Michael’s.

Rosie heaved a sigh. “I needed time to myself in the parlor. Just thinking about... everything.”

Mrs. Sheridan patted her hand, seated on her other side. “I cannot say this often enough... no one blames you for any of this. Simple curiosity brought you to us, and no one would fault you for needing answers to your heritage.”

Rosie blinked back tears. “Thank you for being so understanding.”

“All of us couldn’t agree more,” AJ added. “You’ve been nothing but loyal to our family. We consider you one of us.”

“The problem remains,” Rosie whispered, extracting her handkerchief from her dress pocket and dabbing her eyes. “What will we do about Mother?” She stuffed her handkerchief back into her pocket.

“Jamieson Davies is busy working on our defense. We’ll win... I’m certain of it. There isn’t a judge alive who’ll side with Anna, considering the foggy wording in that diary.”

“*Didn’t elaborate on the details*,” Rosie repeated the most troubling words, in her opinion. “That most likely referenced the extent of Lucille’s relationship with Michael Miller. The depth of their love despite having known each other for such a short time. Love at first sight. Lucille’s mother may have scoffed at the entire idea.”

Michael cleared his throat and glanced away.

“Not the case for you, son,” AJ whispered, grinning.

Rosie recalled the turbulent beginning to their own love story. Accusing her of lying about Michael Miller being her grandfather. Accusing her being a fraud with ulterior motives. She could smile about it now, but at the time she'd never been more hurt or insulted.

Michael gazed into her beautiful eyes and smiled. "Doesn't matter when a fellow finds that special person. Just that he finally does."

Rosie noticed his carefully worded response, conveying his meaning perfectly without admitting aloud he'd fallen for her. Of course, the latter was the worst kept secret on the Double M. Even a blind person could sense how he felt about her. And her sentiment toward him couldn't be clearer either. Their love for each other positively oozed from every pore on their bodies, resulting in a frequent girly blush from her and cow-eye affection for her in Michael's expression, which his sister and sisters-in-law teased him about relentlessly.

She briefly glanced away, feeling him gently clasping her hand under the table. She smiled when he winked at her.

"We're not going to allow this situation to put a damper on our lives. Chores require doing, our animals depend on us for comfort and care, meals need cooking, life goes on, nothing will change." AJ settled his arm around Michael's back.

"We've put our faith in Jamieson Davies and I'm confident he'll win in our favor," Michael added.

"We'll keep searching for the truth. Michael Miller was not your granddaddy, Rosie. But we're all hoping to learn who was."

Rosie nodded. "Thank you, AJ. I don't know where this tale will end, but the truth is not in those diaries or we would have found it already."

"I agree." Mrs. Sheridan patted her hand. "But no one is giving up on learning the real story behind your grandmother's visit to Montana."

After AJ offered the blessing, Rosie took the bowl of potatoes from Mrs. Sheridan's hands and served herself. She couldn't have accidentally toppled into the lives of a more generous, accepting, kind-hearted family. She hadn't a doubt in her mind that together they would eventually learn the entire truth of her existence. She prayed the discovery process didn't destroy the family or her relationship with them in the meantime. Especially her relationship with Michael.

She couldn't lose his love.

The loss would destroy her.

Chapter 23

Anna Dalton sipped a cup of coffee, seated in one of the rocking chairs on the front veranda. Sunshine warmed her on this lovely mid-July morning while pretty colored songbirds chirped and flitted from branch to branch in the cottonwood tree overhead. Although surrounded by the large McLennon family and her daughter, she couldn't feel more alone in the world.

Of course, her current situation resulted from her own doing.

No one believed her.

Not even her own child.

Well, that wouldn't prevent Anna from pursuing her personal agenda. She truly believed herself in the right. The proof lay in her own mother's words, contained within the pages of the leather-bound journal her daughter had discovered hidden somewhere under Anna's own roof. How had she never learned of her mother's habit of keeping a diary? They'd never been what anyone would consider a close-knit family, but Anna truly hadn't known her mother at all.

"Rider approaching," someone called from across the yard near the horse barn.

Anna's head whipped up and she gazed toward the well-trodden road leading to the ranch buildings. Sure enough, a lone rider drew closer, riding directly toward the house. A shiver raced up her spine. Had AJ sent for the authorities, having tired of her objection to his interpretation of the journal entries? Would she be arrested for disagreeing with him and initiating legal action against his inheritance of the Double M?

She swallowed hard, her heartbeat racing. She set her coffee cup down and stood, considering her options. Stand her ground and find herself arrested? Run to her room and bar herself inside? Race to the garden and hide among the fruit trees like a misbehaving child until the lawman left? Every choice seemed more ridiculous than the former.

She continued to gaze as the rider approached. The man appeared familiar, for some reason. And then she realized the visitor to the ranch was Randolph Barnes. What would her lawyer be doing here? Why would he venture all the way from Butte to the Double M? Had he doubted her story

and come to check out the validity of her claim? She straightened her back, miffed by the very idea. Perhaps she hadn't hired the right man for the job after all.

"Good morning, Mrs. Dalton," he called, dismounting and tying his horse's reins to the hitching rail.

Anna clasped her hands and muttered, "Good morning."

Randolph Barnes climbed the veranda steps and removed his bowler. "I hope I haven't come at an inopportune time?"

"I suppose not," Anna conceded. She might as well hear him out and be done with this. At least she wore one of her nicest dresses and she'd fixed her hair properly this morning.

"Excellent. We have a lot to discuss."

Anna waved him toward one of the rocking chairs and settled onto the one she'd vacated minutes ago. "Why did you travel all this way?" she blurted, feeling her face redden. She hadn't intended the question to sound so blunt but he'd surprised her, arriving so unexpectedly.

"What I have to say seemed best related in person," he offered.

Just then, the front door opened and Mrs. Sheridan stepped outside. "Don't mean to interrupt, but I thought perhaps you and your visitor would like a cup of coffee?"

"Certainly," Anna replied, smiling while silently scolding herself for such a display of poor manners. She should have offered Mr. Barnes a refreshment herself. He truly discombobulated her by showing up without warning.

"That would be much appreciated." Mr. Barnes accepted the cup of coffee the housekeeper handed him from her tray.

"I added a dab of cream and a spoon of sugar," Mrs. Sheridan explained.

Their visitor smiled and nodded. "Perfect. And thank you."

Mrs. Sheridan set the tray on a nearby table, pointing to the coffee pot. "Help yourself to another cup and the fixings, Anna." She returned inside, closing the front door behind her.

Anna silently fumed, having been snubbed by the woman leaving the unspoken message *the likes of you can serve yourself*. Clearly, Mrs. Sheridan didn't approve of Anna's actions against her employer and his family. The woman would discover herself the first employee looking for another job the day Anna won ownership of the Double M.

She reached for her cup and refilled it, adding cream and sugar before returning to her seat. She smiled at Mr. Barnes. "Now, where were we?"

Mr. Barnes sipped his coffee and then sighed. "I come bearing news, both good and bad."

Anna's legs trembled beneath her skirts. *Both good and bad?* Whatever could that mean?

"After you visited our office, Father and I initiated work on your case immediately." Mr. Barnes set his cup aside on the nearby table. "In the process of our investigation, I telegraphed your Boston banker, Mr. Albert Drake, whom you mentioned during our initial meeting, to confirm that you were who you claimed to be."

Anna gasped and her mouth dropped open.

Mr. Barnes waved his hand. "Purely, our policy. Nothing derogatory intended against your character, I promise."

"I understand," Anna muttered, although a bit perturbed that the fellow would doubt her credibility. "I'm certain Mr. Drake confirmed my story about my husband's passing and the sale of his business to the newly formed partnership by his colleagues."

"Yes, everything you told us has been corroborated as we expected," Mr. Barnes replied. "I'm afraid Mr. Drake shared other information, more troubling communications, as well."

Anna waited for further explanation while he reached for his cup and drank the remaining contents before setting it down again. Why was he delaying relating his findings? And then she recalled he'd mentioned bad news. And he'd used the word troubling. Was there something she should be worried about?

"Your bank manager replied to our inquiry immediately. Albert Drake claimed he'd been informed you were traveling but he hadn't been apprised of to where or for what purpose," Mr. Barnes began.

Anna grimaced. All of that was true. She hadn't wanted to risk her society friends learning she'd ventured off on a goose chase to retrieve her wayward daughter after all. The less divulged about this questionable paternity matter, the better.

"Anyway, apparently Mr. Drake and his banking colleagues had been frantic to contact you, Mrs. Dalton."

She gaped. "Our family dealt with that bank for generations. Had he feared when he couldn't find me that someone had done me harm or

worse?”

“Perhaps, but regardless, he seemed relieved to hear from us.” Mr. Barnes leaned forward and met Anna’s eyes. “It appears you have much bigger problems than acquiring ownership of this McLennon fellow’s ranch. A case I must say you most likely won’t win anyway.”

Won’t win anyway? What could be worse than not winning her case? What were these bigger problems?

“I... I don’t understand what you mean?” she muttered.

“Did you fail to mention to my father and me that you’d recently remarried?” Mr. Barnes leaned back in his chair. “Mr. Drake has been contacted by your new husband, and the fellow instructed the manager to transfer all your money from your account into his, enabling him to care for you properly. Without bothering you about financial matters.”

New husband? Transfer all your money?

Anna swallowed the bile rising to her throat. What was he talking about? “I... I haven’t remarried anyone.” And then the realization of what he’d related struck her like a fist to the stomach. Had the banker believed this man? Had he transferred all of her money to this scoundrel’s account? Had her banker left her virtually penniless?

Anna slumped in her chair. If she hadn’t a cent to her name, what would she do? Mr. Barnes claimed she wouldn’t win her case against AJ. She leapt to her feet and gasped. Had her actions without a moment’s consideration for the McLennons caught up with her? Had greed, as her daughter claimed was her motivation, been her downfall?

Had she lost absolutely everything?

A wave of dizziness overtook her and then everything went black.

Chapter 24

Anna blinked and forced her eyes open, squinting against the bright sunshine streaming through a window, recognizing the interior of AJ's study. "What... what happened?" she muttered.

"You fainted, Anna."

Anna strained to hear Mrs. Sheridan's muffled reply, as if the woman spoke the words from the depth of a well. Anna touched the cold cloth resting on her forehead. She truly must have fainted. Something she'd never done in her entire life.

And then she remembered why.

She hadn't a penny to her name!

"I'm... I'm ruined," she muttered, tears welling in her eyes and blurring her vision.

Someone touched her hand. "No, Mrs. Dalton. Your funds are safe."

Anna's heartbeat raced. Had she heard Mr. Barnes correctly?

"It's true. Some fellow was claiming to be your new husband. Mr. Drake immediately became suspicious since you hadn't mentioned anything of the sort to him, and there hadn't been any mention of such an event in the newspaper." Mr. Barnes shifted in his chair. "Wise fellow, this Albert Drake."

"Yes, truly." Anna processed little of what he reported beyond *your funds are safe*. Thank goodness for that. Being all alone in the world, she wouldn't have known what to do.

"Mr. Drake impeded the fellow's request by insisting on a letter from you requesting the money be transferred from your account to this new husband's. And he insisted it be signed by you as well."

Anna heaved a sigh. "Bless you, Mr. Drake. Since I'm hundreds and hundreds of miles away, his request couldn't be met. That must be the end of it then."

"Not the case." Mr. Barnes shook his head. "The fellow presented the letter as requested, including your signature. Mr. Drake immediately suspected the signature was a forgery, since the man showed up with the

letter the next day. And Drake knew you weren't in town and the likelihood the fellow obtained your signature seemed highly unlikely."

"More like impossible," Anna blurted, raising her head.

"Keep this on a while longer." Mrs. Sheridan replaced the cool cloth on Anna's forehead. "The nerve of this fellow."

"Who he is remains a mystery. But he obviously knows you've come into a substantial amount of money after selling your husband's business." Mr. Barnes perused several sheets of paper. "Here it is. The banker claims the fellow is Jonathan Wilson Walters."

Anna shrugged.

"You have no idea who he is?"

"None whatsoever. I've never heard the name before."

"The papers the fellow presented to Drake were signed 'Anna Walters' and the crook claimed you'd altered your signature since acquiring your new name."

"Isn't that a convenient way around obtaining a signature," Mrs. Sheridan scoffed.

"Yes, the man doesn't appear an amateur. But the banker insisted the name on the account was still Anna Dalton, and that the letter instructing him to complete the transfer of funds must be signed as such." Mr. Barnes smiled at her. "Thankfully, for your sake, Drake is stalling this shyster at every turn. But we must act quickly to thwart this criminal's intentions. Or your banker might be forced to transfer those funds."

Anna gasped. "Albert Drake knows the man is a fraud. Why doesn't he simply summon the authorities and have him arrested?"

"He certainly intends to, but he requires our assistance. You must inform him you haven't remarried and assure him this Walters fellow is attempting to illegally remove the funds from your account." Mr. Barnes shook his head. "Time is not on our side. Returning to Boston will take far too long. We need to act now."

Mrs. Sheridan touched Anna's arm. "You know I'm not fond of you, considering what you're attempting to do to the McLennons. But I don't want you ruined by this dreadful fellow either. I have an idea."

Anna sat, stunned, as the housekeeper patted her hand and then hurried out of the room. Why would the woman who clearly despised her, offer assistance without hesitation? She may have underestimated Mrs. Sheridan. No wonder everyone on the ranch adored the selfless, caring woman.

A few minutes later, AJ strode into the room with Mrs. Sheridan on his heels.

“Nellie tells me there’s a bit of trouble brewing in Boston, concerning Anna,” AJ said, meeting eyes with Mr. Barnes.

Introductions followed, accompanied by a round of handshaking, and then Mr. Barnes explained the entire situation once again. AJ sat behind his desk, listening intently while his expression clouded with each new revelation. Anna prayed he’d agree to help them.

“This Walters needs to be stopped,” AJ concluded. “And I know exactly the man who can do it.”

Mr. Barnes reared back in his chair. “Who do you have in mind?”

“My favorite Pinkerton agent.”

Chapter 25

A loud knock on the study door drew Michael from his conversation with his pa.

“Come in,” AJ called.

The door squeaked open with a hinge in need of oiling, and Eric Lake popped his head inside. “Do you have a minute, sir?”

AJ waved him inside and Eric stood shifting from one foot to the other before sticking his hands in his pockets.

Michael noticed Eric’s nervousness immediately. The new hire wasn’t making eye contact with anyone either. “What did you do?” he blurted.

Eric’s head whipped up. “I haven’t done anything.”

“Then what’s this about?” Michael demanded. “You’re acting mighty guilty.”

AJ waved a hand at him. “Now, son, give the fellow a minute to explain himself.”

“Thank you, sir.” Eric heaved a sigh. “It’s not me.”

Michael glanced at his father and then crossed his arms over his chest. “You reckon someone else is robbing us?”

“Nobody is stealing anything,” Eric blurted in exasperation.

Michael still had his doubts about the ex-convict, but he’d hear him out at least.

“I... I overheard Sammy and Mrs. Sheridan talking.” Eric met AJ’s eyes. “I don’t listen to other folks’ conversations, but they were pretty loud while discussing this thing with Mrs. Dalton.”

“What did you hear?” Michael demanded, although he was well aware that Mrs. Sheridan’s idea of a whisper was anything but.

“I heard that some feller in Boston is posing as her new husband and trying to steal all her money.” Eric glanced at Michael and then at AJ. “Is... is that right, sir?”

AJ nodded.

“First thing that popped into my mind... sounds exactly like something my pa would do,” Eric confessed. “I don’t rightly know if he’s still in prison

or not. I don't know if... could you find out if he's still there? Or was David Lake released and he's up to his old tricks?"

AJ stood and strode across the room. He set a hand on Eric's shoulder. "Son, I doubt very much if this scoundrel is your pa. But I'll sent a telegraph tomorrow and we'll confirm that your pa is still in the Montana Territorial Prison at Deer Lodge."

Eric blew out his breath. "Thank you, sir. That would put my mind at ease."

"You're welcome."

"My mind worked all night, worrying that maybe Pa had been released. Or maybe he'd escaped. I couldn't sleep and I've been aworryin' myself sick all day." Eric grinned, sheepishly. "Sammy thought I was in love or something. Can't keep my mind on my work. I finally had to admit what the problem was and my boss sent my behind up here to see you."

AJ chuckled. "I'm heading into town this afternoon, so I'll make inquiries and let you know what I learn."

Eric offered a weak smile. "Thank you so much. I'm probably getting my mind in a lather over nothing, but I... I can't abide my pa stealing from innocent folks."

"Anna Dalton ain't all that innocent." AJ scratched his head. "That woman wouldn't blink an eye if the judge awarded her ownership of the Double M."

Eric gasped.

"Now, that's nothing for you to worry about, son." AJ waved off the matter. "Ain't happening as long as I'm able to draw breath."

"Or me either. She's not taking what don't belong to her," Michael reiterated.

Eric dragged his hands down his trousers and then stuck out his hand. "Thank you, sir. I'll be getting back to work now."

AJ shook hands with him, and Michael followed suit. Maybe Eric had turned his life around. Sammy couldn't say enough good things about his new assistant. Michael wasn't worrying about the fellow being around the womenfolk, especially Rosie, anymore either.

"You're doing a good job," Michael admitted, looking Eric in the eye. "I'm a bit surprised, but I'm happy to have been wrong about you."

Eric beamed. "That's mighty high praise coming from... thank you."

“I’m happy the job is working out. Sammy should retire sooner than later, and you’re the man to replace him.” Michael chuckled. “Unless he fires you for dillydallying today.”

“Right. I’ve got to go.” Eric bolted out of the study and a second later the front door slammed closed.

“Well, I guess I’m off to town again. Just traveled into Milestone yesterday to telegraph Daniel. Hadn’t planned on another trip so soon, but that young man is some troubled about his pa so I figured I’d invent a little white lie about heading to town. A man’s not at his best when his mind is troubled.” AJ lumbered out of the study and down the hallway. “Who knows? Might be a reply from Daniel waiting for me.”

Michael followed on his heels. “You reckon Lake’s still in jail?”

“Yes, I’d reckon so. Don’t hurt none to check. And I’ll have Sheriff Manning send the telegraph. I expect we’ll hear back sooner that way.”

“Good thinking, Pa.”

“I’ll give our regards to your sister also. I plan on dropping by her store to say hello.”

“Could you pick up some sweets at the general store for me?” Michael grinned. “Rosie is particularly fond of anything peppermint.”

AJ chuckled. “Is she now? I’ll see what I can do.”

“Speaking of dillydallying, don’t you have some work to do?” AJ’s eyebrows rose.

Michael smiled. “Who was it told me all my life *the work on a ranch is never done*? Guess that means I should get myself out to the cattle barns.”

“Wise man who told you that.” AJ slapped his son on the back. “And Michael Miller told me the same thing about a thousand times also.”

Michael’s throat tightened at the mention of his namesake. Dang it, but he wished he’d met the man. Clearly, the fellow had died too soon. And he must be rolling in his grave with all the to-do and a possible lawsuit over his ranch. Seemed downright disrespectful, to Michael’s way of thinking.

Worse yet, he couldn’t think of a single thing he could do to fix it.

Chapter 26

Rosie sat beside her mother in AJ's study, worrying the handkerchief in her hand while the ladderback chair tormented her backbone. She and Anna had been summoned after supper to talk over a matter of importance, as AJ put it. Rosie hadn't a clue what that meant. Her first thought had been *what has Mother done now?*

"Would either of you like a glass of sherry?" AJ paused to pour himself a glass of whiskey.

"No, thank you," Rosie piped up, too nervous to indulge in anything.

"That would be lovely, thank you," Anna replied, offering her host a splendid smile.

Rosie gaped. Did nothing faze the woman? She sat calm and collected as if they'd been invited for an evening of cards and friendship, but Rosie suspected neither was on tonight's agenda.

AJ had spent the majority of the day in town and she couldn't imagine what he wanted to discuss with them. Had he spoken to his own lawyer again? Did he intend to evict her mother from his home? Rosie certainly couldn't blame him.

And now this additional threat of the imposter attempting to extort funds from her mother, something she'd only heard about from Anna minutes before they sat down to supper, must weigh heavy on her mind.

AJ settled into his chair behind the old desk that monopolized the majority of the room. He set his drink down and crossed his arms over his chest. He gazed intently at Anna. Rosie swallowed hard. Here it comes.

"I sent the telegraph to Daniel the day before yesterday."

Rosie and Anna sat, speechless. Rosie childishly crossed her fingers, hidden in the folds of her skirts. A habit she'd indulged in since childhood when she never knew what to expect from a frequently absentee mother and a father prone to volatile temper.

"Have you received a reply?" Anna inquired, sipping her sherry.

"Actually, I did. While in town today on a different matter, I checked with Rodney Wilkes at the telegraph office and he had a response to my

inquiry waiting for me.” AJ sampled his whiskey and nodded in appreciation before setting the glass down again.

Rosie feared she’d die from waiting for further explanation. And what had this different matter been? She hadn’t been told about additional problems concerning her mother and the ridiculous lawsuit. Why had all of their lives become so complicated?

“Daniel surprised me by his quick reply, but he shocked me when I learned his message had been forwarded to him in Boston. He’s working on a case there as we speak.”

“What a wonderful coincidence,” Anna exclaimed, clasping her hands in delight.

“A fine piece of luck all right,” AJ agreed. “Daniel assured me he’d find the time to make inquiries and meet with your banker. For a Pinkerton, the entire matter sounded simple enough to sort out, I suppose. Daniel will keep me informed of any progress.”

Anna leaned back in her chair. “My goodness, AJ, I must say this news sets my mind at ease. I appreciate your assistance so much.”

“Well, nothing I wouldn’t do for anyone.” AJ sipped his drink and clasped it in his hands.

“Does this mean you’re going to stop this ridiculous lawsuit, Mother?”

Anna glared at her. “Rosemary, the two matters are completely unrelated.”

Rosie translated that to mean a resounding no.

“Your mother needs to do what she believes is necessary,” AJ offered. “Our opinion on her actions is of no importance. We’ll let the judge decide who’s in the right, if it comes to that.”

Rosie’s eyes welled and she blinked away the tears. She’d never before met such a kind-hearted, fair-minded man as AJ. She wouldn’t have believed they existed had she not met one. AJ’s selflessness surprised her, but his genuine goodness bewildered her. Anna was suing for ownership of the very ranch she’d been permitted to live on as his guest. Who would believe such a thing? She smiled to herself again recalling the old idiom *keep your friends close and your enemies closer*. Perhaps there was cunning and logical reasoning behind AJ’s actions after all.

“Well, ladies, I’m off to bed. We’ll have to wait until we hear from Daniel again before we can put this matter behind us.” He met eyes with Anna. “I’m confident Daniel and his counterparts will settle this matter in

your favor, Anna. Your funds will remain intact at your bank, if the Pinkertons have anything to do with it.”

“Thank you again, AJ.” Anna gushed as she rose off her chair and smiled at their host, coquettishly. “Sleep well. I will, knowing you’ve handled this so admirably.”

Rosie glared at her mother. Surely, she hadn’t decided to double her chances of success by making a play for AJ’s affections. Everyone in the family told her about Edna and how she’d been the love of his life. Anna was certainly barking up the wrong tree this time. Rosie decided to sit back and allow her selfish mother to make a complete fool of herself with the one man whose heart she would never win.

“I’m going to find Michael and suggest a walk before we turn in,” Rosie announced. She needed to catch up on his news and inquire if he was apprised of details she hadn’t learned as yet. Especially what this different matter was that AJ had mentioned.

She’d always been told country life lent itself to relaxation, nothing even close in comparison to the rush and confusion of city living. Who would believe life on the Double M could be so worrisome and troubling? With one issue coming after the next and none of them good, the Double M Ranch appeared the exception to the quiet, easy life principle. And she’d found herself firmly rooted in the middle of it.

Thankfully, Rosie could rely on Michael at her side with his unwavering support to see her through it all.

* * *

Anna stood in the cookshack, staring at the aged ranch cook wearing a stained bib apron over his denims. Sourdough Sammy glared at her, brown eyes blazing.

“How dare you shout at me.” She’d never been spoken to in such a disrespectful tone in her entire life, and she didn’t appreciate it one bit.

“Well, someone needs to talk sense into you,” the old fellow yelled as one gnarled age-spotted hand grabbed a huge metal bowl off an open shelf. He slammed the bowl onto a scarred wooden workbench.

Anna startled at the show of temper.

He scooped flour out of the large built-in bin, filling the bowl while a cloud of white dust drifted into the air. He closed the tight-fitting lid on the

bin and flipped it back into place hidden within the workbench.

She brushed flour dust off her dress and moved farther away from him. What had driven this outburst? “You had Eric summon me here so you could shout nonsense at me?”

“Nonsense?” Sammy exclaimed, glaring at her again. “Stealing this ranch from AJ is complete insanity.”

“Not to me it isn’t. And I’m entitled to my opinion.” Anna looked down her nose at the annoying old man with the scruffy gray beard that matched the tufts of hair sticking out from under his old battered Stetson. If the rude, argumentative fellow worked for her, he’d be banished from the ranch immediately.

“Entitled to... what in tarnation are you thinking, girl? I never heard anything so dang stupid in my life.” Sammy lumbered around the cookshack preparing the evening meal as he spoke. Anna hadn’t a clue as to what he was doing. He’d added things to the flour including milk and flopped the entire thing onto the top of the workbench, working it into a huge ball.

“I expect you’re siding with AJ since you’re employed here and unconditional loyalty is expected of you.” Anna paced the cookshack floor. She’d heard enough from this infuriating old man. What nerve!

“I’m telling you again... Michael Miller wasn’t your father. AJ knows what he’s talking about. I knew Michael well, and a more gentlemanly fellow has never been born.”

Now Sammy was tossing random ingredients into one huge pot on the woodstove. “What are you doing?” she demanded, curiosity getting the better of her.

“Making stew and biscuits for supper.” Sammy tossed what Anna recognized as carrots into the pot next.

“I’ve heard enough from you,” Anna muttered, heading for the door.

Sammy snagged her arm on the way by.

“Let go of me,” she shrieked.

“Then forget this stupid idea that you should have inherited this ranch.”

“I’ll do no such thing.”

“You’re wrong. This is AJ’s ranch, not yours.” Sammy released his grip, shaking his head.

“We’ll see about that.” Anna tossed her head and sniffed in disgust.

“Michael Miller wasn’t your father,” Sammy reiterated one final time as Anna stormed out of the cookshack.

“Stupid old man. Loyal to a fault, but completely infuriating.” Anna stomped back to the house where she required the comfort of her room and a hot cup of tea. At first, she intended to mention the man’s rudeness to her host, but Sammy had been working here for years and AJ would no doubt side with his long-time employee.

“I’ll show you, old man,” she whispered the vow. She wasn’t listening to a word he said, and intended instead to double her efforts to prove herself right.

Chapter 27

August

Michael lounged on the bench seat at the long wooden table in the cookshack. To save the bother of washing up and presenting himself at Mrs. Sheridan's dining table in the main house, he'd chosen to eat the noon meal in the cookshack with the ranch hands.

The rest of the men had returned to work, but he'd decided on a final cup of coffee before returning to the corral to check on the heifer that had tangled with a coyote and been bitten badly on one leg. They'd summoned the local vet, and Doc Campbell was tending her now.

"Could I talk to you for a minute?"

Michael looked up and met eyes with Eric Lake. Michael initially wasn't too fond of the ex-convict, but his pa convinced him the fellow passed muster as a cook. Seeing how well the man had worked out so far, Michael conceded that giving Eric a second chance had been warranted. And his pa had learned that Eric's father, David Lake, remained in prison, after Eric had worried the criminal had escaped.

"What's on your mind?"

Eric glanced toward the doorway. "Let me know if Sourdough Sammy returns," he whispered.

Michael leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest, and glared at him. Was he about to mean-mouth the old fellow who'd worked on the Double M for decades, hoping to secure himself the job of head cook? Had his pa badly misjudged Eric? "All right. What do you want?"

Eric settled on the bench across from Michael and leaned his arms on the table. "It's about Sammy," he began.

"You want his job," Michael blurted, not even attempting to hide his contempt for the man from his voice.

"Hell, no." Eric stared at him. "I'm concerned for Sammy. He's been acting... a little strange. Talking to himself."

"Not against the law to talk to yourself," Michael scoffed. "If it was, my sister would be incarcerated in the Milestone jail more than she was

free.”

“He’s been muttering a mite. Worrisome things...” Eric’s expression suggested he was genuinely concerned.

“Like what?” Michael demanded.

“A lot of it don’t make no sense to me, but one thing has me concerned.”

“Tell me.”

“Sammy said that he was afraid.”

“Afraid? Afraid of what?”

“Something about ‘things were getting out of hand’,” Eric whispered. “I reckon I’m telling tales out of school, talking to you about this. But the old fellow has me worried.”

Michael detected a degree of sincerity in the man’s statement. “What do you reckon he was talking about?”

Eric shrugged. “Dang if I know. At first I figured he was concerned for his job, what with me showing up and getting myself hired on. Maybe he was annoyed with me for making suggestions on how things got done in his cookshack.” He dragged his hand down his face. “But the old fellow readily agreed to a couple of changes I mentioned. Said he liked the ideas, even though Sammy’s pretty set in his ways. Despite what he allowed, I’m concerned maybe he’s actually none too pleased with me.”

Michael crossed his arms over his chest. “Go on.”

“Well, I reckoned Sammy would tell you or AJ if he didn’t want my help, and you’d promptly send my britches down the road. I didn’t intend to overexcite the old fellow making too many changes, and I didn’t want to lose my job either.”

“And now you believe it’s something else.”

“He also muttered that he should say something,” Eric whispered and glanced toward the door. “Has he mentioned anything to you or your pa?”

Michael polished off his coffee. “Nothing that I’ve heard.”

“I did some thinking on it... maybe the old fellow’s concerned about Anna winning her claim on the ranch. He’d be worried if he still had a job and a home if she became the new owner. Heck, I’d be worried myself, especially if she sold the ranch. Who’d be the new owner? Would he send all of us on our way?”

“Unless Pa bought the ranch back from her,” Michael suggested.

“Why on earth would your pa buy back his own dang ranch? That’s just plumb crazy talk. I wouldn’t give that sneaky easterner a single dime, if it was me,” Eric scoffed.

“Well, neither would I. But at least we’d get the ranch back,” Michael argued. “Pa is convinced no one is going to win ownership of this ranch. Don’t worry, Eric. Your job isn’t going anywhere and neither are you.”

“Well, thank you. I reckoned I should tell someone about this thing with Sammy.” Eric smiled. “I appreciate your pa giving me a chance and I figured I owed him. I’m fond of the old cook, and if there’s something wrong I’d wager your pa would want to know.”

“What do you mean by ‘wrong’?”

“What if the old fellow... is ailing?” Eric whispered. “Think on it for a minute. *Afraid. Getting out of hand. Should say something. Maybe...*”

Michael swallowed hard, unable to comprehend the possible consequences of Eric’s speculation. Sammy ailing? He couldn’t even think about the old fellow passing. “No, it must be something else. Sammy seems as spry as ever.”

Eric threw up his hands. “Well, I done my part. I knew you’d want to know, so I told you. Not my place to confront the old man about this. But I hope your pa will learn what could be troubling his cook.”

Michael stood and stuck out his hand. He’d developed a new respect for Eric, bringing his concerns to light. He obviously cared about Sammy and he worried if his boss was all right. “Thank you for sharing your concerns. I appreciate it. Pa will, too.”

“Good. I don’t want anything bad to happen to Sammy. I really like the old fellow. He’s been sharing his recipes with me. Giving me some pointers in cooking. Even shared his secret ingredient in those sourdough biscuits he’s so dang famous for. Swore me to secrecy, of course. Wild horses won’t drag that out of me,” Eric finished, grinning. “So don’t be asking.”

Michael smiled in spite of his former opinion of the man. “I know better than that.” He had to admit nothing could have impressed him more than hearing Sammy had shared his biscuit secret with his future successor. That alone spoke volumes for Sammy’s opinion of the man. Maybe Michael had been a bit overzealous in initially judging Eric so poorly. “Well, I need to get back to work. Thank you again for sharing what you heard with me.”

Eric shook his hand. “Couldn’t live with myself if something happened and I hadn’t spoken up.”

Michael strolled out to the barn. Eric must be doing a great job cooking if Sammy was sharing secret recipes with him. He supposed his pa would definitely be keeping Eric on. The man obviously loved the job and so far he'd been keeping his nose clean. Of course, he hadn't been off the ranch either, so nothing to worry about there.

* * *

Later that night, Michael wandered into his father's study. "Need a word with you, Pa?"

"Sure, son. What's on your mind?"

"Eric's concerned about Sammy." Michael related everything the ranch cook had shared with him that afternoon.

His father listened intently. "What do you make of it?"

Michael shook his head. "I don't know, Pa. But I'd wager Eric isn't lying. He sounded concerned about his boss."

"I haven't noticed anything out of the ordinary. Of course, I only talk to Sammy when I'm in the cookshack for the occasional meal," his father admitted.

"That's more often than I've spoken with him." Michael shrugged. "Sammy pretty much keeps to himself. Mrs. Sheridan would know if anything seemed out of sorts. They're talking to each other constantly."

His pa clambered out of the chair. "I'm having a chinwag with her right now."

"Make sure Sammy isn't around. I doubt he'd appreciate us making inquiries behind his back," Michael warned. He'd known Sammy all his life and there wasn't a more private man alive. He kept to himself and only spoke when someone else initiated a conversation. Never played cards with the men in the bunkhouse or socialized much in town either.

"I'll make a discreet inquiry. Don't worry. If there's something to Eric's concerns, I'll discover it." His father slapped his son on the back. "Thank you for letting me know about this, Michael."

"You're welcome, Pa," he muttered.

Of course, he'd bring any matter to Pa's attention if it concerned the ranch or anyone living here. The McLennons looked out for their own, and that included both family and ranch employees. Everyone living on the Double M was an equal in AJ's eyes, and Michael and his brothers lived by

the same creed. Michael just prayed Eric's concerns wouldn't amount to much, if anything. Especially, the concern that Sammy was ailing or worse. Anything but that.

Chapter 28

AJ clasped the telegraph in his hands while he waited for Anna and Rosie to meet him in his study. Michael slumped in a chair to his left, one leg crossed over his knee, appearing relaxed and unconcerned about what he might learn. Of course, AJ's youngest son hadn't bothered to hide his contempt for Rosie's mother, or at least, for what she was attempting.

"Where are the womenfolk?" Michael grumbled.

AJ chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "Son, a man spends a lot of hours over his lifetime, waiting on womenfolk. Best get used to it now."

As if they'd overheard their conversation, Rosie scooted into the room with Anna strolling along not far behind. The woman never hurried over anything as if the entire world would wait for her to put in an appearance. "I'm sorry if we're late. I insisted on helping clear the table," Rosie explained.

"I'm certain Mrs. Sheridan appreciated that." AJ leaned forward and winked at Michael. "And we didn't mind waiting."

Michael shook his head.

"Did you hear from Daniel?" Rosie guessed the reason AJ asked them to come to the study.

AJ waved the telegraph in his hand. "Yes, I did. Take a seat and I'll read this to you."

Anna's face paled and Rosie reached over and clasped her hand.

"Daniel sent this final telegraph a couple days ago. He's telegraphed a prior report a couple times, but I haven't said anything since I didn't want you to worry Anna more than necessary, or get her hopes up." AJ smiled. "It's good news."

Anna slumped in her chair, relief evident on her face. "Tell me, please. What did your son learn?"

AJ cleared his throat. "Daniel reported he'd met with the banker, Mr. Drake, and on Daniel's instructions, the banker set up a meeting with this Jonathan Wilson Walters fellow."

AJ showed Rosie and Anna the initial telegraph.

Drake arranged meeting with Walters. Will report more later. Daniel.

“What happened next? Did they meet?” Anna whispered, wringing her hands.

AJ could tell she wasn't certain he'd be sharing good news with her as he'd suggested. If he found himself near to losing his entire financial livelihood, he'd be a mite nervous also.

Rosie handed the telegraph back and met AJ's eyes. “Did Mr. Walters bring another letter supposedly signed by Mother?”

“Walters canceled the next meeting one day when Mr. Drake wasn't in the bank. He told the clerk that he would be traveling for a week, but he'd be back two Fridays from that day.”

Meeting canceled by Walters until following week. Will report then. Daniel.

AJ set aside the second telegraph that he'd received after the ladies read it also.

“My goodness, I'm so nervous. Please tell me something positive happened that next Friday.” Anna clasped her hands on her lap.

“Daniel waited in the bank for Walters, posing as a bank clerk. I imagine when Walters arrived, he talked to Daniel behind the wicket and handed him the letter supposedly signed by Anna. Perhaps Daniel inquired where he and Anna had been married, and he'd provide some imagined story. Of course, Daniel would know the man was lying. He might have instructed Walters to wait in Mr. Drake's office on the pretense Daniel was arranging to move the money out of your account and into his.”

“But Daniel didn't transfer my money anywhere.”

“No, of course not. He arranged for local lawmen to arrive and arrest the imposter who was claiming to be your husband.” AJ smiled. “Walters' letter obviously was a fake with your signature forged by someone. The man will face a judge and definitely be sent to prison.” AJ handed Anna the last telegraph he received and Rosie read over her shoulder.

Walters presented fraudulent letter. I posed as clerk. Walters arrested by local law. Going to prison. Daniel.

“I wouldn't be surprised if we learned he'd attempted this before, and probably succeeded,” Rosie suggested.

Anna heaved a very audible sigh and her eyes filled with tears. “Thank goodness, your son stepped in and handled this. I cannot thank him enough.”

“Daniel and his wife visit us occasionally. And they have a little daughter named Edna,” AJ said, wistfully. “My wife’s namesake. They’ll come home to Milestone again one of these days.”

“Mother, I’m so happy this worked out for you.” Rosie hugged her mother.

The sudden affection surprised AJ. Perhaps the emotional conversation had prompted the gesture.

“Thank you, Rosemary.” Anna met her daughter’s eyes. “I should say thank you, Rosie. Knowing that my money is safe is a huge relief. I won’t worry anymore.”

“Despite our differences of opinion on... certain issues, I couldn’t let some scoundrel steal all your money,” AJ explained. “I’m happy I could help.”

“Thank you so much. Now, we just need to settle the matter of my father...” Anna muttered, leaving the thought hanging.

AJ hoped she would see reason and drop the ridiculous idea she should have inherited the Double M. He needed to prove Michael Miller hadn’t been her father which would settle the matter quickly enough. He didn’t have the first notion how he’d do it, though. He could use a miracle right about now. Or else he’d have the fight of his life on his hands. One thing for certain... no one would take this ranch from the McLennon family. Not as long as he drew breath.

“Pa, you all right?”

AJ startled from his thoughts. “I’m just fine, son.” He hadn’t noticed when Jackson, Adam and Simon entered his study. And the women had left, leaving only Michael sitting across from him. This probably wasn’t a coincidence. Had the makings of a good chinwag, and the topic probably wouldn’t be the weather either. “What brings you boys in here?”

Jackson glared at Michael. “We heard about you helping Anna.”

“Can’t say I blame you for doing it,” Adam added. “Right thing, getting a woman out of a fix like that.”

“But it’s the other thing that’s troubling us...” Simon met his pa’s eyes.

Michael shifted forward on his chair. “We’re all concerned about Anna.”

“Are you?” Adam blurted. “You’re in love with her daughter.”

“What does that have to do with it?”

“Whose side are you on? If you’re with Pa and the rest of us, then why are you keeping company with her dang kin?” Jackson chimed in.

Michael’s jaw dropped. “Of course, I’m on Pa’s side. Even Rosie’s on Pa’s side.”

“As long as she’s not lying,” Adam scoffed.

“She’s devastated that her mother is doing this,” Michael insisted. “The dang woman believes Michael Miller was her father. She won’t listen to a word we tell her. Anna has made up her mind and that’s all there is to it. Somehow we need to prove she’s wrong.”

“Of course, she’s wrong,” AJ blurted. “I’d peg my life on it. That diary is useless to us. Rosie’s grandmother left us with more questions than answers.”

“Someone must know the answer,” Adam speculated.

“But who is this someone, son?”

“Maybe we should talk to a few of the older townsfolk in Milestone. One of them might remember something,” Jackson suggested.

“That’s a good idea,” Michael agreed.

“Sam Perkins’ grandparents are what...” Adam searched his brothers’ eyes. “In their seventies? Perhaps they would have been friends with Michael Miller back then. I’m not certain when Sam’s grandfather ran the cooperage, but it’s possible he could have had dealings with Mr. Woodley himself.”

“Something to consider.” AJ dragged his hand down his face. “I’ll be heading to town in a few days. I’ll drop by and talk to old man Perkins and see if he remembers anything that might have happened back then.”

Simon shook his head. “I doubt Mr. Perkins concerned himself with who was in whose unmentionables back in 1833. And would he even remember this Woodley family?”

“It’s a longshot, I know, but we’re not sitting on our hands and doing nothing.” Adam leapt off his chair. “I’ve got to go. Sunrise was having a bit of trouble with one of her hooves again. Roland Campbell is expected to arrive anytime to take a gander at her. I’d best be getting back to the barn.”

“I hope she’s all right, Adam.” AJ slapped his son on the back. “Good horse is Sunrise.”

“This is the third time we’ve had Roland out here to look at her. I hope he can figure out a cure soon.” Adam smiled at his pa. “Sunrise produces those pretty little fillies and I don’t want to lose her.”

“Boys, we’ll figure out this problem with Anna soon enough also. Go about your business runnin’ this ranch and leave the worryin’ to me.” AJ smiled at them. “I’ve got nothin’ but time on my hands, and I might as well be worryin’ as doing anythin’ else.”

His sons glanced at each other.

“We’re not worried, Pa. We know you’d never let anyone take this ranch from you,” Jackson affirmed.

“That’s the plan, boys. That’s the plan.” AJ wandered out to the hallway and lumbered upstairs to his bedroom to contemplate his next move against Anna and her ridiculous intentions.

Back on the day he inherited this ranch from Michael Miller, he never dreamed he’d find himself in this predicament decades later. But he refused to betray the trust placed in him by losing the Double M to some greedy female easterner who didn’t deserve one acre of his legacy.

If only he had one iota of a plan to accomplish that.

Chapter 29

Michael stood in the hallway outside the study, drawn by the loud voices carrying throughout the entire lower level of the main house.

What the devil were his pa and Sammy discussing? He shuffled closer to the open doorway in an attempt to distinguish their argumentative words. His pa must have mentioned the old fellow's health or other worries, and Sammy didn't appear particularly appreciative of his pa's concerns.

"None of your dang business," Sammy shouted.

"The hell it ain't," his father countered. "If you're ailing, tell me. We'll send for Doc Bennett and—"

"There ain't nothin' wrong with me, you fool."

Michael risked a quick peek inside the room and spotted Sammy pacing the floor. Michael's father stood, leaning against his desk with a concerned expression clouding his face. His pa had taken Eric's and Michael's concerns about the old fellow seriously, but it appeared the confrontation wasn't going well.

AJ cleared his throat. "Folks have noticed you've been acting funny the last while. They've brought their worries to my attention."

"Ain't been acting funny neither," Sammy defended himself.

"You've been talking to yourself."

Michael stepped across the threshold but remained silent. His pa caught a glimpse of him and discreetly nodded.

"No harm in a body discussin' a few things with himself." Sammy stood hands on hips, his temper keeping him unaware of his audience. "Half the population of Milestone likely as not talks to themselves."

"I'd wager you're right," AJ offered. "But they don't mutter they're afraid of something."

Sammy's face paled.

"They don't mutter that things are getting out of hand," AJ repeated what Eric related.

Michael caught himself holding his breath, anticipating what Sammy's defense would amount to. Or would the old fellow flat out deny it? Instead, the cook remained silent, hands fisted at his sides.

“Somethin’ you want to get off your chest?” AJ ventured.

“Nothin’ to tell.”

AJ chuckled. “So, not a dang thing wrong with you. Sounds like denial to my ears.”

“Don’t care what you reckon you’ve heard.” Sammy waved his hand. “There’s not one blame thing for you to be concerned about.”

“Not even what you reckon is ‘getting out of hand’?”

“Nothin’ I can do about it.” Sammy shrugged. “Leastwise, not without openin’ a whole can of trouble.”

“Trouble?” AJ tipped his head. “I figured maybe, despite the age difference, you were intendin’ to propose to Nellie. Don’t reckon on that causin’ any trouble. She’d probably say yes.”

Sammy’s jaw dropped. “I ain’t proposin’ to Nellie. Where’d you come up with a hair-brained idea like that?”

Michael stepped farther into the room. “I wouldn’t call marrying the woman you’re clearly in love with a hair-brained notion. If you’re not ailing, like you claim, then why not propose to her?”

Sammy whipped around. “This is none of your business either. Dad-blamed young’uns.”

“Actually, Michael mentioned you weren’t yourself lately,” AJ confessed. “Seems Eric noticed your odd behavior also.”

“Damn conspiracy, what it is,” Sammy muttered. “A man can’t—”

“Big difference between concern and conspiracy, old man,” AJ interrupted, shaking his head.

Michael glanced at his pa. “Something else I meant to tell you, Pa.”

“What’s that?”

“I overheard Sammy talking with Anna yesterday.”

Sammy gasped. “That was a private conversation.”

“Then you shouldn’t have been shouting at each other.” Michael glared at Sammy. “Folks might have heard the two of you clear to Milestone.”

Sammy harrumphed.

“The conversation turned a mite heated, Pa.” Michael turned his attention to his father. “Sammy told Anna that Michael McLennon wasn’t her father. Of course, lots of folks believe that. Well, Anna wouldn’t hear a word of it. That’s when the shouting commenced. Caused quite the go-around. Spatting like a couple of alley cats on a Saturday night, countering each other’s claims.”

“The dang girl won’t listen to reason,” Sammy muttered.

Michael met his eyes. “You expected Anna would? She’s claiming the ranch should be hers. She’s not backing down on anyone’s say so.”

Sammy wave his hand. “She’s wrong. I can’t stand by and let her take the ranch that Michael Miller gave your pa fair and square.”

“Our Michael is right, Sammy. Anna’s got a bee in her bonnet about her paternity.” AJ shook his head. “Hopefully, a judge will get the dang woman to see reason.”

“Fool’s wishful thinking, if you ask me,” Michael scoffed.

“Well, I’ve got my suspicions about what initiated that argument. Now, I might be way off the mark here. Best I hear it from you, Sammy,” AJ declared, meeting the cook’s eyes.

Sammy grunted and shook his head. “Just trying to help you out.” He turned and lumbered out of the room without looking back.

“What was that all about? *Got my suspicions...*” Michael stared at his pa, waiting for his reply. What did his father mean? Did he believe Sammy was ailing despite the old fellow’s denial to the contrary?

“Let the matter be for now, son,” AJ counselled, resting a hand on Michael’s shoulder. “We’ll see what comes of this once Sammy thinks on it for a day or two.”

“I hope Sammy will be all right,” Michael whispered, recalling the old fellow was seventy-three. Could be anything the matter with a fellow at that age. But why would he deny such a thing? No shame in growing a little older every year. Happened to everyone.

“Nothing ailing the old man but a serious case of guilt, I’d reckon.” AJ nodded and then left his study.

Michael watched his father walk away. *Guilt?* What did Sammy do that he’d feel guilty about? He’d been caught arguing with a guest on the Double M, and although not a gentlemanly thing to partake of, to say the least, AJ hadn’t scolded the old fellow for it.

Michael shrugged. None of this made sense, but he reckoned he’d learn more in a day or two. For now, he’d bide his time with his chores on the ranch and let Sammy and his thoughts stew for a bit. In time, the old fellow would spill the beans. At least, Michael hoped so. And if need be, they’d fetch Doc Bennett at once.

For now, he’d search for Rosie and ask her to accompany him while he checked on the cattle in the valleys to the east. The outing would occupy the

better part of the day, and he required some fresh air to clear his head of all the worries concerning Sammy.

He'd ask Mrs. Sheridan to pack them a picnic and not expect them home until dusk. With all the bother Anna had generated lately, it seemed ages since Michael and Rosie had stolen some time for themselves.

Today was the day.

Chapter 30

September

Michael attached the picnic basket to the back of his saddle and turned when Rosie approached.

“I’m so sorry for being late.” She offered him a lovely smile in addition to her apology.

“Just finished saddling our horses. Your timing is perfect.” Michael patted Mick’s neck.

“Hello, I’ve missed you,” Rosie gushed, patting the old gelding and playfully tugging on his forelock. The two of them had become the best of friends since Rosie arrived at the ranch and took to riding the senior animal almost every day. Michael would swear the old horse was smiling with all the attention he’d been receiving of late.

Now that the days were cooling, Mick would be slowing down in the colder weather and mostly wouldn’t leave the barn all winter long. For now, he and Rosie were inseparable.

“I see you put the sidesaddle on Mick since you requested I wear a dress today,” Rosie observed.

Michael nodded. “And that pretty outfit is perfect for our ride. There’s a special place on the ranch I’d like to show you.” She’d dressed in a lovely dark green dress with a matching bonnet and a warm brown shawl surrounded her shoulders.

“Sounds wonderful. Just getting away from the house and mother and all the fuss and bother right now is most appreciated.” Rosie touched his arm and smiled up at him.

He rested his hand atop hers and leaned down for a quick kiss. They’d spent several days out riding, sharing a picnic, getting to know each other. They’d come a long way since their initial meeting.

“We should be on our way before someone comes and demands your attention,” Rosie whispered.

Michael chuckled. “I’ve issued enough orders the ranch hands won’t complete all their chores for a day or two.”

“Smart thinking.”

Michael helped her into the saddle and then mounted up.

“Is this your new gelding?”

“Yes, ma’am. This is Brick. Named by his previous owner for the coloring of his coat. Dumb name in my opinion, but he comes on a trot every time I call him, so he’s keeping the name,” Michael explained.

“He is pretty.” Rosie smiled, admiring the sorrel horse.

Michael shook his head. Wonderful, just what he needed, a ‘pretty’ gelding. “Let’s go. We have a bit of a ride ahead of us.”

The two of them rode in companionable conversation for the next two hours. They discussed a number of topics from the toll her mother’s lawsuit was taking on the family to the November 5th celebrations planned on the day Montana would achieve statehood.

Michael reined Brick to a halt beside a rushing creek, then turned toward Rosie and waved her closer as he dismounted. “We’ll stop here for a while and rest the horses.”

“They’ll appreciate a drink,” Rosie added, halting her horse beside his.

Michael clasped her middle in his hands and lifted her out of the saddle. He held her against his body, slowly lowering her to the ground while gazing into her eyes. The moment her toes touched the grass, he wrapped his arms around her in a close embrace and brushed her lips with his.

Rosie inhaled sharply and smiled. “Thank you for helping me down.”

He chuckled. “You’re welcome, ma’am. Any time.” And then he winked at her.

“We truly should go riding more often,” she whispered.

“My thoughts exactly.” He released her and then led the pair of horses to the water.

Their mounts drank deeply and then he tied each of them to a low-hanging branch where they could graze until their riders returned.

Michael untied the picnic basket from his saddle and tucked the blanket he’d brought along under his arm. “I know the perfect spot to eat.” He reached for her hand and led her down a trodden path to an opening on a cliff with a glorious view of the canyon below.

“Oh my. This is beautiful,” Rosie exclaimed.

“This is a popular spot with my family for picnics. Especially when a fellow is courting a young lady,” Michael added, winking at her. Her face

remained flushed, a pretty shade of pink which was rapidly becoming his favorite color.

“I can certainly see why.” Rosie gazed across the rugged but lovely canyon, vibrant autumn gold and orange foliage evident.

“We should appreciate what Mother Nature offers while it lasts. Every inch of Montana will be covered in white before we know it.”

“Brr.... I’m not looking forward to that.” Rosie grinned. “I am not at all fond of winter and cold weather and snow.”

“Do you plan to return to Boston before the snow flies?”

Rosie shrugged. “I don’t want to. I refuse to leave until I learn who my grandfather was, or until we settle this business with Mother. No matter what, she cannot succeed in acquiring ownership of the Double M.”

“It’s unfortunate you’re not a judge.” Michael grinned at her. “But all of us appreciate that you’re on our side in this.”

“Of course I support the McLennons in the fight for their ranch. This is *your* ranch. Michael Miller wanted your father to own it. No one possesses the right to question that.”

While Rosie spoke her mind, Michael helped her set out the picnic. They continued their conversation during the meal of fresh-baked bread, ham slices, and cheese. And a wedge of apple pie each for dessert. Michael stretched out and leaned on one side to rest his stomach while Rosie collected the dishes and repacked the picnic basket.

“I’ll fold up the blanket in a minute,” he offered.

Rosie sat with her skirts tucked beneath her legs, hands clasped in her lap. “It’s so quiet and peaceful out here. Nothing to disturb the silence except birds singing in the trees and water rippling over rocks in the creek.” She turned toward the horses and smiled. “Horses shuffling their feet while eating grass,” she added with a chuckle.

Michael clambered to his feet and offered her his hand. “Let’s walk for a while.”

“An excellent idea.” She allowed him to help her stand.

They walked hand in hand for several minutes until they arrived in the spot Michael had intended all along. “This is my favorite place on the ranch.”

Rosie gazed around and closed her eyes as the sun beamed down on her face. “This is possibly the closest thing to heaven on Earth.”

“I agree.” Michael turned her around to face him.

Rosie opened her eyes and gazed into his.

“There’s a special reason I brought you here.” Michael took her hands in his. “We’ve been through so much these past few months, but we’re stronger people for it.”

“I never could have imagined any of this when I stepped off that stagecoach back in May,” Rosie said.

“But we’ve come through it together. And I’ve fallen in love with you, Rosie.” Michael looked deep into her eyes. “I cannot imagine my life without you.”

“I love you, too, Michael.”

“I’m hoping we can spend the rest of our days together. Rosie... my forever love, will you marry me?” He stood, holding his breath while he waited for her answer.

A moment later, Michael noticed her eyes filling with tears and his heart almost stopped. She didn’t feel the same about him? No, that couldn’t be right, she’d just assured him she loved him. What was the matter? What had caused her to cry? Had he said something wrong?

“Yes, Michael,” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

He blew out his breath. Thank goodness.

“I have never been this happy in my entire life.” Rosie threw her arms around his neck. “I traveled all this way searching for answers. Instead I found the man created especially for me. The man I was meant to spend the rest of my life with.”

“I’ve waited my entire life for you. For the girl I cannot live without. I watched my brothers fall in love and marry. I wouldn’t admit it to anyone, even myself, but I was plagued with jealousy.” Michael glanced away for a moment to collect his thoughts and wrangle his emotions under control. He looked deep into her eyes. “But now I’ve found you. And nothing could ever tear us apart.”

He kissed her lips, deepening the kiss when she responded to him. He couldn’t love this girl more. And he knew she sincerely loved him equally as much. A minute later, he broke the kiss. He needed to halt this now, before the situation got out of hand. “All right, Rosie, time to pack up the picnic basket and blanket and head home.” Michael refused to shame his namesake by forgetting he’d been raised a gentleman.

“Thank you for this wonderful day. I’ll remember it the rest of my life.” Rosie smiled at him.

“I’ll remember it always,” he agreed.

“I love you, and I adore your family. I’ll proudly take the McLennon name,” Rosie whispered.

“I’m pleased to hear that, ma’am,” Michael drawled, followed by a smile as he hugged her and kissed her lips. Breathless, he needed to distance himself from the girl he loved, if he intended to live up to the McLennon men’s stellar reputation around womenfolk. He took her hand and walked her back to their horses. “It’s going to be fun telling everyone our news.”

“Well, almost everyone. I’m not certain if Mother will welcome my engagement. She considers AJ the erroneous benefactor of her father’s will. She might believe I’m marrying into the wrong family.”

Michael shook his head. “Only thing that matters is what you believe.”

“I’ve never been more content. And I believe we’ll enjoy a long and happy marriage.” Rosie stood on tiptoes and kissed his lips.

“Exactly what I wanted to hear.” Michael helped her into her saddle. But she needed to stop kissing him. A man could only keep his hands to himself so long. “Let’s head home and share our good news.”

Chapter 31

Rosie could barely contain her excitement, waiting for everyone to congregate in the dining room in preparation for the evening meal. Michael sat to her left and held her hand under the table. He winked at her and she almost giggled but caught herself in time.

What will everyone think?

Rosie suspected their pending engagement was the worst kept secret on the ranch. Everyone, her mother being the one exception, considered her and Michael perfect for each other. She couldn't agree more. She suspected no one would be surprised by their announcement, and her betrothed gently squeezed her hand, signaling it was time to share their news.

Michael stood and cleared his throat. "I... I'd like to say something before Nellie fills the table with food." He glanced down at Rosie and helped her to stand. "This afternoon, I asked this beautiful young lady to be my wife. And she said yes."

Rosie hugged his arm. "We're engaged," she exclaimed, unable to contain her glee.

"That's wonderful, son." AJ clambered out of his chair at the head of the table and strode toward Michael. "I'm delighted with this news."

AJ shook hands with his youngest son and then hugged Rosie.

"Thank you, AJ," she whispered, tearing up. She never would have imagined the warm welcome she'd receive from the family patriarch starting the first day she arrived at the ranch. And despite the despicable situation concerning her mother, AJ continued to accept her as worthy of his son's hand in marriage.

"Congratulations, Rosemary," her mother said, her facial expression unchanged.

"Thank you," Rosie replied. Was Anna happy for her? Or annoyed the spotlight had shifted to her daughter? Not a hug. Not even a smile. Rosie had given up any hope of ever understanding her mother.

"This calls for a celebration," Mrs. Sheridan announced, beaming. "I baked a lovely chocolate cake this afternoon for no apparent reason. Just felt I should do it. Now, I know why the urge came over me."

“Chocolate cake. My favorite,” Michael declared.

“We know,” Jackson and Adam spoke in unison.

Rosie burst into laughter. “Mrs. Sheridan, I don’t suppose you’d be willing to teach me how to bake a chocolate cake?”

“If she can teach me to bake, she can teach anyone,” Lily chimed in from across the table. “I almost destroyed the kitchen a couple times when I first married Jackson.”

“She’s not joking,” Mrs. Sheridan confirmed, smiling. “I discovered spatters of chocolate in the oddest places.”

AJ burst into laughter. “Nellie keeps a spotless kitchen. Or at least, she used to until my sons started bringing home their new wives.”

“I have never once messed up the kitchen,” Willow declared. “Mind you, I couldn’t boil water without a recipe, so no fear of any messes ever happening because of me.”

“And I couldn’t deliver a foal if my life depended on it,” Mrs. Sheridan teased, extending her hand. “We’ll each stick to our own talents.”

“You have a deal,” Willow playfully shook her hand.

Mrs. Sheridan beamed at AJ’s daughters-in-law. “But seriously, I’ll gladly share my kitchen with these lovely young ladies who’ve joined the McLennon family.”

“Thank you,” Lily exclaimed.

“Yes, thank you so much,” Willow added. “I know Iris and Violet feel the same as we do.”

“So do I,” Rosie piped up. “Well, I’ve almost joined the family.”

“Close enough,” AJ interjected.

“Congratulations, little brother. And you, too, Rosie. I’m certain you’ll both be very happy,” Jackson called from the other side of the table. “Now, can we eat? I’m starving.”

Adam returned to the room with a tray filled with glasses. “Not until we have a toast to the newly engaged couple,” he announced.

Rosie gasped. “I didn’t even notice you’d left the room.”

“This is very thoughtful, Adam.” Michael extended his hand. Adam set the tray on the table and the brothers shook hands before Adam distributed the glasses.

AJ stood at his son’s side. “To a wonderful young lady and my youngest son. The last one to find the woman especially for him. May you

be as happy as Michael's mother and I were every day of our time together."

"Hear, hear," Jackson shouted.

"And as happy as Willow and I are," Adam added.

Jackson added, "And Lily and me."

"Boys... marriage is not a competition," AJ reminded them as everyone clinked glasses.

"To your future together," Anna offered, looking directly at her daughter. "May your marriage be long and happy, and may your life with Michael be full of love and everything you ever hoped for."

"Thank you, Mother," Rosie replied and then took a sip of her sherry. Had her mother's toast resulted from recollections of her own unhappy, loveless marriage? It appeared Anna wanted a better life for her only child, and Rosie appreciated the sentiment her mother had voiced. Rosie totally disagreed with everything her mother had instigated, especially regarding the ranch, but Anna was her mother and she supposed she loved her despite her upbringing and their current differences.

Now, if they could only solve the mystery concerning her mother's parentage, Rosie's life would be perfect, and she would be free to marry Michael without any hurt feelings or unresolved issues hanging over their heads.

Rosie looked into Michael's eyes. "I love you," she whispered, clinking glasses with him.

"I love you, too," he replied, kissing her cheek. "And I always will."

"I can't wait until we're married. I don't want to waste another day without you in my life."

"We do need to set a wedding date and plan our celebration. Pa will insist on a proper wedding, despite the turmoil surrounding the future of the family and the ranch." Michael smiled.

Rosie nodded and sipped her sherry. Was it too much to hope that they could find a means to bring all that to an end before she and Michael said the I dos? Or was that simply wishful thinking?

* * *

While cleaning tack, Michael found himself surrounded by his brothers in the horse barn the next morning.

“So you proposed to Rosie?” Adam began.

Jackson chimed in, “And she accepted. No surprise there.”

“Of course not. We love each other.” Michael defended his fiancée.

“Are you sure you’re not marrying the enemy?” Simon offered, clarifying the purpose of this ambush.

“I thought you were happy for us? Last night, you—”

“That was for Pa’s benefit. He’s a mite fond of Rosie. Don’t mean we are,” Adam clarified.

“Well, she’ll be a member of this family soon. Carry the name McLennon like the rest of us. And you couldn’t be more wrong about her.” Michael’s gaze moved from one of them to the other. “Rosie hates what her mother is trying to do. She firmly believes Michael Miller wasn’t her grandfather, and she’s as determined as the rest of us to learn the truth. Pa claimed Michael wouldn’t have compromised Lucille’s virtue, and Rosie is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Although, I don’t think Rosie doubts a single word Pa says.”

“You truly believe she’d go against her own mother in this?”

“Yes, Jackson, I know she would. In a heartbeat. She’s never been close with her parents, but her grandmother couldn’t have meant more to her.” Michael scratched his chin. “Rosie wants to learn the truth as much as we do. And she would never forgive herself if her mother succeeded in taking this ranch from us.”

“Why’d she send for her mother then?” Adam blurted. “If that witch hadn’t shown up here...”

“Rosie informed her mother where she was so she wouldn’t send out the authorities looking for her. It certainly wasn’t Rosie’s intention for Anna to travel to Montana.” Michael stood, hands on hips. “No one was more surprised than Rosie when Anna showed up at the Double M. Rosie told her mother to leave. It was Pa who invited Anna to stay.”

“I bet he regrets that,” Jackson scoffed.

“No doubt he does. But you know Pa’s generous heart. Always thinking of others to a fault,” Adam muttered.

“What’s done is done. Now we need to see to it Anna doesn’t get her way.” Michael settled the saddle back in place, finished with the oiling. “We won’t win against Anna if we’re fighting like a bunch of alley cats on a hot summer night. We need to stand together in this, united in our convictions, and prove we belong here. Convince any dang judge that we deserve to own

the Double M. That it was Michael Miller's intentions we remain here as we have for decades now. And will for generations to come." Michael stood hands on hips. His brothers had riled him up a mite. He'd spewed more words in the past minute than anyone normally got out of him in a week. But he'd stand by the woman he loved until his last breath.

Jackson rubbed the back of his neck. "You're right. I'll trust Rosie, if you say she's on our side. Can't say as I've seen her do anything that would suggest otherwise."

"Me either. Yet," Adam conceded.

"What about you, Simon?"

His brother nodded.

"Good then." Michael adjusted his Stetson. "Then let's get back to work. This ranch ain't gonna run itself and the McLennons will be living here for decades longer. At least, if I have any say in it."

"Hear, hear," Jackson and Adam added in unison.

"All right." Simon headed for the door. "I need to get back to my own ranch. Good luck with this easterner. I hope she gets set straight and hauls her tail feathers back to Boston as soon as possible."

"That's the plan, little brother," Jackson called. "Say hello to Violet for us."

Simon waved his hand and disappeared out the door.

"Back to work, boys." Jackson waved a hand in their direction. "I'll let you know what Pa learns in town once he talks to Sam Perkins' grandfather and a couple other old fellows. I just hope one of them recalls something."

Michael gazed heavenward. He hoped for the same. Otherwise, he hadn't the first clue what they'd do.

Chapter 32

Michael slumped in the chair across the desk from his father.

Jamieson Davies stood. "I'll be heading for home. But I encourage the McLennons to reason with Anna in hopes of settling on a compromise."

"By 'the McLennons', you mean me," AJ suggested.

The lawyer nodded. "Your best move is to reach... a compromise that appeases both the family and Mrs. Dalton, despite her seemingly unfounded claim."

Reading between the lines, Michael figured the lawyer hinted a monetary offering might settle the matter. Giving that woman even one penny riled his sense of fairness, but something needed to be done and soon.

"So you fear we'll never know the truth, but some judge just might believe her," AJ muttered, crossing his arms over his chest.

Jamieson shook his head. "Your word against Anna's."

"If only Lucille had spelled out the truth in her diary, we wouldn't be speculating what she meant exactly," Michael grumbled.

"That's true. There's too many ways to interpret Lucille's words that serve the reader's own purposes. And Anna's doing just that." AJ shook his head.

Just then a loud knock on the door drew their attention from their conversation.

"Mind if I come in?"

"Come in, Sammy," AJ offered. "Something wrong in the cookshack?"

Sammy Anderson shook his head and wandered into the room. "That's not why I'm here."

"I was just leaving." Jamieson stuck his bowler on his head.

"You'd best stay and hear this, Mr. Davies," Sammy suggested.

"All right, if you think it best. No reason to rush back to town." The lawyer removed his hat and returned to his chair.

Michael straightened in his seat and stood. Sammy sat quietly, not making eye contact with AJ. "Here, Sammy, sit here." Michael walked over to the window and settled on an armless wooden chair, wondering what the

old cook had to say. He would swear the old fellow seemed nervous, worried even. Had he done something and feared a reprimand? Had he and Eric disagreed over the cookshack operations? Had he fired Eric in a heated moment and feared a scolding? Surely, Sammy didn't think he needed a lawyer to represent him.

"What's this about?" AJ opened the conversation.

"It's about Michael Miller." Sammy sighed. "And Lucille Woodley."

"I reckoned it might be." AJ crossed his arms over his chest.

"I knew both of them, back in '33 when Lucille and her family were in town. Everyone knew William Woodley traveled to Montana to take a gander at his business enterprises and ensure the partners and managers were working up to snuff. And he brought his wife and daughter along for the trip. Lucille's pa held numerous financial interests in Butte and a couple in Milestone, as well."

Michael slid forward in his chair. "So you met the fellow?"

Sammy shook his head. "Not me. After Michael and Lucille met at a social evening in town one night, Michael arranged a meeting with Mr. Woodley a few days later to ask if he'd allow him to court his daughter. Any fool could see the two of them were perfect for each other."

"Michael fell in love with her the first time they met?" AJ interrupted.

Sammy smiled and chuckled. "Never in my life have I witnessed a man fall in love so fast after meeting a female. That first night, Michael simply gazed into her eyes and she done the same. He couldn't have put a sentence together if his life depended on it. Then Michael got it into his head to court her, proper like."

"By asking permission," Michael clarified.

Sammy nodded. "I went about my business, keeping to myself. Never heard what became of the meeting with her pa until Lucille and Michael spoke to each other at the Milestone Hotel several days later. Michael and I were in town for another community social. Of course, Lucille and her parents attended also. Michael seemed troubled when he was talking to the girl. Next thing I know she's crying her eyes out and she races out of the hotel. Nearly knocked me over when she run into me in the doorway. She muttered an apology and disappeared into the hotel gardens. It was well past dark and I reckoned she'd hurt herself if she weren't careful, so I followed her."

"Where was Michael? Why didn't he go after her?"

Sammy met eyes with AJ. “Lucille explained to me that her father refused to let Michael court her. Her pa told him his daughter deserved better and to stay away from her since the family was returning back east next day.”

AJ nodded, encouraging him to continue.

“Lucille was a mite upset about that, let me tell you. She sobbed and sobbed and ranted about how unfair her father was being. I didn’t know what to do. Can’t abide a crying female,” Sammy admitted, shaking his head. “Couldn’t then, can’t now.”

Michael sympathized with the old fellow. Female tears bothered him no end, too. Nothing sent most fellows into heart palpitations quicker than dealing with a sobbing woman.

“So what happened next?” Jamieson looked enthralled with the story.

“Well, I suggested she and Michael just go against her father’s wishes. They were perfect for each other to my reckoning. Lucille stumbled about, completely befuddled, still sobbing. I didn’t know what to do.” Sammy dragged his hand down his face. “No matter what I said, I couldn’t console her. She didn’t want to return to Boston, and she was muttering something about never marrying anyone her father figured was more suitable.”

“Sounds like she definitely loved Michael Miller as much as he loved her,” Jamieson observed.

“You’re right. I done some stupid things in my youth, and I wasn’t half as ambitious as Michael. I’d guessed he’d hired me as ranch cook because he felt sorry for me. Michael Miller was an excellent, honest businessman, but he was so busy starting his ranch and running his other business interests, the man hardly knew I existed. I remember being so blinded by jealousy of Michael I couldn’t see straight.”

“I didn’t realize you felt tossed aside,” AJ said, softly.

“Well, my reckonings were likely all in my head. But when I found his gal crying, I considered the possibility she’d fall for me instead. Plumb stupid thinking, I know. But it didn’t stop me from doing what I done.”

Michael glanced at his pa. “What are you talking about, Sammy?”

“Go ahead. Tell him what I’ve started to suspect,” AJ said.

“Michael Miller was a moral man.” Sammy nodded and threw up his hands. “While I was comforting Lucille and we was akissing each other, one thing led to another, and well... it weren’t Michael who compromised

that young lady's virtue. It was me," he whispered. "All mutual, of course, I never forced her into anything."

Michael sat, stunned. His pa nodded his head and dragged his hand down his face.

"Michael weren't Anna's pa... I am," Sammy voiced his confession.

"You?" Michael exclaimed.

"My, oh my, this does change things," Jamieson muttered.

Sammy nodded and sighed. "Michael returned to the ranch that night. And the next day, Lucille returned home to Boston with her folks. I reckoned she'd marry some feller her pa picked for her. Michael never mentioned her name again, and I sure as shooting never told him what happened that night."

"Doesn't surprise me Michael never married," AJ observed.

"I never admitted nothing, but guilt almost ate me alive every time I thought of what I done to a feller who'd been nothing but kind to me. Then Michael passed years later, and I figured the matter was behind me. No one would ever learn the truth." Sammy scoffed, "Until Miss Rosie arrived at the ranch spilling her story. When I realized that little girl had to be my granddaughter, the truth nearly stopped my heart."

Michael gasped. "That's right. You're Rosie's grandfather."

"Why didn't you say something earlier?" AJ demanded.

"I never dreamed there'd be a baby, but when I learned the result of that stupid mistake I made decades ago, the guilt started up all over again."

"And then Anna decided to claim the ranch as her own." AJ met his eyes.

Sammy shook his head. "I didn't figure anyone would believe Anna and her fool claims. But when she tried to steal this ranch from you, and it appeared she might actually succeed... I had to stop her. I told Anna that Michael wasn't her pa, but she wouldn't listen to a word of it. Mighty greedy, that girl."

Michael shifted on his chair. "And so you decided to fess up."

Sammy nodded. "I knew I couldn't sit by and let her steal your pa's inheritance. Michael Miller wanted AJ to have this place."

"He truly did. I recall the reading of the will," Jamieson added.

Sammy sighed. "You'll probably run me off the ranch now that you know what I done, but the truth had to come out."

AJ shook his head. “Not when you’re the only person who can prove her claims are unfounded. Jamieson can put this to rights now, for all of us.”

“Anything you want, AJ.” Sammy stuck out his hand. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am that the worst mistake of my life almost cost you the Double M.”

A loud gasp sounded near the doorway, and Michael turned to see who’d overheard the conversation. Anna stood there, her face white as a bedsheet.

“I... I...” Her hand flew to her mouth. “*You?* You’re my father?”

“I’m sorry, girl. But you wouldn’t listen to reason. I told you Michael wasn’t your pa,” Sammy muttered.

“And you consider me nothing more than *the worst mistake of your life?*” Anna uttered the venomous-sounding accusation, and then stormed out of the room.

“What have I done to that girl? My own daughter,” Sammy whispered. “If I’d only known about her...”

“She’s hurting and she’s in shock,” AJ reasoned. “Not the best way to learn the truth about herself.”

“You need to apologize to Anna. Tell her your true feelings,” Michael added.

“I didn’t mean... I wanted you to realize...” Sammy slumped in the chair. “Dang it all. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut.”

“No, you’ve done the right thing.” Jamieson stood and stuck his hat on his head.

AJ rested a hand on Sammy’s shoulder. “Anna will understand. You’ll see.”

“I surely hope so.” Sammy clambered out of the chair. “That woman is my daughter. I... I’m not certain how I feel about that. But she’s kin and I...”

Michael watched Sammy age a couple more years before his eyes. He couldn’t imagine how the old fellow had been struggling, wrapping around his mind the idea of having a daughter. And to watch how unfair she’d been to the folks he considered family. Driven purely by greed most likely.

“No man is perfect. No man is a saint, Sammy. Every man has made mistakes he’s not proud of.” AJ slapped Sammy on the back. “Give it some time, and everything will work out.”

Sammy nodded and followed AJ and Jamieson out of the study.

Michael sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. Finally, the truth had been revealed. But would that help Rosie? Or had that can of trouble Sammy mentioned awhile back just been ripped wide open and the contents stuck to the edge, waiting to spill all over?

For weeks, he'd hoped to learn the truth. Now that he had, he wasn't so certain that knowing the entire story would prove a good thing after all.

Especially when it involved Rosie.

Chapter 33

Anna flopped onto the bed, her mind unable to process what she'd just overheard. She'd decided to inquire if AJ had heard more news from Daniel concerning the situation with this fake husband who'd attempted to defraud her of her funds. Had the scoundrel appeared before a judge? Had he been sentenced to years in prison? Instead, she learned the truth spoken by the man actually claiming her paternity.

Her father.

Sourdough Sammy.

Truly?

She never would have imagined the argumentative, aged cook who'd lived on the Double M the majority of his life had fathered her all those years ago. Sammy Anderson could have claimed the story had been invented to assist AJ in saving his ranch. He'd hadn't realized she was listening, and he admitted all of it willingly with only the best of intentions in mind, providing everyone with the truth. He hadn't any reason to lie to them. And he seemed as honest a man as any she'd known. She hadn't any choice but to believe him.

Someone knocked on the guest room door, but she ignored the intrusion on her thoughts.

"Anna, please open the door," Mrs. Sheridan requested.

"Mother, we know you're in there."

Anna cringed. Rosie stood on the other side of the door also? Had her daughter been told the truth? How would she accept the news? Would she be expected to welcome the old fellow as her kin? Could Rosie accept that her image of a grandfather who pioneered this ranch had been shattered like a fine crystal glass with the few words spoken by her true grandfather?

"It's open," she muttered.

A second later, the door swung inward and the two of them entered.

"Are you all right, Mother?" Rosie hurried to her side and sat on the edge of the bed. "We just heard from AJ what happened. He told us the entire story."

“AJ sent us to check on you,” Mrs. Sheridan added. “There’s no easy way to impart such a revelation, and Sammy is worried sick about you. About the unfeeling way you learned the truth.”

Anna waved her hand, dismissively. “I’m fine,” she whispered.

“Your face is so pale, Mother.” Rosie reached for her hand. “I doubt very much that you’re anything but totally in shock.”

Anna nodded. “I hadn’t expected to learn the truth that way. So unexpected. So... callous.”

“Sammy didn’t realize you were listening,” Mrs. Sheridan defended him. “He truly is sorry he didn’t tell you himself, as soon as you arrived here. What you interpreted as callous, I’d guess was self-disgust. I’ve never seen Sammy so disappointed in himself.”

“I cannot believe this,” Rosie muttered, slipping an arm around her mother’s shoulder. “It’s so... so much to wrap your head around. But we suspected your father was someone other than Michael Miller.”

“You did.” Anna met her daughter’s eyes. “But I wanted to believe he was. My entire life I haven’t felt wanted or loved. Learning the truth about Lucille gave me hope that Michael had loved Mother and if he’d known me, he would have...”

“I understand, Mother. Our family has never been... affectionate toward each other.” Rosie patted her mother’s hand.

Anna silently admitted the truth of her daughter’s statement. With her paternity revealed, she realized the reason behind her parents’ coldness toward each other. Brighton Wentworth, the man she’d believed her father, married her mother strictly to secure his place in William Woodley’s company. Brighton knew he wasn’t her father, and he hadn’t given her a moment’s regard because of it. And history repeated itself with Anna’s own marriage to a man more interested in his future at Woodley Enterprises than displaying any affection for her.

Anna gazed at Rosie. She knew her daughter loved Michael McLennon with all her heart. Anna could see the truth in her daughter’s actions; she’d caught her daughter watching Michael when he wasn’t looking. And Michael showed similar feelings for Rosie when he proposed and she said yes to marrying the young rancher. Would her daughter break their family streak of unhappy marriages, by marrying Michael? She truly hoped so. Her beautiful daughter deserved nothing less.

“Mother, talk to me. Tell me what you’re thinking. Tell me what we can do to help you.” Rosie smiled at her. “This must have come as a complete shock.”

“I couldn’t have been more surprised.” Anna smiled, weakly. “I... I don’t know what to think, but Sammy’s story makes sense. My parentage was an accident. A moment of... what? Unplanned passion? Not really. Sammy provided Mother with comfort, understanding, kindness. He never intended to hurt Mother by leaving her with child. But... it happened.”

“And if it hadn’t, you wouldn’t be here, Anna. Nor would Rosie.” Mrs. Sheridan stood, hands clasped in front of her. “Although it hadn’t been planned, perhaps it was meant to be.”

“You’re always so optimistic,” Rosie observed, smiling at the housekeeper.

“No sense fretting over things that can’t be undone.” Mrs. Sheridan smiled at Anna. “I hope this news gets you thinking, Anna. Now that the truth has come out, you can undo a lot of trouble you’ve brought onto this family.”

Rosie looked into her mother’s eyes. “She’s right. You aren’t Michael Miller’s daughter. You have absolutely no claim to this ranch.”

Anna’s chest tightened with the realization her daughter spoke the truth. She was the daughter of a ranch cook. A man by his own admission afflicted with limited ambition. A man who worked on the Double M most of his life without much to show for it. She blinked back the tears threatening to embarrass her further. She’d been raised the daughter of a wealthy Boston businessman, but she hadn’t appreciated her privileged upbringing. Now, she’d learned who she truly was. Anything but their equal, her society friends could never learn the truth or she would never dare to face them again.

“I... I need to return home.” Anna leapt off the bed. “I can’t remain here. I...”

“Mother, you’re in no condition to travel. You’ve received an enormous shock.” Rosie reached for her mother’s hand and pulled her back down beside her.

“I’ll be fine,” Anna argued. “I won’t stay for your wedding and embarrass my daughter even more than I have already. Everyone in Milestone knows I attempted to steal the ranch from the McLennons. From your soon-to-be new family.”

“They’ll understand. You believed with all your heart that Mr. Miller was your father.”

“But everyone knew the kind of man he was. Knew he wouldn’t have done what I believed of him.” Anna shook her head. “I should have listened to AJ. I should have known such a wonderful man was telling the truth. Especially when he stepped up to help me, contacting his son to sort out that dreadful business back in Boston.”

“Mother, you had no reason to—”

“Oh, but I did. Instead, I read into those diary entries what I wanted to believe. Not what was written in plain language. Mother hinted that Grandmother was mistaken, but I wouldn’t allow myself to believe it.” Anna dropped her head into her hands. “Why did I dig myself into this hole?”

“Money drives some folks to make mistakes,” Mrs. Sheridan offered.

Anna raised her head and met the woman’s eyes. “You mean greed not money,” she whispered. And greed had fed her purpose.

The housekeeper remained silent.

“Since my husband’s passing, I’ve worried what would become of me now that I’m alone in the world,” Anna admitted. Her parents were gone. Rosie deserted her without looking back for even a moment. And Anna couldn’t blame her. She’d been a horrible mother to her beautiful daughter. Her birth so late in Anna’s life hadn’t been her daughter’s fault. She’d been as much a surprise as Anna’s conception no doubt had shocked Lucille. Two daughters. Both unintentionally conceived. Both living a life unloved because of it. Anna prayed that Rosie and Michael’s children would grow up in the large, loving McLennon family, knowing they’d been planned, been wanted, were loved unconditionally.

“I sold the company that had created so many problems for all of us. For Mother. For me. For you, Rosie. The company that meant much more to our fathers and grandfathers and all the men in our lives than any of us women ever did.”

Rosie hugged her tightly. “You’re right, Mother.”

“Now it’s over. I need to return home where I belong. Where my life and my friends await me,” Anna declared, patting her daughter’s hand. “Your future is here with this loving family. With the man who will love you the way you deserve. I don’t belong here, but you do, Rosie.” *Rosie*. Her daughter’s pet name rolled off her tongue with surprising ease. The

entire McLennon family used the name. She hadn't heard a single person call her daughter Rosemary in the time she'd been here.

Rosie smiled at her. "Travel home safely, Mother. Daniel has settled the matter of the fraudster and your money is awaiting you in the bank in Boston. You'll be all right. I won't worry about you, knowing you're among friends. But if you ever need anything, please telegraph me or write a letter."

"Thank you, my dear sweet daughter." Anna kissed her cheek. "Perhaps I'll return some day. Who knows? I will certainly come to visit my first grandchild."

Rosie chuckled. "You are definitely counting chickens, Mother. We haven't said the I dos yet."

Anna knew Michael wouldn't compromise her daughter, insisting they wait for the wedding night. He wore his namesake's moniker proudly. The McLennon men were honorable, hard-working, honest and generous fellows. Anna was pleased her daughter had found happiness on the Double M with this family.

Anna stood and smiled. "You deserve Michael's love, Rosie. Promise me, you'll enjoy every day to the fullest."

"I will, Mother. I couldn't ask for more in life than what I've found here. A place I truly believe is home." Rosie walked toward the door. "I'll let Michael know you're leaving for home tomorrow. He'll arrange for someone to drive you into Milestone, or to Butte if you prefer. You can clear things up with your lawyer before you return to Boston."

"Thank you, Rosie," Anna called as Mrs. Sheridan followed her daughter out of the room.

Anna pulled the lids open on her trunks and started packing her belongings. She marveled at how the Boston servants ever fitted everything into the trunks so compactly when Anna herself failed miserably at the task. She left several hats and other articles of clothing behind, hoping Rosie might make use of them.

When she arrived in Butte, she would reimburse Randolph and his father for their time spent on her ill-inspired pursuit. And then she'd return home and forget this entire matter ever happened. Returning to Boston and being content with what she had in life—more than sufficient money to live comfortably on and a familiar circle of friends—sounded perfect to Anna.

She could have lost everything if not for AJ contacting Daniel, and the talented Pinkerton resolving the fraud attempt so competently.

While Rosie felt she belonged here in Montana, Anna considered only one place home. Although she mentioned returning to Milestone and the Double M for a visit one day, she sincerely doubted she'd set one foot outside of Boston ever again.

Chapter 34

November 12, 1889

Rosie stared out the window from the top-floor guest room in the Milestone Hotel, recalling the wonderful town celebrations a week ago when Montana Territory received statehood and became the State of Montana. Citizens enjoyed the complimentary town-sponsored meal and then danced into the wee hours of the night. What a momentous day it had been. A milestone in everyone's life.

She turned back to the cheval mirror in the far corner and stepped closer to admire her dress. Amanda Manning outdid herself in Rosie's mind. The lovely emerald green gown in satin and silk with the sparkling beaded collar had been the perfect choice for her wedding dress, highlighting her hazel eyes and auburn hair. She couldn't wait to walk down the aisle to Michael. And her grandfather would be doing the honors of escorting her down that aisle. A few months ago, she never would have dreamed such a thing possible.

A loud knock roused her from her musings.

"Come in."

The door opened and her grandfather popped his head inside. "Can we talk for a few minutes?" Sammy inquired.

"Of course." Rosie waved him inside. "How are you doing? Any nerves?"

Sammy smiled. "Maybe one or two. Not every day a fellow walks his granddaughter down the aisle."

"You'll be wonderful."

"With such a beautiful bride on my arm, nobody will even notice me," Sammy suggested, chuckling.

Rosie hugged him tightly. "You're such a charming fellow."

"I have a question, Rosie. I've been a bit of a coward, worrying about this and not saying anything."

Rosie seated herself on the edge of the bed while Sammy settled into a nearby chair. "You can ask me anything."

“I’ve been thinking... your ma’s probably disappointed. Learning I’m her pa and not Michael Miller. She skedaddled back to Boston soon as she learned the truth.”

“Mother was embarrassed more than anything. She’d dropped her cloak of propriety, revealing the extent of her greed and heartlessness. And she should be ashamed of herself. Especially considering the horrible way she treated AJ and his family. But I believe she’s remorseful in her own way.”

“She never spoke a word to me, never said goodbye, but I understand better now. Thank you for—”

“Regardless of what Mother said or didn’t say to you, I couldn’t be more delighted to have you in my life. You’re like family to the McLennons. Anyone would be proud to call you their grandfather. And goodness knows, Mother and I are sadly lacking in family.”

“You’re truly alone in the world, except for Anna?”

“Except for me, Mother has no one except a houseful of servants. She has her society friends, but I haven’t a very high opinion of most of them. I believe grief contributed mostly to Mother’s shameful behavior. It wasn’t that long ago that she became a widow, and she is still coming to the realization that everyone in her family is gone.” Rosie offered him a smile. “I’m the only other Dalton left. And that will change in a few minutes.”

“I’ve been alone my entire life, and now that you’re here...” Sammy’s eyes filled with tears. “I’m plumb tickled silly you’re my granddaughter.”

“And I can enjoy your company every day on the Double M,” Rosie exclaimed. Now that Eric had assumed the role of head cook, she hoped that meant several more years of time together with Sammy who’d grown accustomed to less work and more spare time to relax. No doubt, in a few years, AJ would hire someone to help Mrs. Sheridan and ease her into retirement also.

Someone knocked softly and then Amanda popped her head into the room. “Are you almost ready?”

“Just waiting for you to arrive with my flowers,” Rosie replied, smiling.

“I’ll get out of your hair and head over to the church. I’ll be waiting for you, my girl.” Sammy kissed her cheek and wandered toward the door. “See you in a while.”

“And here’s your bouquet.” Amanda handed her a lovely arrangement of dried autumn flowers with live greenery, tied with a large green ribbon. “Mrs. Sheridan worked on this all day yesterday until she judged it perfect.”

“It’s so beautiful,” Rosie gushed. “And quite unique.”

“Most of Milestone’s autumn and winter brides carry dried bouquets. Nothing fresh available around these parts unless it’s spring or summertime.” Amanda fussed with the bride’s skirt, carefully arranging each fold into its proper place.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done to help me prepare for today.” Rosie offered her future sister-in-law a warm hug. Truth be told, Rosie wouldn’t have known where to start. Back in Boston, the servants would have arranged the venue, the church, the food, and everything else. Her mother wouldn’t have lifted a finger to assist. At least, her mother wasn’t present to cause a disruption or scratch a black mark across the day’s celebrations. Although, Rosie suspected her mother might have changed her ways after learning her true parentage. “I couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

“Nonsense. I loved helping out.” Amanda leaned back and met her eyes. “Michael and I are the two youngest of the siblings and we were extremely close growing up. Don’t tell my other brothers, but Michael’s still my favorite,” she whispered.

“He’s my favorite also,” Rosie teased, chuckling. “I couldn’t love him more.”

“He loves you, too,” Amanda confirmed. “I’ve never seen him so content.”

“I’m glad. I’m happy, too. Perhaps for the first time in my life,” she admitted.

“Remember the day you arrived in Milestone? For days after, you two acted like a couple of cats spitting and hissing at each other.” Amanda hugged her again. “Now, today’s nuptials mark another beginning. You and Michael will celebrate many happy years together.”

“From your lips...” Rosie whispered. She did recall the day Michael left her standing alone outside the hotel, crying. At the time, she never would have imagined the challenges they would face and eventually work so hard together to overcome in the months following. But they’d survived it all, and their love grew from the ashes of despair caused by her mother’s shenanigans.

“Now, we must hurry or you’ll be unforgivably late arriving at the Milestone Community Church.” Amanda handed Rosie her coat and grabbed her own. “Ray’s carriage awaits us. It’s tradition.”

Rosie had been warned about the matching pair of grays and the lovey carriage that every McLennon groom hired to transport his bride to the church, and then take the newly married couple to the hotel for their wedding meal. Her stomach flipflopped with a dozen butterflies, and her mind was tangled by nerves. She couldn’t wait to say her ‘I dos’ and become Mrs. McLennon. Was Michael troubled by a case of nervousness today as well? Or was he the picture of calm and serenity?

Rosie followed Amanda downstairs. While they walked through the lobby, a few familiar patrons called best wishes from the dining room and front desk. Soon Rosie and Amanda exited the hotel with Farley, the hotel owner, on their heels. Rosie searched the street for the waiting carriage.

“Good day, ladies,” Ray Cochrane called, driving the team forward. Farley clasped the team’s halters and held the grays still while Ray helped the ladies into the carriage.

“My goodness, I feel like royalty being driven in this lovely carriage,” Rosie gushed.

Ray chuckled. “You look like royalty in that dress. Michael is one lucky young man.”

“Thank you. You’re very kind.”

“You make a perfect picture, too, Amanda,” Ray added, climbing onto the seat and taking up the reins.

“Nice of you to finally notice me,” she teased, covering their legs with a pretty patchwork quilt.

Rosie smiled in appreciation. Although the sun shone, the weather had cooled considerably and a brisk November breeze ruffled their hats.

“Not proper, Amanda,... flirting with the sheriff’s wife,” Ray defended himself, offering her a wink.

Amanda burst into laughter. “Big difference between extending compliments and flirting,” she called.

“Yes, Mrs. Manning, you’re right.” Ray touched the brim of his hat. “Hang on now, ladies.”

Soon, they were headed to the church and the happiest day of Rosie’s life.

* * *

Ray swung open the church doors and then stepped aside. A moment later, Rosie spotted her grandfather standing inside the church entryway. When their eyes met, Sammy's face erupted in a broad smile and he clasped his hands together. "Oh, my goodness. Rosie, darling, you're the picture of beauty. The loveliest bride I've ever seen."

"Thank you, Grandfather," Rosie whispered, her eyes welling. She blinked rapidly to keep the tears at bay.

Sammy Anderson extended his arm to his granddaughter and she wrapped her hand around his elbow. "I'm so grateful. Thank you with all my heart for allowing me to do this."

"Who else would I ask?" Rosie squeezed his arm tightly. "You're my grandfather."

"I'm still getting accustomed to the idea."

"Me, too," she admitted, laughing. "But it seems we're stuck with each other."

"And I'm thoroughly tickled about it." Sammy patted her hand. "I've only had you in my life for a few weeks. Now, I'm passing you to the young man who won your heart. But I couldn't be more in agreement that it's Michael you're marrying."

"Thank you. He's a very special person."

"Just like the wonderful man he was named for." Sammy winked at Rosie. "I've made so many mistakes in my life, but having a remarkable young lady like you for a granddaughter will make me a better man."

Rosie nodded, fearing she'd burst into tears. No one had ever spoken such endearing words about her before. She adored her new grandfather, and she hoped Sammy realized the depth of her love for him. "Michael told me what you said about yourself when you confessed you were Anna's father."

Sammy patted Rosie's hand. "Refresh my old memory."

"That you were jealous of Michael Miller's success and his wealth."

Sammy nodded. "Yes, well, he made something of himself, and I've been nothing but a ranch cook my entire life."

"Grandfather, think of the smiles you've put on all the faces of folks who've eaten your famous sourdough biscuits. You wake up every morning looking forward to what the day has to offer. Always a cheerful word for

the ranch hands. You've made a success of yourself in your own way. Never believe otherwise."

"Thank you, Rosie. That's about the dang nicest thing anyone has ever said to me."

Rosie hugged his arm. "And every word is the truth."

"Well, young Eric is taking over now."

"Those flapjacks of his are going to become as famous as your biscuits," Rosie predicted. "All of the McLennon sons are eating breakfast in the cookshack instead of coming up to the house."

"Nellie's been a tad miffed about it, too," Sammy added, chuckling. "Even AJ sneaks down for breakfast a few days a week."

"I think Eric has a secret ingredient he's not telling us."

"Applesauce in the batter," Sammy whispered and winked at her. "Sweetens them flapjacks real nice. That boy's making good use of Michael Miller's apple orchard. And hopefully, we can keep Nellie off the ladders."

"I heard about the spill she took a couple years ago," Rosie shook her head. "I believe she's learned her lesson."

"It's time." Mrs. Fitzpatrick, the reverend's wife, waved them forward and Rosie walked down the aisle toward her groom.

The room was beautifully but simply decorated as any small town church should be. Candles burned atop the window ledges and a lovely pine scent filled the air from all the boughs used in the décor. Soon, Rosie and Sammy arrived at the altar, and then Michael and Rosie were facing each other before Reverend Fitzpatrick. Michael appeared speechless as he looked deep into Rosie's eyes, and she smiled at him. His brother, Simon, stood at his side, serving as best man. And Rosie had chosen her new friend, Willow, for her matron of honor.

"We are gathered together today, to join these two young people in holy matrimony..." the minister began.

Rosie listened intently throughout the ceremony, repeating the 'I dos' and 'I wills' in all the proper places and smiling when her groom spoke his vows to her as well. She truly intended for this marriage to be 'until death us do part' and, after every challenge they'd faced and survived in the past few months, she knew nothing could ever spoil their love for each other or tear them apart.

"You may kiss your bride, Michael."

The groom smiled and whispered, "You bet I will."

Several parishioners in the front pews chuckled, and Rosie realized he'd whispered a little louder than he probably intended. And then Michael's warm lips touched hers and she lost herself in the pure bliss of his love. They'd exchanged kisses a dozen times before, but this kiss held special meaning, signifying the beginning of their lives together as husband and wife.

"May I present for the first time... Mr. and Mrs. Michael McLennon," Reverend Fitzpatrick announced, smiling.

Michael reached for her hand and together they walked down the aisle. Minutes later, they'd donned their coats, exited the church, and climbed into the waiting carriage.

"We'll take a little ride around town before we head to the hotel," Ray suggested, touching the brim of his hat. "Give the newlyweds a few minutes to chat in private."

"Great idea, Ray," Michael replied, smiling as he wrapped an arm around Rosie.

She rested her head on his shoulder. "Sheriff Manning might stop this carriage," she warned, gazing into her new husband's eyes. "It must be illegal to feel this happy."

Michael chuckled. "Then we'd both be under arrest."

Chapter 35

Rosie stood in the Milestone Hotel lobby, surrounded by family and friends. Michael took her coat and hung it up. She gazed at the wedding guests, many of them laughing and reminiscing. Her gaze always returned to her new family.

“What are you thinking?”

Rosie met eyes with her new father-in-law. “Hello, AJ. I... I was thinking about family.”

“I’m so happy Daniel and Iris and their daughter returned home. Daniel swore he wouldn’t miss his brother’s wedding. And he didn’t.”

“I enjoyed meeting the man who saved my mother from financial ruin.” Rosie touched AJ’s arm. “Look around. Jackson and Lily, Daniel and Iris, Adam and Willow, Simon and Violet... the entire family is here. All five of your sons together again. All happily married. And Amanda and Sawyer, too.”

AJ chuckled. “I’m a very lucky man for a fellow who started life as a hired gun, searching for criminals and bringing them to justice. And now I’ve two grandchildren and two more on the way.”

“Willow and Violet are so excited to be mothers soon. Both are expecting their babies in January.”

“Willow is praying she’ll be well enough to attend the birthing of spring foals.” AJ laughed. “I doubt Adam will keep her out of the barns, new baby or not.”

“She’ll set up a cradle in the horse barn. Mark my words.” Rosie laughed along with AJ.

“What’s so funny?” Michael hugged his new wife.

“Nothing really.” Rosie winked at AJ. “We’re just being silly.”

Michael’s eyebrows rose. “Pa, find yourself a woman of your own to be silly with, and leave my wife alone.”

“Don’t worry. She’s all yours, son. Congratulations on your marriage.” AJ kissed Rosie’s cheek. “I adore all of my daughters-in-law. You boys have done well for yourselves.”

“Couldn’t agree more,” Simon added, joining them. “Have you seen Eric? After Daniel gave him the news last night, I wondered if he’d attend today.”

“He’s over talking with his sister. Iris seems to be taking the news well.”

“What news?” Rosie met her husband’s eyes.

“It’s their pa. David Lake was the instigator in a fight in the state penitentiary. Sheriff Manning received word by telegraph last night. Eric and Iris’s father is dead.”

Rosie’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, no.”

“He was not a very nice man. I doubt there’ll be many tears shed. Even by his children,” AJ muttered.

“Enough troubling thoughts, we have an appointment for a photograph,” Michael reminded his bride.

Twenty minutes later, the photograph had been taken by Richard Green, the owner of the *Milestone Weekly Gazette*. Rosie had feared the perfectionist would never be satisfied with their positioning, but she looked forward to having a wonderful remembrance of their special day.

Soon, Michael and Rosie entered the dining room, anticipating a lovely wedding meal prepared by the hotel cooks under the strict supervision of the hotel owner, Farley Johnson.

Sheriff Manning approached the head table and Rosie smiled at him.

“Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. McLennon. I’m plumb confused with the lot of you. Jackson and Lily, Daniel and Iris, Adam and Willow, Simon and Violet, and now Michael and you, Rosie. A few too many Mr. and Mrs. McLennons in this town to suit me.” The sheriff’s broad smile gave him away and Rosie realized he was teasing her.

“You could call us Mr. and Mrs. One all the way to Mr. and Mrs. Five if you’d like,” she suggested, grinning.

“I’ll think on it. Don’t know as the Pinkerton Agency would appreciate a telegraph directed to Mr. and Mrs. Two.” Sheriff Manning chuckled.

“Perhaps not.” Rosie noticed a piece of paper in his hand.

“I’ve got something for you. Picked it up from Rodney at the telegraph office on my way here.” He handed her the paper.

Rosie stared at it and tears welled in her eyes. “It’s from Mother,” she whispered.

Congratulations on your wedding. Be happy, my dear girl. Much love. Mother.

She clasped the paper to her bosom. "Thank you for bringing me this. It was very kind of you."

The Sheriff touched her arm. "Thought you'd want to read it as soon as it arrived."

Rosie nodded, overcome with emotion. She'd exchanged a few letters with her mother since she returned to Boston, but Rosie hadn't expected this today. Perhaps her mother had learned a few things about parenting and maternal love as a result of her time in Montana.

"Are those tears?" Michael inquired, looking deep into her eyes.

Rosie nodded and handed him the telegraph.

"That was thoughtful," Michael remarked after reading his mother-in-law's words.

"Considering the source?" Rosie whispered, grinning. "She's changed, I believe. For the better."

Sammy and Nellie approached them, smiling. "Congratulations again. But we'd like to share some news of our own."

Michael stuffed the telegraph into his vest pocket and slipped an arm around his wife. "News?"

Sammy looked into Nellie's eyes. "For years, I saw how happy AJ and Edna were together. Reckoned I might as well see what all the fuss was about."

Nellie swatted his arm and laughed. "He asked me to marry him," she whispered. "Took some thinking, but I said yes."

"She thought about it for about two seconds," Sammy clarified.

"So, you two are engaged?" Rosie whispered.

"Appears there's going to be another wedding. And can't be too soon for me." Sammy slipped his arm around Nellie and hugged her tightly. "Can't wait to spend the rest of my years with this wonderful woman."

"Oh, my goodness," Rosie exclaimed. "This is the last thing I expected."

"Me, too," Nellie added. "But I love this old man dearly."

"Who are you calling an old man?"

"Only as old as you feel," Michael suggested.

"There you go. Reckon I'm spry as a fifty-year-old, same as Nellie." Sammy winked at Michael and Rosie. "Never was any good at cyphering."

I'll just ignore that twenty-year difference between us."

Rosie chuckled. She'd never known anyone her grandfather's age who could outwork a man years his junior. Sammy would busy himself in the cookshack every day all day long if Eric allowed it. Thankfully, his successor watched out for Sammy and sent him for a rest the moment her grandfather appeared a bit weary.

"Cyphering is over-rated," Michael agreed.

"You two are together every evening, so you might as well spend the rest of your lives together," Rosie reasoned.

Sammy and Nellie almost rocked the runners off the rocking chairs on the ranch veranda every night while discussing the day's events and any number of other topics. Rosie joined them for a cup of coffee some evenings, before turning in for the night. Now she'd be sharing a bedroom with her new husband. Together, with her family under one roof.

"We'll be serving the meal in a few minutes, folks. Everyone find a seat, please," Farley Johnson announced in his usual booming voice.

Michael guided Rosie toward the front table where Simon and Willow, the best man and matron of honor, were waiting to be seated.

"How are you feeling, Willow?" Rosie whispered, glancing at her good friend's middle.

Willow touched her arm. "Perhaps a bit tired, but I'll be fine."

"If you need to rest for a while, let me know. Michael arranged a room upstairs for Amanda and me to prepare for the wedding. You can lie down in the room," Rosie offered.

"You won't be using it... later?" Willow's face creased in a broad grin.

"Not at all," Michael chimed in. "I have a surprise in store for Rosie tonight. I've rented a house for us for a week. It will be wonderful spending time together, and no worrying about the ranch or the rest of the world."

Rosie gaped. "First I've heard about this."

"I wanted to surprise you." Michael kissed her cheek. "Lily fetched the suitcase you packed, and she and Jackson dropped it at the house before heading to the church."

"The house? Whose house?"

"All right. Roland and Faith Campbell left yesterday to attend some meetings for veterinarians. They won't be back for a couple weeks, and they offered me their house." Michael chuckled. "I hope no rancher comes knocking in the middle of the night asking for help with a sick horse."

“We’ll post a sign on the door... VET IS OUT OF TOWN. Then they won’t dare to ruin our sleep,” Rosie suggested.

“Or ruin anything else,” Willow whispered to Rosie.

Rosie felt herself blushing. “Yes... well... I suppose not,” she stammered.

Willow chuckled. “Oh, if you could see your face.”

“Leave my blushing bride alone.” Michael slipped an arm around her shoulder and guided her toward their chairs.

“Thank you for rescuing me from her teasing,” Rosie whispered shaking out her skirts and then sitting on the chair her husband held for her.

Michael glanced toward the kitchen. “I couldn’t have her bothering my bride. Besides, I’m starving and the sooner we get seated, the sooner they’ll start serving the food.”

Rosie laughed. “Mrs. Sheridan warned me how much you love to eat. I’m delighted we’ll be living at the ranch and she’ll be doing the cooking. Otherwise, you may very well have starved to death with me feeding you.”

“I would have hired a housekeeper for you,” Michael said, kissing her lips.

A cacophony of cheering and shouting erupted.

“You were caught,” Rosie whispered, laughing.

Michael stared into her eyes. “And we’re about to be caught again,” he warned, before kissing her deeply.

Rosie savored the warmth of his lips, as a shiver of excitement raced up her spine. Despite her nervousness, she looked forward to spending tonight and every night for the rest of her life with the man she couldn’t love more.

Chapter 36

April 1891

Rosie leaned back in the hardback chair at the old mahogany desk in the bedroom she shared with her husband. She gazed out the window and smiled. Deciduous trees were leafing out, and the early-blooming perennials would soon offer a lovely array of color to the flowerbeds surrounding the backyard. Another season's renewal to delight the eye.

Yesterday's day-long celebrations following the christening of her son, Samuel Michael McLennon, during Sunday services had exhausted Rosie. But she'd slept well despite the two o'clock feeding and again at five when Michael kissed her cheek and left for work on the family ranch. Now, she looked forward to beginning her new project, and she opened her brand-new journal, dipped her pen in the ink pot, and began to write.

Double M Recollections

I recall my first trip to the Double M Ranch in the spring of 1889, riding in a buggy with Amanda Sawyer, a gracious and friendly young woman I'd met the day before.

I marveled at the towering mountains, the fast-flowing river running along the mountains' base, and the wide valleys blanketed with green grass and peppered with generous portions of sage and scrub. The land appeared both rugged and beautiful to this city-dweller's eyes. Little did I know, months later Amanda Manning would become my sister-in-law and I would be looking forward to forever calling this beautiful ranch my home.

To honor her grandmother's fondness for keeping a diary, Rosie started a journal of her own, recording thoughts and memories as they occurred, the first entry dated on her wedding day. As a result of the pleasure she derived from the exercise, she'd decided to document the lives of the McLennons and her grandfather, Samuel Anderson, and the history of the

Double M Ranch for future generations, including her young son and his cousins, to read and learn about their predecessors. She dreamed of having her musings published one day, but that would be something for future consideration. Today, she returned her attention to the beginnings of her manuscript and dipped the pen into the ink pot again.

After reading my grandmother's journals and erroneously interpreting her musings, I believed Michael Miller to be my real grandfather. Thus, I traveled to Montana to learn about Michael Miller, owner of the Double M Ranch near Milestone. What I discovered upon my arrival and after extensive conversations with the current owner, A. J. McLennon, would change the course of my life forever.

Within these pages, I shall endeavor to record the history of the Double M Ranch and the people who lived and worked here a generation ago. And I shall write about the everyday lives of the current generations to whom these numerous acres are home. It is my fondest hope that future generations of these proud folks will live and work on this land for decades to come, perhaps even for a century and beyond.

A persistent cry coming from the cradle at her side, pulled Rosie from her thoughts. "Young man, are you hungry again?" She set aside her pen and returned the cap to the ink pot. This baby was definitely his father's son.

"His pa is hungry also."

"You're here, Michael," Rosie exclaimed. She shouldn't be surprised. Her husband had left the barns and returned to the kitchen for his noon meal every day since the baby's birth, seeking her out first, despite which room he found her in.

Her grandfather enjoyed spending time with his brand-new namesake. Although he still insisted upon helping out with a bit of preparation for Eric. Sammy especially enjoyed a bit of cooking during busy times like fall roundup. He'd shared his many recipes with Eric, including the secret ingredient in his famous sourdough biscuits. With her limited culinary talents, Sammy refused to share his secrets with his granddaughter until she learned to cook. Rosie chuckled to herself as she changed the baby,

suspecting she may never learn the secret. Perhaps he would hand down all his culinary secrets to his namesake one day. She must remember to put a wooden spoon in the baby's hands, the moment he learned to walk.

"Mrs. Sheridan promised to set aside plates of food for us, so don't rush our little fellow's feeding." Michael settled into the chair beside the rocker his wife occupied.

Rosie chuckled, gazing down at the beautiful infant nursing at her breast. "Believe me, when this baby is hungry, he's hungry. He's the one in the rush."

"Takes after his pa, I guess," Michael mumbled. "How are you feeling? You were some tuckered out after all that fuss yesterday."

"Your son's christening should never be referred to as 'all that fuss'. I enjoyed the day immensely, especially having the entire family home. Besides, I'm completely rested again," Rosie claimed, stifling a yawn. When her husband returned to work later, she would indulge herself in a short nap while little Sammy slept as well.

"I apologize. You're right. Our son's special celebration was a day to remember."

"Willow and Adam were the ideal choice as his godparents. And they were both delighted to be chosen."

Michael smiled. "I agree completely."

Rosie reached out and Michael wrapped her hand in his, squeezing gently. She couldn't have explained with words the special connection she shared with her beloved husband. She'd found true love. Forever love.

She leaned back against the rocker and closed her eyes for a few moments, savoring in the contentment of new motherhood. "Do you suppose every new mother is this happy?" she whispered aloud.

"I'm certain of it. Maybe not at two a.m., though."

Rosie's eyes flew open. "Those feedings are the best. Sammy and I are the only two people in the world it seems, comfortably cloaked in silence while sharing special time together. Each of us content, living in this serene, love-filled place we call home."

Michael smiled. "You have a talent with description and you're the perfect person to record our family history."

"*Our family history*. I cannot tell you how much I love the sound of that." Rosie closed her dress and shifted her son to her shoulder, gently patting his back. "I only hope I'll do justice to the project."

“I haven’t a single doubt. You’ll do the perfect job.”

Rosie’s eyes welled with happy tears. “I’ll do my best.” Her efforts were rewarded with a loud eruption from the baby.

“Good job, little man. Now, your parents can eat.” Michael stood and helped his wife out of the rocker.

Rosie settled the baby in his cradle and gazed down at the sleeping infant. A wife. A mother. A loving family and a forever home. This well-to-do city child who grew up feeling unloved and lonely in Boston couldn’t ask for a better beginning to her own Montana story. Happy endings were possible.

Her husband slipped his arm around her middle and kissed her cheek. She looked forward to the rest of her life with Michael and their children, and with her grandfather for as many years as they would be blessed to share together.

Thanks to a fellow named Michael Miller, a man with impeccable morals and a generous heart the size of the state of Montana, a bright future lay ahead for the entire McLennon family.

Haven’t read the Sons of a Gun Series from the beginning?
Start here...

Canceled Order Bride
Sons Of A Gun Series
Book One

Lily Watson arranges to become the mail-order bride of a successful cattle rancher. She’s elated to escape marriage to a conniving man forty years her senior, but minutes before boarding the train, she receives a telegram stating *the groom has changed his mind*. That will never do! Using money her late mother left her, Lily travels to Montana Territory anyway.

Jackson McLennon enjoys a laugh when he learns his sister corresponded on his father’s behalf with an aging mail-order bride. When Lily Watson shows up at the family ranch despite the canceled proposal, both Lily and

his father are in for a shock. Jackson has never set eyes on such a beautiful young woman, and now that his father has met Lily, Jackson worries his pa might regret withdrawing the proposal.

Lily's determined to make Montana her home. Or will her past follow Lily out West and jeopardize her hopes for a happy future?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to beta readers Vicki Chatham and S. L. Dickson for offering invaluable assistance with this series, including help with titles and critiquing all five manuscripts. You ladies were a huge part of the planning and the creation of this historical western series, once I finally settled on a series concept and title. And I couldn't have finished it without your continued support.

Thank you to Su Kopil from [https://www.earthlycharms.comhttps://d.docs.live.net/95e0629b28e96031/THURSTONPROJECT/BOOK - SOAG FINAL FORMATTED VERSIONS BOOK 1-5/www.earthlycharms.com](https://www.earthlycharms.comhttps://d.docs.live.net/95e0629b28e96031/THURSTONPROJECT/BOOK-SOAG_FINAL_FORMATTED_VERSIONS_BOOK_1-5/www.earthlycharms.com) for creating the five beautiful covers for the books in the Sons of a Gun Series. They are perfect and I love them. And don't we all adore a handsome cowboy!

Thank you to Ted Williams, times five for the entire series, for once again line editing and finding my grammatical errors while on the lookout for inconsistencies and blatant goof-ups. I appreciate your passion for the written word and your diligence.

Thank you to my husband for accompanying me to Butte, Montana to complete research for the series set in the fictional town of Milestone, Montana which I imagined to be located several hours travel by stagecoach south of Butte. The fictional McLennon family's Double M Ranch is situated approximately halfway between Milestone and Butte. The series spans the years 1885 through 1889, and I've tried my best to represent the time and era to the best of my abilities as an author, while taking instances of creative license to enhance the storyline where I felt necessary. My apologies for any blatant errors my readers may catch. Butte is a beautiful

city oozing with history and stories from days gone by. From mining kings to Irish and Chinese immigrants, from mining disasters to annual celebrations still flourishing today. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Butte and I encourage anyone to check out this wonderful city.

After being preoccupied with several contemporary romance stories and multi-author projects, I've enjoyed returning to my first writing and reading love – historical western romance. I loved writing this HWR series! And it's my fondest wish that my readers will enjoy reading it equally as much. I would much appreciate readers leaving a review—even one sentence will suffice—on Amazon or any social platform of your choice. Thank you so much for your support.

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Short novella

About the Author

Brenda Sinclair is the author of over twenty historical western and contemporary romance novels. After a career in the accounting field, she traded in numbers for words to become a full-time author. A member of her local romance association, she supports and mentors other writers, believing in paying it forward by helping others.

Brenda has been married to her loving husband for over forty-five years. During that time, they raised two sons and welcomed three wonderful grandchildren.

When Brenda isn't writing or researching her next novel, she enjoys walking her little dog, Kelly, checking out what Jack Abbott is up to on today's installment of *The Young and The Restless*, or snuggling with Kelly on the sofa and enjoying a good book.

Brenda believes life is good, and for days that life isn't so good, just get over it. There's always tomorrow.

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