



MAIL ORDER

Victoria

CAROLINE CLEMMONS





Mail-Order Victoria
Widows, Brides, and Secret Babies
Book 7

By

Caroline Clemmons

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Widows, Brides and Secret Babies Series
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Table of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[About Caroline Clemmons](#)

Chapter One

Atlanta, Georgia 1875

Victoria Bailey clutched her precious daughter to her. “You will never take Regina from me.”

Her father-in-law, Peter Bailey, smiled in the annoying and patronizing way of his. “My dear, any judge will see that Regina will be much better off being looked after by two prominent grandparents with considerable resources over a widowed mother with little or no income.”

Victoria shook her head. “No, she belongs with me. Neither of you would ever love her as much as I can—as I do. There is no price on a mother’s love.”

Her mother-in-law, Esther, reached for Regina but Victoria moved away quickly.

Esther tried again. “Now, you don’t want this dragged out in court, do you? Think of the humiliation a public trial will bring. Having the judge award us custody in front of a courtroom of people that include reporters will make you the target of shame.”

“I’ve nothing to be ashamed of and you know it. Whatever you’re concocting will be based on lies.”

Peter looked at his wife. “We’ll see, won’t we, Mother?” He turned to Victoria. “We’ll go for now but don’t think we won’t return. Get Regina’s clothes and toys packed for her move to our home. As soon as we talk to the judge, we’ll be back with a court order.”

She didn’t think that was the way a legitimate child custody trial would be handled but she wasn’t certain. One thing she knew, her in-laws would not rest until they had Regina. In addition, Victoria was positive the

Baileys would find a way to turn her out of the home in which she and her husband had lived.

When her in-laws had left, she put Regina in her perambulator and pushed the baby carriage to visit her friend Diana Price two doors down the street.

Diana invited her into her home. “Dear Victoria, you look as if all the cares of the world weigh on your shoulders. But, when I was cutting roses a few minutes ago I saw your in-laws leave. I suspect they’re responsible for your pale face and the haunted look in your eyes. Come have a seat while you tell me about your troubles.”

Victoria fought tears as she sat in the nearest chair. “They say they’ll get a court order and I’ll have to surrender Regina to them. Oh, Diana, I’m afraid they’ll succeed.”

Diana rang for tea and sat near Victoria. “You’re a wonderful mother, but with their money they probably will. All they have to do is find a greedy judge who’ll take their bribe. I don’t have a high opinion of those two and expect they know more than one office holder who takes bribes. I suspect they’ve used them before.”

Victoria’s chest constricted as if a vise held her in its grip. “I have to get out of Atlanta immediately, but how and where? I don’t have much money and nowhere to run.”

“I could loan you enough to get away.”

Her friend’s offer soothed her somewhat but Victoria remained in a terrible quandary. “That’s generous of you but I don’t know where to go. Or what I’d do when I got there or how I’d repay you. No, but I have to think of Regina’s welfare.”

“Do you have cousins who would shelter you?”

She shook her head. “My parents were each only children. I don’t know of anyone—not even distant kin.”

Diana reached over to pat Victoria’s hand. “Hear me out before you say anything. I’ve been thinking about your situation and I remember this matchmaker my cousin Felicity used. She keeps urging me to do the same and I may. If you travel somewhere and remarry, your in-laws won’t know how to find you.”

“Remarry? Paul’s only been gone two months. Even though I believe he only married me to spite his parents, remarrying so soon would be scandalous.”

“To whom?” Diana raised her eyebrows and widened her lovely brown eyes. “You’ll simply disappear and won’t be here for anyone to snub. While it’s true you won’t be in love with someone else—yours will be a marriage of convenience with a man who wants a wife. My cousin Felicity is really happy with the man she wed.”

Victoria hated the idea but couldn’t think of a better option. Actually, she couldn’t think of any other option. Panic had her stomach roiling and her muscles cramping.

Her head pounded as if a blacksmith hammered his anvil inside. She couldn’t continue in this state of fear. Instead, she had to *do* something without delay.

“Tell me the matchmaker’s address. I’m too desperate to turn down any chance to leave Atlanta with Regina safely in my care.”

“Fortunately, she lives only about a mile from us.” Diana rose and went to her writing desk. She opened a drawer and took out a sheet of paper.

Referring to a letter she’d removed from an envelope, Diana wrote on the paper then handed it to her. “Here’s the address. You won’t have any trouble finding her house.”

Victoria studied the writing. “I think I know where this is and I’ll go there now. There’s no time to waste. I expect my in-laws back to steal Regina no later than noon tomorrow.”

Diana hugged her briefly. “Godspeed, my friend. If you do leave, promise you’ll let me know your new address.”

“I will because I am leaving for somewhere, Diana. Thank you for your friendship.”

The soft breeze failed to soothe Victoria. She recognized the part of town in which the matchmaker lived. The homes were nicer than hers—though she thought of the house as hers, her in-laws actually owned her home. She found the correct house and was surprised a matchmaker lived there.

The red brick home was built in the Federal style with white columns in front. A small brass plate was attached to the fence pillar. The first line said *Mercedes McCormick* and the second line read *Matches Made In Heaven*.

“That described what she needed. Her first marriage wasn’t made in heaven but perhaps the next one would be better. She pushed the

perambulator up the walk and maneuvered it up the steps to the porch.

“Regina, here we go. I hope we’re not sorry.” She rang the bell.

A smiling woman in her forties opened the door. Her brown hair was neatly coiffed into a bun at her nape. She was wearing an elegant burgundy taffeta dress trimmed in silver lace.

“Come in. Have you come about finding your groom?”

Victoria was so upset she was almost tongue-tied. “I-I’m not sure but I think so. Do you have someone who might accept a widow with a child?”

“I’m Mercedes McCormick. Come to my office and let’s discuss your situation while I search my requests for a bride.”

Victoria followed Mrs. McCormick through a beautifully appointed parlor and into an equally luxurious office. She took the seat the matchmaker indicated.

Mrs. McCormick sat at her desk. “Now tell me about yourself and why you’ve come.”

Victoria told her about being widowed. “I’m twenty-four and grew up in Atlanta. My parents have passed on and I was an only child. My late husband’s parents have vowed to take my daughter from me. They never approved of the marriage and have the money to accomplish what they’ve promised to do. I must get away before they achieve their goal.” Regina fussed so Victoria pushed the perambulator back and forth with one hand to quiet her daughter.

“My, that does sound like an emergency.” The woman appeared to study her for a moment. Then, she seemed to make up her mind. “Hmm, I remember one letter... let me see, where is it?”

Mrs. McCormick shuffled the stacks of papers on her desk until she grasped one. “Here it is. This man sent the fare and he wants someone immediately.” She handed the letter to Victoria.

Dear Mrs. McCormick,

My friend Darrel Runnels gave me your name and address. My wife died six months ago and I am in dire need of a wife to cook and clean and keep house. I own a ranch and live slightly over a half hour from town by buggy. I’m thirty and have been told I’m nice looking but can’t say I agree. At least my face won’t scare the woman you send when she arrives.

The house is sturdy and a nice size with six bedrooms. The water pump is at the sink. I'm not the wealthiest man in Texas but I have enough in the bank to be secure. My wife will have whatever she needs and most of what she wants. My three ranch hands eat in the house but sleep in the bunkhouse. She'll have to cook enough for them to share with us.

I'm sending the fare with this letter so you can send someone right away. I don't want to waste time writing back and forth. We can get acquainted after we're married. Please send me a telegram to let me know when she'll arrive and her name. She'll take the train to New Braunfels, Texas and I'll meet her there. We'll be married then make the drive to the ranch.

*Sincerely
Gregory Hardy
The Slanted H Ranch
Ordinary, Texas,*

Victoria didn't know what to think. She reread the letter. He wanted someone right away, which fit her needs. On the other hand, he didn't sound... well, cultured.

She looked at Mercedes. "Is this typical of the letters you receive?"

The matchmaker smiled. "Much nicer than most, especially those from West of the Mississippi River. Men are a different breed out there, but they prize being a gentleman toward a woman. I was impressed by Mr. Hardy's letter and the fact that he has a large home."

She looked through the remaining papers on her desk. "He included a letter from his minister in which the reverend vouched for Mr. Hardy's character. Also, Mr. Hardy sent plenty of cash for food and incidentals on the trip—not all men are that thoughtful or generous."

Reassured, Victoria decided to accept. "I wonder when I could leave. I suppose I can take a cab to the train station and learn when the trains leave." She really spoke more to herself than to Mrs. McCormick.

The matchmaker opened a drawer and extracted a train schedule. "Let's see." She ran her fingertip down the page. "Going west there're several times you can choose. One train is at seven in the morning, one at noon, one at six, and so forth. I'm sure you realize you'll have to change trains along the way."

“I can be ready by seven in the morning. It’s hard with a toddler but necessary that we leave as soon as possible. Wait—is there a late train this evening?”

Surprise widened the matchmaker’s eyes. “Why, yes. There’s one at nine o’clock.”

She glanced at her lapel watch. “The time is eleven now so that wouldn’t give you much time.”

“I’ll manage since it means escaping with my daughter. How does getting my ticket work?”

Mrs. McCormick’s smile reassured Victoria. “I’ll meet you at the train station at half past eight. I’ll have your ticket then. I always ask that brides let me know how they’re doing and if they’re satisfied with their match.”

Victoria stood and offered her hand. “I’ll write you. Thank you for your help. I can’t thank you enough. I’ll see you this evening.”

On the way home from the matchmaker’s Victoria arranged for a drayman to call at half past six. That was earlier than she needed but she wanted to make certain she didn’t miss the train. She’d pack as much as her two trunks would hold.

When she returned home Victoria packed as rapidly as possible. She made up sandwiches and included crackers and things Regina could eat. She also packed apple juice and water in jars. Even though Mr. Hardy had included funds for eating on the train or at stops, she wanted to save what she could.

Besides, she’d heard bad things about food available at the depots. She couldn’t take a chance on upsetting Regina’s digestion. The train dining cars were supposed to be elegant and the food cooked well but expensive. She planned to start with her food and switch to the dining car later.

As if she knew something was changing, Regina continued being fussy. Normally, she was a happy and well-behaved child.

She lifted her daughter to her arms. “You’ll love living on a ranch, Regina. I’ll bet you can have a horse when you’re older. I’ll bet there will be chickens and cows and kittens and dogs.”

Regina stopped sniffing. “Dog goes woof woof.”

“That’s right. Kittens go meow.” Now that Regina was placated, Victoria returned her daughter to her toys.

She left the trunk the toys would go into open until the last moment. Concentrating on what to take meant heartbreaking choices. Better to take the things she hoped to save than baby things.

In a large valise she put Regina's a few changes of clothes and all her diapers. That left only enough room for one change of clothing for her. She found an oilcloth bag Paul had used when he went sailing. That would be suitable for wet diapers.

Traveling with a toddler was going to be difficult. She'd manage same as others did. At least she was riding a train and not a covered wagon or stagecoach.

Chapter Two

New Braunfels, Texas, Monday morning

Greg Hardy parked the wagon in the shade and gave the team of horses some oats. Tired and not at his best, he strode into the New Braunfels train station. Since his wife, Cora, had died, he'd had more than he could handle. Mrs. Jennings had helped some, like today, but she couldn't help often enough to solve his problems.

He wondered if he'd be pleased with his mail-order bride. He hoped she'd be more likable than the two women who'd been dogging him since his wife had died. Neither Melba Dean nor Nora Adams came close to what he wanted in a woman.

In spite of the fact he'd been as gentlemanly as he could he was near to losing his temper. He didn't want any more surprise visits with a cake or a pie. The food was welcome, but not with the strings that came attached. His marriage would settle that problem.

The clock in the depot said he was a little early.

He sauntered up to the counter. "Is the incoming train on time?"

The station master glanced at the clock. "Far as I know. They send word if there's a major delay. She ought to be rounding the bend in about ten minutes."

Greg drifted outside to the platform. He saw another man waiting that he recognized but he couldn't recall the man's name. He nodded. "Good morning."

"Nice day." The other man looked uncomfortable. Probably couldn't remember Greg's name either.

Greg walked to the end of the platform. He wasn't patient at waiting. Coming to town today meant losing time he needed to be at his ranch.

At least with a wife to take charge of the house he could concentrate on discovering who was up to mischief. The last couple of weeks there had

been too many incidents. Fences cut and cows missing were the work of someone who wanted him to go bust.

By golly, he wasn't going to fail. He was going to find the son of a gun responsible and see him in jail. If only he had a clue to who the culprit was he'd know what to do. As it stood, he had no idea. He hadn't had a falling out with anyone, didn't know of anyone who hated him, and didn't have any enemies he could name.

A train whistle captured his attention. He stood in the shade while the train pulled into the station and stopped. Only a few people got off. He searched for a likely mail-order bride.

The other man greeted a woman and two children when they left the train. He lifted one of the children and tousled the hair of the other as they walked to a buggy. A man who carried a salesman's case walked toward the hotel.

That left an exhausted-looking woman carrying a baby. Naw, that couldn't be her, not with a child.

The conductor set a fancy baby buggy on the platform for her. "Here you are, Mrs. Bailey. Take care of that little charmer."

Her face lit with a smile that reduced the signs of fatigue. "Thank you so much for your help."

She set the child into the buggy and pushed it toward him. "Are you Mr. Hardy?"

He shifted from one foot to the other almost tongue-tied. "I am. If you're Mrs. Victoria Bailey, I wasn't expecting you to have a baby."

The woman—Victoria—was one of the prettiest he'd ever seen. Red hair, though. Likely had a temper.

She sent him a no nonsense glare. "You didn't give me a chance to inform you. I left Atlanta the day I was told of your need for a wife. Does this mean you've changed your mind?"

He shook his head. "No, give me your claim tickets and I'll collect your luggage. I never saw such a fancy baby carriage before."

"A perambulator is what the store called it. It was ordered from London. Regina and I have used it frequently for our walks. I brought it to use as a bed until one could be obtained for her. That and the fact it's so nice I hated to abandon it."

There went more money. "I sure hadn't counted on you having a baby. I reckon we'd better get her a bed while we're in town. The preacher

is expecting us in about thirty minutes so we should go to the church first.”

“All right. Lead the way to your wagon.”

Greg found the porter and they loaded the heaviest two trunks he could imagine onto his wagon. Good thing he’d left the sides on the wagon so that fancy baby buggy wouldn’t roll off. Perambulator, hmph. When those were loaded, he added her large valise that bulged so much he was surprised it closed. The purse she carried was bulging, too. He figured travel with a baby was a chore.

“We’re ready. You hold the tyke—Regina is it?—while I put the buggy in the wagon. We made a kind of V-shaped wall with the trunks.” He set the buggy so the trunks kept it from rolling.

She turned back and forth rocking the child. “Thank you. She’ll probably go to sleep on the way to your ranch. Motion makes her sleepy. She was really good on the train.”

“Glad to hear it. I sure hadn’t counted on you having a baby. Guess we’ll manage, though. You a good cook?”

“I’ve never had any complaints. What kinds of food do you like?”

“Anything that fills my belly and isn’t burned, scorched, or half raw. We’ve been having a hard time trying to keep food on the table. Kansas, he’s one of my ranch hands, helps with the cooking. He’s better than I am but that’s not saying much.”

“Do you have plenty of food supplies on hand?”

“Sure, it’s a ranch so we have to. There’s a root cellar under the house and a cool space and a smoke house and a large walk-in storage room. We have a big garden every year. Here we are at the church.”

“It’s a lovely building. I see it’s Lutheran. Do you come to church here?”

“Too far. There’s a community church in Ordinary, no denomination.”

He heaved the baby buggy—the perambulator—down for baby Regina. He guessed she was more a toddler than a baby. Then he took the child from Victoria and laid Regina in the buggy.

Regina regarded him with wide blue eyes but didn’t cry. She looked puzzled but not afraid. She sat up and her gaze followed him as he helped Victoria from the wagon.

The minister, Reverend Gray, greeted them and didn’t seem surprised by Regina. “Delightful child. How old is she?”

“She’s eighteen months.”

“Wonderful age.” The minister gestured. “Mr. Hardy, you stand here. Mrs. Bailey, please stand here. You can place the baby buggy next to you so she can see you. My wife and her sister will serve as witnesses.” He opened his Bible and smiled at each of them.

“We are gathered here today in the sight of God and these witnesses to unite Victoria and Gregory in the bonds of matrimony. If anyone can show just cause why they may not be legally united, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

The baby chose that moment to speak. “Mama, Mama, want down.”

Victoria leaned down to talk to her daughter, “Not now, Regina. Be a good girl and be very quiet please.”

He was surprised when the child quieted. She gave her mother a pouty glare, but made no further sound.

Reverence Gray chuckled. “Do you, Gregory, take Victoria to be your lawfully wedded wife? From this day forward to have and to hold for better, for worse, for richer, and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

“I do.” His mouth had dried up and his voice sounded gravelly.

“Do you, Victoria, take Gregory to be your lawfully wedded husband? From this day forward, to have and to hold, for better, for worse, for richer, and for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do you part?”

“I do.” Her answer was soft but clear.

“Gregory, please take the ring you have selected for Victoria.”

Hoping he didn’t fumble and drop it, he fished in his shirt pocket for the ring.

“As you place it on her finger, repeat after me: With this ring, I thee wed.”

He took Victoria’s icy hand that was soft as a baby calf’s nose and slid the ring on her finger. “With this ring, I thee wed.”

“In so much as the two of you have consented together in holy wedlock, and have witnessed the same before God and this company, by the authority vested in me by the State of Texas, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.”

He brushed his lips across hers. Hers were soft and like velvet. She smelled of roses and something else flowery. Darned if he hadn’t forgotten

how nice a woman could smell and how soft she could feel.

They signed the wedding certificate. While Victoria took care of Regina, he paid the minister.

Reverend Gray blew on the wedding certificate signatures to dry the ink. "This will be filed with the county clerk today. I imagine it will appear in the newspaper as well."

Greg placed a hand at his wife's waist. "We'd better get to the furniture store. Then we'll have lunch before we head for the ranch."

"You're nice to buy Regina a bed. I imagine I have enough left of the money you sent to pay for the bed. I also have a little money from my account."

That surprised and impressed him. He'd expected her to spend every penny. "Not necessary. I provide for my family. You use any funds left for yourself."

They found a bed quickly and had it loaded onto the wagon. When it was secure, he escorted her to a restaurant where he usually ate when he was in New Braunfels.

The waitress looked at Victoria and then him. "Hello, Mr. Hardy, what can I bring you?"

After she rattled off their day's menu, they both selected pork chops. Victoria ordered Regina applesauce, a hardboiled egg, and a small portion of roast beef.

Victoria entertained Regina while they waited for their food. "When we return to the wagon, I need to change her. I was training her to use her little potty. I suppose she picked up on my reaction to my husband's death and his parents' threats. At any rate, she regressed."

"That's a lot for a little girl to process in a short time."

She sent him a smile that dumbfounded him. "Thank you for your understanding."

Their food arrived and they ate without conversing. His wife helped his new daughter eat.

Greg compared today with his first marriage, a large wedding with two hundred guests. He'd been uncomfortable with that ceremony. He'd felt like an exhibit on display but Cora had loved it. She enjoyed being in the spotlight.

He hoped he hadn't made a mistake by bringing Victoria here. She was a city girl who might find his ranch isolating. When he'd finished his

meal, he pushed his plate away.

“If the ring doesn’t fit, we need to stop by the jewelers where I purchased it. He said he’d resize it or exchange it for another.”

She held out her hand examining the gold band. “Oh, it’s perfect but thank you.” She cleaned the child’s face and hands with a handkerchief.

“Are you ready to start the ride to the ranch?”

“Yes, I’m eager to see it.”

After he’d paid, they walked back to the wagon and he helped her up to the wagon seat. He loaded the baby buggy then climbed beside her. On the way out of town, he pointed out a few sites.

“Oh, my, look how lush that garden is and it’s not even summer. I see spinach and onions and cabbage. I’ll bet whoever lives there spends a great deal of time on each row.”

“You know anything about and gardening?”

She shook her head then met his gaze. “Not for food. I grew beautiful roses. I had close to a hundred rose bushes and many other flowers like daisies, delphiniums, peonies, and many more.”

She grinned and her blue eyes sparkled. “And a gardener to help.”

“Reckon you come from a wealthy family.”

“Not me. My late husband was the only child of a wealthy couple. It was they who ordered the perambulator from England.”

“Huh, looks like they would have wanted to keep the baby in Atlanta with them.”

“Oh, they did, but definitely not me. They were committed to taking her away from me because I’m a single mother. They had the money to buy lawyers and judges. I suspect they would have arranged conditions so I would never see Regina alone again if I saw her at all. I was happy to learn you needed someone immediately. I left the day I met the matchmaker.”

“In-laws don’t sound like nice people. Guess this works out for both of us.”

“I certainly hope we can build bonds of friendship and respect even if love doesn’t follow.”

“That’d be good. You still cut up about your husband dying?”

She didn’t meet his gaze but looked at her hands clasped in her lap.

“That’s a complicated question. Rather, the answer is complicated.”

“That mean no?”

“I’m sorry he died, as I’m sorry anyone dies. He wasn’t the husband I’d hoped he’d be. He didn’t hit me or yell at me. I guess you could say he wasn’t very interested in me. He was rarely home in the evening. When Regina was born, he was angry we had a girl instead of a boy.”

“Sounds like that apple didn’t fall far from the tree.”

She looked at him. “I’m afraid you’re right. My parents died two years ago. As far as I know, Regina is my only living relative. I couldn’t let her be raised by those cold-hearted people. They owned the house where we lived.”

“Your late husband lived off his parents? Doesn’t speak well of him.”

“I’m certain they were going to force me to move. They didn’t know that for months I’d been trying to talk Paul into moving to our own house. We had the money—or would have had if he hadn’t spent so much. I just hated living in a house owned by people who didn’t think I was good enough to be part of their family. As it turned out, when Paul died, we were very nearly broke.”

“I can see why you’d not feel comfortable in a house owned by them. I have a passel of kin scattered in Texas, even some in Georgia as a matter of fact. If one of us was in trouble, the rest would pitch in to help. Otherwise, we’re all self-sufficient.”

“That’s the way families are supposed to be.” She gazed at each side of the road. “The landscape here is a lot different from Georgia, at least from Atlanta. Seems strange to see large trees with no moss hanging. Does Spanish moss grow in Texas?”

“Sure, just not in this part. What we have here are things that sting, stick, and bite.”

When she appeared alarmed, he held up a hand. “I don’t mean to frighten you. Since you have Regina and she’s likely to get loose, I want to warn you. We have a lot of critters of all sizes. Rattlesnakes, scorpions, spiders, and in the water we have cottonmouth moccasins.”

“We have moccasins in Georgia. I suppose spiders are everywhere. My word, we may have scorpions and rattlesnakes but I’ve never seen them. Just their mention alarms me. Is anywhere safe?”

“Most everywhere is but you have to keep your eyes peeled. You can’t let Regina play outside in the yard without supervision.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t. She’s not even two years old yet.”

Her indignant glare let him know he'd been right about her red hair meaning she had a fiery temper. When he first saw her he should have explained. He figured she was going to be mad as a rattler when they got to the ranch.

Chapter Three

Victoria would give a lot for a warm bath and clean clothes. She couldn't remember ever feeling this exhausted and dirty. She brushed at her skirt.

As if he read her mind, he smiled. "You look nice for having traveled so far except you look a mite worn out."

"Thank you. I am tired. Traveling with a child—even a well-behaved one—is difficult."

"We'll be at the ranch in about fifteen or twenty minutes. Um... before we get there, there's something I need to explain."

That did not sound promising. "I assure you that you have my full attention."

"See, my late wife, Cora, she died from childbed fever."

She exhaled in relief. "Oh, you have a baby? No wonder you wanted someone immediately."

"Yeah... uh, her name's Harriett but we call her Hattie." His voice lowered, "and then there are the others who are older."

"Others? How many others and how old?" He wouldn't look at her so she figured this was going to be something she really didn't want to hear.

He shifted his shoulders and stared straight ahead. "Well, there's Martha, she's three, and there's Frankie, he's five, and there's Sidney, he's seven, and Cindy is twelve." He exhaled as if he'd been holding his breath. "We had a girl in between Cindy and Sid who died of diphtheria."

The nerve of this man. She half turned on the seat to glare at him. "Five? You have five children and didn't think to mention that in your letter to Mrs. McCormick?"

He sent her a stony glare. "Sure I thought about it, thought about it a lot. But, I was afraid no one would want a man with five kids and one of them a baby."

"Yet you went on and on about me having a baby." She wanted to yell but didn't want to wake or upset Regina.

“Now look, I didn’t go on and on. I just mentioned it in passing because I was surprised.”

“You did not just mention it ‘in passing’. Three times you clearly said, ‘I didn’t figure on you having a baby’. *Three times*. That is plain hypocritical.”

“No it isn’t. I figure we’re even now. We both have surprise children.”

She poked his arm repeatedly as she spoke. “Greg Hardy, we are not even. I couldn’t tell you I had a child because I didn’t have time to write you. You *chose* not to tell the matchmaker you had five, not one, but *five children*. When we met, you didn’t tell me you had five children. When we got married, you didn’t tell me I was now the mother of your five children. While we ate you didn’t tell me that we had five children.”

He hunched his shoulders. “All right, all right, I’m sorry.”

Turning on the seat, he faced her. “If you must know, I figured if I waited until we were almost to the house you couldn’t run out on me. Don’t act like I robbed a bank or a train.”

She clutched her purse in her lap with both hands so she wouldn’t strike him. “We had better establish some guidelines right now. We will work together to present a united front. You will not contradict me in front of the children, is that clear?”

He jerked a thumb at his chest. “Hey, they’re *my* children.”

“Oh, no, Mr. Hardy, since our wedding they are *our* children. If I tell them do something, you have to back me up. If I tell them not to do something, you have to back me up. I will do the same for you. Is that understood?”

“Listen, I’ve been taking care of these children all their lives and on my own for six months. I reckon I know what they should and shouldn’t do.”

She fisted her hands on her hips. “Then why did you need someone so desperately? You wanted a maid and cook and bed partner, am I right? You should have stated in your letter that you weren’t asking for a wife, you were requesting a servant. To save money, you could have contacted a Texas employment agency for a maid and a local bordello for a bed partner.”

Now he stabbed his forefinger at her. “I knew when I saw that red hair you were going to be trouble and I was right.”

“Red hair, is it? My hair color has nothing to do you’re your omissions. Did you even tell the children you were getting married?”

He turned back to look at the horses. “Well, not exactly.”

“What *exactly* did you tell them?” She really wanted to sock this man who had no clue about the right and wrong way to introduce a new mother to his children.

“I said I was bringing them a surprise. I figured if you didn’t show up then I’d get them all a toy or a book or something.”

He sent her a frown. “I heard sometimes men have sent money for a mail-order bride and she just kept the money and disappears.”

She threw up her hands. “Well, I didn’t just keep the money. I’m here and they’re certainly getting a surprise, aren’t they?”

He pulled on the reins and stopped the buggy. “Listen, you need to calm down before we get to the ranch. You’ll scare Martha. She’s real easy to upset. So is Harriett.”

She was stuck here now, devil take the man. “Oh, I’ll be calm and charming when I meet *our* children. They’re not to blame and I’m not angry with them.”

She pointed at him. “You, sir, are the target of my fury.”

He frowned. “For Pete’s sake, don’t let on to them.”

“I don’t intend to.” She took a couple of deep breaths. “Do your ranch hands know you sent for me?”

“Yeah, they do. They’re sure glad, too. So is the woman staying with the children today.”

Calmer now but still upset, she looked at her new husband. “Greg, if you’d told me while we were in town, I’d have bought each of the children something special.”

“Um, I had a little time to kill when I got there so I bought each of the kids something for you to give them.”

“What? What did you get them?”

“They’re under the seat. You can look at them. There are two large packages.”

She felt under the bench and brought out a large brown paper-wrapped parcel. When she untied the string, she pulled back the paper. Inside she found three dolls of different sizes and three books.”

“The dolls are very nice. The two youngest can sleep with theirs.”

“Sorry I don’t have one for Regina.”

“She has one in one of the trunks.” She held up the books. “Jules Verne’s *Mysterious Island* and Thomas Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes*? I suppose those are yours. Oh, this looks as if it’s for a girl, Susan Coolidge’s *What Katy Did*. I’m not familiar with this one.”

“The lady at the store said it’s about a twelve-year-old girl so I figured Cindy would like it. She likes to read.”

She retied the parcel before she pulled the other, heavier and larger, package to her lap. Inside the paper, she discovered a wooden wagon filled with building blocks. A large box held toy soldiers.

“Each of these is nice. Obviously each child gets something worth keeping. That’s good of you.” She rewrapped the parcel and tied it with the string. When both looked like they had when she found them, she laid them aside.

“If you look up, you can see the ranch house and buildings.”

In a picturesque valley the large house sprawled as if it had started smaller with several additions. Now there’d be six children and two adults so it needed to be large. She was glad it was one story. No stairs for children or adults to tumble down. A gentle slope led to a creek along one side, but not too close.

Two children played in front of the house. They must have seen the wagon because they ran to the house then back to the yard. Two dogs barked and wriggled in excitement as they approached the wagon.

The barking waked Regina. She sat up and peered around. She pointed at the dogs. “Dog goes woof woof.”

“Yes, dear, there are two dogs going woof. Come here to Mama. We’re at our new home and you’ll have other children to play with you.”

She pulled her daughter to her lap. How she loved her precious girl. She prayed the other children would be kind to Regina. If they were, her daughter would benefit from siblings.

Soon a number of adults and children swarmed into view. Men came from the barn and another building. An older woman who held a baby stood on the porch. A small girl who must be Martha clung to an older one who must be Cindy. Both waited with the woman.

Greg pulled in front of the house and set the brake. Her husband started to climb down but she put her hand on his arm.

She spoke quietly. “Greg, before you give the children their surprises, would you let me get Regina’s doll from the black trunk?”

He must have figured out why. "Sure, if it's near the top I'll get it for you."

"It's the very top thing under the tray." She yanked a blanket from the perambulator. "You can wrap it in this until we have all the dolls and children together."

"Let me get you into the house and then I can bring in the surprises." He took Regina and held her with one arm while he helped Victoria from the wagon.

The men walked over to stand by the children.

Greg took a deep breath and acted as if he wished this part was over. "Everyone, this is Victoria, my new wife and your new mother. Children, she's your nice surprise. The little girl here is Regina and she's eighteen months old."

He led her a few steps closer to the porch. "Victoria, this is Mrs. Jennings who was kind enough to come help with the children today. This is Miguel Dominguez, my foreman. Next to him is Kansas Kramer, who's saved us from starving. Sonny Dorfman is the newest ranch hand. You can figure the children's names."

"I'm pleased to meet each of you."

Cindy crossed her arms. "We thought you would bring us something to play with or wear, something nice."

"Perhaps we did but only to good children." He gave Regina to Victoria.

Cindy glared at Victoria. "We don't need another baby. I don't need a new mother. I'm old enough to take care of myself."

This is what happens when you don't prepare children. "I'm happy to know that, Cindy. I suspect I will have plenty to do without looking after you. I do hope we can be friends. Since I don't know anyone, I need a friend."

Cindy stamped her foot, turned, and went into the house. Greg said nothing to his eldest daughter. Was this normal behavior for Cindy?

Mrs. Jennings gave Hattie to Greg. "Congratulations on your marriage. I left supper for you. Not much but I didn't want your wife to have to cook for this bunch her first evening here. I need to get home now. You know, I'm not a spring chicken and these children flat wore me out."

Greg appeared concerned. "Would you like one of my men to drive you home and help you into your house?"

“I’ll manage just fine on my own.”

Victoria walked up to the other woman. “Thank you, Mrs. Jennings. I really appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

The woman was already edging toward a buggy. “It’s only stew and cornbread but there’s enough to fill up this crowd. Good luck to you, Missus Hardy.” She climbed into the rig, clicked the reins, and drove off.

Martha tugged on Greg’s britches. “I was good but Hattie was naughty. She cried a lot. Mrs. Jennings said Hattie was going to drive her to ’straction.”

The three ranch hands unloaded the luggage and then the perambulator. She set Regina inside it. Her daughter got on her knees and looked at the other children as Victoria pushed the buggy into the house. She parked Regina in the kitchen.

“Greg, I think Hattie could sit or lie down in here, too.”

“Great, then I’ll bring in the packages.” He deposited Hattie by Regina.

The girls looked at one another. Regina laughed and patted Hattie’s arm. Hattie appeared puzzled and then laughed with Regina.

Frankie came up and looked inside. “What’s that thing?”

“It’s a... a baby buggy.” She decided perambulator was too hard for him to say.

He gripped the sides. “Can I ride in it?”

She pretended to look him up and down. “You don’t look like a baby to me, Frankie. This is a baby buggy but I’ll bet you’re a big boy.”

He straightened his shoulders and puffed out his chest. “I am, I am a big boy. Not as big as Sid but he’s my big brother. I’m bigger than Mattie and Hattie.”

Victoria nodded as if still considering. “I wasn’t sure you were big enough for the surprise we have for you but now I see you are.”

Sid hopped on one foot then the other. “What is it? What do we get? We don’t ever get surprises except at Christmas and on our birthdays. This is the first time we got one for no reason.”

“I hope you’ll enjoy the one you get today. It’s not exactly for no reason. Getting a new mother is a special occasion—like a birthday.”

Sid stilled and stood by Frankie. “Do we have to call you Mama?”

“No, but you can if you wish. If you don’t want to call me Mama, you can call me Victoria.”

Greg came in carrying the parcels including one wrapped in a blanket. "Are there any children here who would like a surprise?"

The boys yelled "Me" in unison.

Martha tugged on Greg's britches leg again. "Me and Hattie would. I bet Cindy would too." She looked toward where Victoria thought the bedrooms would be. "She's been mean and grumpy again all day."

"Why don't you go tell her if she wants her surprise she needs to come in here? We'll wait until you get back to open the surprises."

She appeared hesitant to leave. "Promise you'll wait?"

He put his hand over his heart. "I promise."

Mattie ran toward the back of the house. Soon she was back accompanied by Cindy. The older girl's eyes were red and she'd obviously been crying. Cindy ignored Victoria. She sat at the table.

Greg set the boy's packages in front of them. Then he passed out the dolls. Regina's wasn't new but she didn't know the difference and was happy. Even Cindy smiled when she saw her doll and the book.

Sid held his box of toy soldiers. "Can I go to my room?"

Greg nodded. "Your mother and I will be in the parlor. One of us will call you for supper."

Cindy and the boys left but Martha stayed to talk to Hattie and Regina. Greg pushed the buggy into the parlor. Victoria changed each baby's diaper and set her on the floor. Regina and Hattie appeared content to sit and play with Martha.

Victoria smiled at her daughter. "I'm glad Regina has someone to play with. She's never been around other children."

Greg leaned forward in his chair and spoke softly, "You over being mad at me?"

She met his gaze. "No, but I'm pleased you have nice children. I do worry about Cindy."

He gave a dismissive wave and leaned back in his chair. "Cindy will come around and the others are happy you're here."

Victoria wasn't convinced. "She's upset about something. I wonder what it can be. It might be as simple as wishing her mother was here instead of me. But, Martha said she'd been upset before I came. Does she have friends over from school?"

He gave a slight shrug. "There is no school."

How could that be? “You said there was a church. Surely Ordinary has a school.”

“Yes, but she’d have to ride a horse alone to get there. She’s not good enough on a horse to do that yet. I was hoping you’d teach the kids. I have the books.”

Victoria contemplated that news for a few seconds. “So Sid hasn’t gone to school either?”

“A couple of months last fall are all. Cora drove them in the wagon until she was too near her time for Hattie. When she did she either visited one of her friends in town or came home and then went back for the children. It ruins the day as far as getting anything done.”

“I can understand how it would. But, I know how to drive a buggy and I could take them. Why don’t I teach them here for the rest of this school year and then they can go to school in the fall if we decide they should. Frankie can learn to read if he wants to.”

One more thing she hadn’t counted on doing.

Chapter Four

At home in Atlanta, Victoria had a routine. Here, she had no clue what to do when. She recognized that she'd be really busy. She woke early Tuesday when she heard her daughter cry. She slipped from bed and hurried to the girls' room. Regina shared a room with Hattie and Martha.

Regina's crying woke Hattie, who joined the wailing even louder.

She comforted both girls as she picked up Hattie and put her in the bed with Regina. She laid both girls on their stomachs. "There, darlings, see, everything is all right."

She patted Regina's back. "You don't need to be afraid, Regina. This is our new home. You're safe here."

She massaged Hattie's back. "Do you like having a sister almost your size? I hope so. You can play with each other and with Martha."

Martha sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes. "Those babies woke me again. Hattie cries so much I never get to sleep good like I used to."

Victoria tucked her in and kissed her forehead. "I'm sorry, dear. We'll have to arrange something better for you."

"I could sleep with Cindy?"

"No, I don't think that would work. Cindy is old enough that she needs her own private place. Your father and I will think of something. Go back to sleep and have sweet dreams."

When Victoria turned toward the door, Cindy stood watching. "I heard Hattie cry so I came to see about her. Papa never hears her."

"What a good sister you are, Cindy. Now that I'm here, you won't have to take care of Hattie so often. I will appreciate your help sometimes."

"I wasn't helping you, I was helping Hattie."

"Whatever the reason, thank you."

Cindy whirled and went to her room.

Victoria sighed. She wished she knew how to gain Cindy's trust and friendship. Whatever bothered the girl wasn't just having a stepmother. She

had no idea how to learn what was making the girl ‘mean and grumpy’ as Martha said.

The time was early but she was wide awake now. She went back to the room she shared with her husband and dressed. Being back in the bedroom reminded her of their coming together last night. Greg had been gentle and especially sweet. At least she didn’t have to dread being with him.

By the time she got coffee and breakfast prepared, the men would be ready to start their day’s work.

Coffee was ready when Greg came into the kitchen. “You should have waked me.”

She poured each of them a mug of coffee. “Regina was frightened and cried and woke Hattie and Martha.”

He sipped his and exhaled. “Ahh, great coffee.”

She mixed biscuit dough. “Do the men come in now or do they do chores first?”

“We eat first. When you get the meat and biscuits cooking I’ll ring the dinner bell for them. Better warn you we have big appetites. But, unless we’re working around the barn we don’t come in for lunch.”

She rolled out the dough. “Do you eat bacon or steaks or ham?”

“If you cook bacon, cook up some sausage or ham too. We can each eat a steak or several slices of ham. I like potatoes sliced and fried with chopped onions. Several eggs each.”

“I’d better start the potatoes and onions first.”

“I’ll bring up some from the cellar. You get to work on the meat.”

He opened the door to a descending stairway. He lit a lantern that hung on the wall by the door before he went to the cellar.”

She was grateful the cellar access wasn’t a ladder. In Atlanta she’d known a family whose root cellar was almost a pit. Greg must have huge reserves of food.

Later at breakfast, she served the children. “You children look cheerful this morning.” Martha’s hair needed brushing, Frankie’s shirt was buttoned wrong, but everyone except Cindy smiled.

Regina had to eat while kneeling on a chair. Hattie sat in a high chair. Victoria wished there was a second high chair, but this appeared to work.

“Before we eat, please wait while we have the blessing. Greg, would you lead us?”

He stared at her but bowed his head. His grace was short. When she looked up, the ranch hands wore surprised expressions.

Sid held his fork. “Now can we eat?”

She smiled at him. “You may.” She concentrated on making certain the two youngest ate a sufficient amount of food.

Greg and the three ranch hands ate as if they’d been starving for a week.

After they’d cleaned their plates, Greg pushed back from the table. “Everyone through with breakfast?”

She caught Regina and put the little girl back on her chair. “Eat everything on your plate, young lady. You too, Martha.”

Kansas stood. “That was a mighty fine meal, Mrs. Hardy. Sure nice to eat something I didn’t have to cook.”

Sonny smiled. “Best meal I’ve had since I left home.”

Miguel patted his stomach. “Sí, this was *muy bueno*. Kansas and Greg tried to feed us but the food,” he shook his head, “the food was not good.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it, gentlemen.” She turned to Greg. “Will you be here for lunch?”

“Miguel and I will for sure because we’ll be working with the horses. Kansas and Sonny are checking fence today. Depends on where they are at mealtime whether they come in or not.”

Once the men had gone, she was overwhelmed with the tasks before her. She set Cindy washing dishes and Sid drying them. Cindy still wasn’t speaking to her other than to answer questions with the least words possible.

Friends in Atlanta had mentioned troubled teens and Cindy was nearly a teen. Victoria didn’t believe she had been troublesome at that age, but then there was a war raging. She was concerned for her family and herself. Perhaps the way Cindy was acting was normal for twelve. Whether it was or not, Victoria intended to discover the reason.

She took Hattie and Regina to their room to play while she straightened the bedrooms. In what she thought of as the nursery, a large enamel slop jar with a lid held their soiled diapers. She needed to do laundry as soon as possible.

Martha came in to play with the two girls. "I'm good at taking care of Hattie. Most of the time she cries, though. I don't know why."

"Maybe she's getting new teeth. That makes babies cry because their mouth hurts."

"Let me look." She rushed to Hattie.

"Martha, wait, dear. She's happy now so let her play. I see you have a big girl bed. Why don't you help me straighten it?"

Cindy came to the door. "Mattie, she's tricking you to get you to do chores."

Martha appeared unsure and looked from Cindy to Victoria.

"Cindy, there's no trick. Your sister and I are doing this together while we talk."

"I can make my own bed without help or talking with anyone. First, I have to gather the eggs. Sid and Frankie are milking the cows." She turned and stomped down the hall.

Martha stared after her sister. "She's been like that for over a week. I don't know why she's so mean to everyone."

"Sometimes girls that age have trouble because they're not little girls any longer but they're not grownup either. Maybe Cindy doesn't know why things are changing with her and now with your family."

The little girl paused and wore a wistful expression. "I sure do miss Mama." She hugged Victoria. "Since she went to be an angel, I'm glad you came."

"Thank you, dear. I know you'll never forget her. Should I call you Mattie instead of Martha?"

"I'd like that." Mattie tugged on Victoria's skirt. "Can I call you Mama?"

"I love for you to call me Mama." She kissed the girl's cheek. "Now, how would you like for me to brush your hair?"

When the bedrooms were tidy—they still needed a good cleaning—she prepared lunch for the children and her. The youngest three took a nap. Frankie and Sid only rested because they insisted they were 'too big' for a nap. She smiled when both boys quickly fell asleep.

Victoria would have loved a nap but she had too much to accomplish before the men returned this evening. She wanted to unpack her trunks and find places for the contents. The clothes she'd brought were simple except for a couple of better dresses.

A ranch wife needed easily-cared-for dresses. Fortunately, she'd owned sturdy boots and had worn them on the train. She found places for her clothes in the chest and wardrobe.

She set the little paintings of her parents in their ornate frames on the chest. The photo of Paul she'd save for Regina eventually. For now, she left it in the trunk's tray. Jewelry from her mother and grandmother and any given her by Paul she stored in a case she slid into a drawer.

With a sense of a small victory, she imagined her in-laws' anger when they realized they'd lost the jewelry. The Bailey pieces had been given to her as a gift—not as a loan—by Paul. She'd hand them down to Regina some day.

She'd not been able to bring as many of her keepsakes from parents as she would have liked. At least she'd managed to bring a few and one quilt her mother had made and one her grandmother had made. She left them rolled in the trunk she left at the foot of the bed she and Greg shared.

Sid helped her move one nearly empty trunk to the nursery. Regina's clothes took up less room than her diapers. Victoria had seen no point in bringing all of her daughter's clothes because the girl was growing rapidly. The few toys and books she'd included could be shared with Hattie and Martha.

Cindy stayed in her room reading or playing on her own. When the trunk contents were distributed, Victoria rapped on Cindy's door.

When there was no answer, she opened the door and peeked in.

Cindy leaned against pillows stacked against the headboard with her new book open on her lap. She snapped, "What do you want?"

Pretending the girl had been hospitable, Victoria strolled inside. "I want to see your room. I've seen the other rooms in the house."

The girl made a broad, sweeping gesture. "Here it is, are you satisfied?"

"Not yet." Victoria ambled around the room. "You have it decorated neatly. The colors coordinate well." Though nothing clashed, if she had been truthful she found the riotous shades of pink were almost cloying.

"My *real* mother let me help choose them."

"Of course, you needed to select them." She walked to a shelf. "You have a lovely doll collection. Do you play with them or just admire them?"

Cindy flicked her hair so it fell behind her shoulders. "I'm really too old to play dolls."

“Not if you want to. I think I played with dolls until I turned thirteen.”

A slight flicker of interest in Cindy’s eyes encouraged Victoria. “Does your mother still have them saved for you?”

Memories of her mother created yearning in Victoria. If only her mother were still alive to advise and love her. “I wish she had but she gave them away to the daughters of friends. I would have liked to have handed them down.”

“You should tell her in case the friends aren’t playing with them now.”

“If only I could I would love to talk to her, but she died two years ago. My father, too.”

Ah, open interest this time. “So you’re an orphan?”

“Regina is my only blood relative. I’m really happy to have your family now. Even though I had some nice friends, I admit I was lonely in Atlanta.”

Victoria sighed. “Thank you for letting me look at your room.”

Cindy sat up and appeared alarmed. “I heard you tell Mattie you’d do something so the babies don’t wake her at night. You... you won’t move Mattie in here, will you?”

“No, you probably heard me tell her that wouldn’t be fair. There’re too many years between you. You’re a young lady and Mattie is a little girl. You can still do little girl things when you choose, but Mattie can’t act your age.”

Cindy almost smiled. At least Cindy had been civil at the end of the visit. Maybe the girl could be won over.

Victoria left to go start supper. She set the meat in the oven and collected the vegetables she’d prepare to accompany the main course. She remembered she had to do laundry no later than tomorrow.

Retracing her steps to Cindy’s room, she knocked before she entered even though the door was partly open.

“Cindy, would you tell me where your mother set up to do laundry?”

“She didn’t. Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Dixon come each Wednesday to do the laundry. We always strip the beds as soon as we get up on those days.”

What a relief. “Music to my ears. I confess I’ve never done the washing other than my stockings, gloves, and handkerchiefs. But, I thought it was customary to do the laundry on Mondays.”

The girl shrugged. "They go to a different ranch every weekday and our turn is tomorrow. They wash the ranch hands' clothes, too. It takes them all day to get everything laundered and dried and ironed."

"I'm surprised they get the clothes dry and ironed in one day."

"In the winter they have a hard time getting everything dried. They set up their racks in front of the fireplace and range. They're grumpy women and I stay out of their way."

"I'd be grumpy, too, if I did laundry all day every day, wouldn't you?"

Cindy actually smiled. "I sure would. Looks hard and hot work."

Chapter Five

That evening after the three ranch hands had gone to the bunkhouse and the children were in bed, Victoria and Greg sat in the parlor. She was happy they would have a little time alone each day. In spite of the fact it was early spring, the evening was cool and they had the fireplace blazing.

She sat in an upholstered arm chair at a right angle to the fire. "Did training go well for the horses you and Miguel worked today?"

Greg sat in a matching chair with a small table between them. "Very well. We round up and train mustangs for the Army. If cattle prices drop, we'll have the horse sales to sustain us. At least, that's our plan."

"That sounds like a good strategy. Tell me about your family. You said you have a lot of kin. Do they live nearby?"

"Some do. My parents have moved into Austin now. My oldest brother, Daniel, runs the ranch where I grew up. He and his wife Mary have four children. My brother Rob and his wife Dorcas live about ten miles north of us and have three children. My older sister, Beth, and her husband Jim are in Austin and they have two children. Jim is in politics. A younger sister, Anne, lives with my parents. She's engaged but they haven't set a date for the wedding."

"So you have the same number of children as your parents have."

"Until Regina. They'll be eager to meet you and their new granddaughter."

That pleased her. She had always wished she had a large family. "I'm surprised Anne didn't come help you being as she's single."

"She offered. I couldn't ask her because I know she wanted to be where her fiancé is. He wasn't her fiancé then, but we all thought he would be soon."

"Are there no women in Ordinary or New Braunfels you could have enlisted to help?"

"There are two who have made pests of themselves."

He grimaced. "I didn't mean to be so harsh. Melba Dean and Nora Adams attend church in Ordinary. Mrs. Dean is a widow and Miss Adams a

spinster. They bring pies or cakes and hint they're available permanently."

"I guess eligible men of your caliber are hard to find."

He laughed. "Whatever my caliber is I'm glad your presence will stop that line of thinking. What about you? Weren't there any eligible men in Atlanta?"

"I'm sure there are but Atlanta is still part of the old South with long-held traditions. If I'd stayed in Atlanta, I would have had to wear black for a year and remain at home except for church and small gatherings. The second year I could wear gray as well. Three years after my husband's passing, I could wear lavender and could remarry and still be considered respectable."

She sighed and met his gaze. "Within the week I left, though, my in-laws would have found a judge they could buy and he would name them as Regina's guardians. Later they would create some sort of false tale or arrange some situation that made me look of low morals and get me barred from seeing my daughter."

"What a bunch of skullduggery that would have been. I'm glad Regina is protected from them. Lucky for me you chose to come here."

"You're kind to say so, Greg. I hope we'll be happy together." She grinned. "Even if you didn't figure on me having a baby."

He affected a hang dog expression but his blue eyes twinkled. "You're never gonna let me live that one down, are you?"

She laughed. "Probably not."

He stood, banked the fire, and set the screen in front of it. "Let's go to bed." He reached for her hand.



On Thursday, Victoria was preparing a large roast for the oven when she heard buggy wheels. She set the meat in the oven then rinsed her hands and dried them. She smoothed her hair from her face.

Sid and Frankie ran inside from the porch.

Sid ran up to her. "Here comes that Miss Adams."

The name sounded familiar but Victoria couldn't remember why.

Cindy rolled her eyes. "Uh oh, she's going to be upset."

Mattie jumped up from where she played with the two younger girls in a corner of the kitchen. "Maybe she brought us a cake."

“Mattie, Sid, wait. Remember your manners.”

In spite of her caution, Sid slipped outside.

Victoria went to the door to greet the visitor. She recalled now that Greg had mentioned this woman as one of those who wanted to marry him.

A singsong feminine voice asked, “Hello, Sidney. Is your father at home?”

“No, Ma’am.”

Victoria opened the door. “Won’t you come in?”

The woman’s steps faltered. She carried a covered plate in her hands. “Wh-Who are you?”

Apparently she recovered. “I mean... I’m Nora Adams. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“I’m Victoria. How nice of you to call.” She accepted the plate, which held a cake covered by a towel.

She set the cake on the table. “Would you care for a cup of coffee or do you prefer tea?”

Miss Adams’ face was a picture of confusion. “Coffee would be nice.” She took a seat. “Are you related to Mr. Hardy?”

“Yes—”

Before she could say more, Mattie ran up and tugged at her skirt. “Mama, can I have some cake?”

“Not now, Mattie. Go play with your sisters, dear.”

Miss Adams squeaked, “Mama? Why did she call you that?”

Cindy watched with an amused expression.

“Mr. Hardy and I were married in New Braunfels on Monday.” She poured a cup of coffee and set it in front of the visitor. “Would you care for a dish of cobbler?”

Ignoring the offer, Miss Adams spluttered, “He... He married *you*? But why? I mean, how does he even know you?” She took a sip from her cup.

Victoria didn’t want to be rude but she understood why Greg disliked having this woman drop in. “That’s not important, Miss Adams. My husband is working on the range. Would you care to stay for supper? You can talk to him then.”

“I-I can’t be gone that long. I just came to bring that cake for your supper.” She looked around the room. “Oh, who’s the little red-headed girl?”

“That’s Regina. She’s my daughter, well, now Greg’s and mine.”

“Yours? Good heavens, that makes six. It’s a good thing Cindy takes care of the children or you’d be swamped.”

Cindy smiled. “Oh, I don’t take care of them now. If you’ll excuse me, Miss Adams, I’ll go to my room and read the book they brought me from New Braunfels.” She flounced off toward the hall.

Miss Adams’ eyes widened. “You take care of six children and the house?”

“Of course. That’s my job. Cindy’s job is to be a twelve-year-old girl.”

“Is Mr. Hardy going to hire someone to help you?”

“I don’t think he has any plans to but I don’t need anyone. The older children have chores. Sid and Frankie milk the cow, Cindy gathers the eggs, and Cindy and Sid do the supper dishes. Oh, and two women come to do the laundry once a week. That’s really a lot of help, don’t you agree?”

“Not with the size of this house and six children and three ranch hands. The meals alone are a full-time job.” Miss Adams took a sip of coffee then blotted her lips with her napkin. “Meeting you has been lovely but I really must get home. So much to do, you know. My mother depends on me.”

“How nice for her that she has your help. I’ll tell my husband you visited. Perhaps we’ll see you when we’re able to attend church.”

“Without a doubt because mother and I go every Sunday.”

When she’d gone, Cindy practically danced into the kitchen. “The look on her face was worth a lot. She has always treated me like a servant.”

At the window, Victoria watched Miss Adams driving toward town. “From what she said I believe she thought of you that way. I hope her cake is better than her manners.” She turned back to finish her meal preparations.

Cindy shook her head. “It won’t be. She’s not a good cook even though she thinks she is. If he had to marry, I’m sure glad Papa didn’t marry that old biddy.”

“Be respectful, Cindy. You don’t know what is going on in Miss Adams’ life that causes her to act the way she does.”

“I don’t care as long as she doesn’t live here.” She went toward her room.

Victoria mulled over her eldest daughter’s comment. Didn’t Cindy realize she would be in charge of the children’s care without Greg

marrying? Apparently not.



That evening when they were alone, Victoria sat mending clothes.

Her husband held the newspaper but watched her. “Don’t you ever just relax? Read a book? Do nothing?”

“I love to read and will when I get used to the schedule, Greg. Apparently little boys are hard on their clothes. These still fit but the shirts are missing buttons and pants have holes at the knees.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Ahhh, sure is nice to come home to dinner and a happy household. I know Cindy is still a little standoffish, but I’m sure she’ll come around eventually. She’ll see how beneficial you are for our lives.”

Her hands stilled. “You have no idea how good those lovely words make me feel. I-It’s been two years—that’s when my parents died—since I’ve heard anything positive. Oh, friends said nice things but those were casual remarks not something I lived with daily. The Baileys, including Paul, never said anything complimentary. Like water on a stone, they were wearing me down inside.”

“You’re appreciated here. Put all that behind you.”

“I’m trying, Greg. Your children are wonderful—even Cindy. I know she’ll learn I’m not in competition with her for anything. In the meantime, we’re getting along fine. I’m very pleased with them.”

He reached over and took her hand. “What about their father? Are you pleased with me?” He leaned over to kiss her palm.

Her breath caught in her throat. “How could I not be? You’re a good father and husband. I feel very fortunate. You could have been a drunken, wife-beating lout. I didn’t think you would be because you sent a letter from your minister. I didn’t see it but your letter to the matchmaker was nice even though it lacked a few important details.”

His lovely blue eyes sparkled in the lamplight. “You mean five very pertinent details?”

She smiled at him. “I wasn’t going to mention it again, but yes. Also, you were generous with the money you sent for my fare. Mrs. McCormick said many prospective grooms don’t include enough for meals or other expenses.”

He frowned slightly. "That seems wrong. Do they think their bride will hibernate on the trip?"

"I suspect they don't think. You see the difference? You considered what I would need and provided enough for me. That showed me you were thoughtful and generous."

"Thank you. I was desperate but not totally unconscious. I'm lucky you're the one who answered my request. Do you have concerns other than Cindy?"

"Mattie needs her own room. The babies wake her. She said she never gets to sleep like she used to before Hattie came."

"Aw, she'd be afraid by herself and go right back in there with Hattie and Regina. She can stick it out for now. Soon they'll quit crying as much. Hattie is much better now that she has Regina to amuse her."

"Greg, I really believe this is a mistake. She shouldn't be waked every night by the other two."

"You want her in with Cindy?"

"No, definitely not. There're too many years difference between them."

"Then leave things alone for a while."

She leaped to her feet and faced her husband. "Greg, why did you ask me if I had concerns if you were going to brush me aside? You aren't thinking of Mattie's peace of mind."

He stood and tapped his chest. "She's my daughter and of course I'm considering her needs. She doesn't need her own room."

"She's our daughter and she does." She turned and went to their bedroom.

He followed and closed the door behind him. "Don't walk out on me when we're having a conversation."

"Conversation? I thought it was an argument at a stalemate."

"I told you that red hair meant a temper. Let's talk this through."

She started to raise her voice then remembered the children in the adjoining room and that across the hall. "My hair color has nothing to do with facts. We have different opinions of what our little girl needs. Each of us thinks the other is wrong. It's infuriating and disturbing but I don't know how to change that."

He took her by the shoulders. "We have to remember one important thing. My parents said a couple should never go to bed angry. They

hammered that into my head and I believe it's the truth. We have to extinguish your anger now before we go to bed."

She pushed against his chest with her hands. "I can't help being angry that you dismissed Mattie's needs so easily."

He pulled her close again. "Not easily, Victoria, and I'm sorry if that's how it seemed. If Mattie gets her own room, I think she'll be too scared to sleep alone. Whether she is or not, then Sid and Frankie will want their own room. There we are with no spare bedrooms and two girls still sharing. One day they'll want their own rooms because their brothers and sisters have them. Right now, I want to leave things as they are."

She laid her head on his broad chest and looped her arms around his trim waist. She had trouble holding anger against him. "All right, I see your reasoning process. I still think you're wrong about Mattie but I'm not angry now. I guess you're not ignoring her needs but considering the future. We simply have different opinions."

He pulled her tighter into his embrace. "Thank you. You know I love our children and want what's best for them. I want what's best for you, too."

The last ounce of fight left her. "What about you? What's best for you?"

"I suspect you are. You being here has made me happy."

She could have floated around the room. "What a sweet thing to say and a rare gift, Greg. Thank you."

"Since you're not mad at me, let's go to bed. You have to be as tired as I am."



Victoria's days were filled to brimming over. She had no idea how other women managed to get everything done. At least by the end of the week she had devised a plan to get her chores done and teach the children. She hadn't yet managed to work in the vegetable garden but Sonny was taking care of it for now.

On Friday evening at supper, Miguel used his fork to point at Sonny. "He found another place where the fence had been cut. Looked like the rustlers got six head."

Victoria's breath caught in her throat. She hadn't known there would be trouble. Until now she'd thought her biggest problem was Cindy's unhappiness and stretching herself to be a ranch wife and mother to six children.

Sonny looked up from his plate. "Kansas repaired the fence while I followed the trail. Once they reached the road, there were too many tracks to figure which were your cattle."

Miguel's expression grew angry. "This is getting old, Greg. We must stop this from happening again. Should we patrol at night?"

Greg looked toward each man before answering, "I don't want anyone getting shot. Cattle aren't worth a human life. Don't think anyone should ride alone. Tomorrow morning, you can show me where they cut the fence. I'm marking a map I drew to see if there's a pattern."

Miguel set down his coffee mug. "I have been thinking of that very thing but only mark places in my head."

Victoria took Hattie's hand. "Don't play with your food, eat it. You can play later."

The men talked of nothing else during their meal.

After eating, Miguel stood. "We go to the bunkhouse now. We will see you early in the morning."

When they'd gone and the children were in bed, Victoria sat with Greg in the parlor.

He laid aside a book when she came in. "The print in that book is the smallest I've ever seen. I've tried to read it other times and don't have the patience."

She picked up the book. "My goodness, this would make your head and eyes hurt. What was the publisher thinking? Shall I get you another book? I brought a couple of good ones with me. I have a volume of short stories by Wilkie Collins and *Middlemarch* by George Elliott."

He stood and paced the room. "No, thanks. I have the two I bought in New Braunfels but there's no point in even opening one of them. I can't concentrate because of those rustlers on my mind. I sure wish I knew who was behind this."

"How long has it been happening?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Started almost a month ago. At least, that's when we missed cattle and when we started finding cut fences. Some ranchers are riled at the fences limiting free range. But, no

one else has had fences cut and no one else has lost cattle. I can't figure who has it in for me. I can't think of anyone I've slighted or who thinks I have."

"Who's jealous of you?"

He stopped pacing to stare at her. "What?"

"Greg, you're a successful rancher with a large home. There are bound to be people who resent that you have more than they have."

Before he could protest, she held up her hand to stay his remark. "I know you worked hard to acquire all you have, but people like I mentioned don't think logically. Because they're not successful, they believe they're unlucky. Since you're successful, you must have had lots of help or cheated someone or some other excuse. Even if they mostly sit on their front porch and watch the world go by, they won't admit you've worked hard and they haven't."

He took one hand out of his pocket and rubbed at the back of his neck. "Hadn't considered such a person. I don't know how I could discover someone like that. I sure hope we can find the trail tomorrow. I can't continue to lose six or seven cows every few days. Someone wants to ruin me."

She rose and reached for his hand. "You can worry about this tomorrow. Now, let's go to bed."

"Don't think I can go to sleep as upset as I am."

"I'll bet you can—eventually." She flashed a coquettish glance as she led him to their room.

Chapter Six

Saturday morning at breakfast, Greg asked his foreman, "You said you've seen a pattern in the cut fence."

Miguel shrugged. "I will show you where this happened yesterday and you can tell us what you think. Is your map so you can bring it with you?"

"Matter of fact, I have it folded and in my back pocket." He looked at his wife. "We may be late for supper if we find a good lead. These rustlers have made me angry and I plan to see they're caught."

Kansas patted his stomach. "Sure was good food, Mrs. Hardy."

Sonny grinned. "Best meal I've eaten since supper last night."

Miguel smoothed his mustache. "S í, your cooking is so good that soon we will be as fat as the swine in the sty. Oink, oink."

She couldn't suppress her laughter. "I'm glad you men enjoy my cooking. I appreciate your kind words. Should I prepare lunches for you to take with you?"

Greg was solemn but his blue eyes conveyed gratitude. "That would be nice. We'll have our canteens with us. Jerky isn't that tasty?"

"I'll arrange for each of you to have a packet of food by the time your horses are saddled."

Sure enough, by the time the men were ready to leave, she had four packages of food consisting of biscuits with ham slices inside, a slice of pie, an apple, and some cheese for them.

Greg and his men rode directly to where the fence had been cut when Sonny had checked yesterday. Greg dismounted and examined the ground.

"How many horses you count? I make out three."

Kansas walked about twenty feet past Greg. "We found a fourth one waited here. Looks like he was supervising instead of herding. Never got off his horse."

Greg marked the spot on his map and showed the men.

“You can see they always hit on this side, which makes me think they’re heading west. That means they’d have to cross Cibola Creek or the Guadalupe River otherwise. How far did you trail them yesterday?”

Sonny pointed at the map. “I lost the trail on the road here. There were too many prints and I couldn’t tell which were your cattle or someone else’s.”

Kansas leaned in. “They could be headed between the creek and river to a ranch. Someone may be using your cattle to stock a personal herd. Probably not far either because they keep coming back instead of hitting someone else.”

Miguel nodded. “This is true. I asked around and have not heard of anyone else losing cattle, have you?”

Greg folded his map and returned it to his back pocket. “No, I think this is aimed only at me. My wife said the same thing. I’m not the nicest person in Texas but I sure don’t know who I riled this much.”

He looked at his men. “You hear anything?”

Each shook his head.

“We’ll have to ride back until we get to a gate. This is something else I’ve wondered. Why cut the fence instead of using the gate that isn’t that far away? Who do they not want to see them with cattle?”

Miguel mulled over the question for a few minutes. “Boss, the Jennings—if cattle left by that gate, the Jennings would know. That woman helps you sometimes, but she is one nosy woman. I’ll bet she knows what everyone in Comal County had for breakfast.”

The others grinned.

Greg climbed into the saddle. “You’re probably right. All the same, I’m grateful to her because she helped me when Cora passed. I barely managed as it was. Couldn’t have coped, Miguel, without you and Kansas pitching in to do my share of the work. Now Sonny is here he’s helping, too.”

They ate their lunch at a spot under a grove of trees by the side of the road.

Miguel polished off his food. “I appreciate your new wife’s cooking. This is better than the jerky and water we might have had.”

Kansas grinned. “Mrs. Dean’s pies weren’t bad but Mrs. Hardy’s is better.”

Sonny elbowed Kansas. “She’s a better cook than Miss Adams, that’s for sure.”

Greg couldn’t suppress a grimace. “Since Miss Adams visited and knows I’m now a married man, the word will travel. Thank heavens I can be shed of both of those women.”

Miguel shook his head. “Not completely for they will be angry you married a stranger instead of choosing one of them. I think they will not be friendly to your nice wife.”

Greg hadn’t considered they might be rude to Victoria. If one was, he’d have to have a heart to heart talk with her. He’d tell her to grow up and find someone else.

After lunch they scoured the sides of the road for the sign of a half dozen cows being driven off the road. When the road turned, they found where cows and horses continued west.

Miguel gestured toward the sky. “Greg, look at the horizon.” Miguel’s voice sounded alarmed.

A dark bank of clouds rolled their way. “Son of a gun, we’d better get back to the ranch. That looks like a mean storm.”

Miguel was afraid of storms. He’d been in a house hit by a tornado years ago and feared that ever happening again. “Those clouds could carry hail or a tornado. We must hurry.”

And, they did. Spring storms often brought disaster.



The excited whinnies of horses captured Victoria’s attention. She went to the window to see if someone was outside. Instead, she saw the dark cloud bank approaching. She raced to Cindy’s room.

“There’s a bad storm coming. The clouds look as if they contain hail or worse. Please watch the children while I put up the chickens and try to get the horses into the barn.”

The girl laid aside her book. “I can take care of the chickens. Sid can watch the other children.”

She laid a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Cindy, if this is a really bad storm and it hits while I’m outside, you’ll need to get the babies and Martha into the cellar. You’re the only one besides me who can manage that. I

know I can depend on you. Frankie can get down the steps on his own with you watching. I'll take Sid with me."

She slipped into the boys' room and saw that Sid was awake. "Come with me quickly, please."

"What's wrong?" He shoved his feet into his boots and followed her.

She hurried down the hall. "There's a storm coming that might have hail in it and I'd hate for the hens to be injured or so frightened they quit laying eggs. I'll get the horses into the barn if I can."

Sid kept up with her. "The other horses will follow better if you bring in the bay stallion. He's the leader."

Wind blew in gusts, whipping up dust from the yard and molding her skirts against her. Greenish tinted air carried a heavy scent of moisture. She didn't know about Texas weather, but in Atlanta these conditions meant one devil of a storm was on the way.

"I'll get the horses while you get the hens. Can you do that?"

The boy hurried as they raced across the yard. "I've done it before."

Victoria had ridden since she was eight but she'd never handled a frightened horse. She opened the barn door to the paddock and tried to whistle. Failing that, she turned and hunted a container. Using a bucket filled with oats, she cajoled the bay into the barn.

As Sid predicted, some of the other horses followed. There weren't enough stalls for all the animals. To keep those she'd lured into the barn from leaving, she penned them by moving hay bales and barrels into their path. Both dogs were upset but fortunately wanted to remain inside the barn.

She ran out to the paddock and slapped a horse on the rump. Using the apron she'd removed, she shooed the stragglers toward the barn. Sid appeared and helped. He removed his shirt and waved it to drive the horses

The wind increased and pushed at her. Sid appeared to have trouble staying upright and the wind whipped his shirt from his hands. The airborne shirt caught on the fence and he grabbed it.

Thunder rumbled and lightning shot across the sky not far in the distance. The storm moved rapidly their way. Soon it would be directly over them.

She and the boy got the horses inside and shut the barn door. She was breathless and rested her back against the door briefly. Would Greg and his ranch hands be all right?

“The milk cows are safe in here. What about the pigs? What does your father do to protect them?”

He buttoned his shirt. “We don’t do anything. They’re smart enough to go into the covered part of their sty. It’s like a small barn.”

Raindrops fell outside—large ones. Or was it hail? They couldn’t delay.

She put her arm around the boy’s shoulder. “We have to get to the house and into the cellar. Let’s hurry. When I open the barn door, you run for the house and go straight to the cellar. If Cindy doesn’t have the others there tell her to get them there now. I’ll secure the barn and be right behind you.”

Had water been given the animals? Feed to the milk cows and chickens? They were safe and she didn’t dare delay any longer. Deafening thunder rumbled overhead. Dark clouds released a downpour.

By the time she reached the porch’s shelter, she was drenched. She grabbed a couple of towels and made quick plans. Dinner was in the oven so she adjusted the heat to cook much slower.

They might need something to eat while in the cellar. She filled a basket with bread, cheese, a knife, and a jar of water in case they were trapped for several hours. As a last thought, she piled in as many tin mugs as would stay in the basket.

Before she descended the stairs she grabbed a lantern. At the stair door she heard the two youngest crying.

Through sobs, Regina cried, “Mama... I want my Mama.”

Hattie wailed in echo, “Mama, Mama.”

Mattie whimpered. “I want Mama, too, Cindy. When is she coming? Why isn’t she here now?”

“If you would stop crying long enough, you could hear her on the stairs.” Cindy’s voice carried frustration.

“I’m coming, children. I brought us a snack in case we get hungry playing games.”

Sid took the second lantern. “Should I light this now?”

“Yes, let’s have two lanterns so we can see well while we play.”

The open part of the cellar was only about ten by ten. Bins lining two sides held apples, pears, potatoes, yams, onions, carrots, turnips, and parsnips. On the shelves were containers of dried apples, sauerkraut, vinegar, and other containers she hadn’t yet investigated.

Frankie jumped at a loud boom of thunder. “What if a tornado comes and the house falls on top of us?”

She put her arm around his shoulder. “We’ll crawl out. Now stop worrying.”

Mattie tugged at Victoria’s skirt. “I’m scared.”

“First things first. Cindy, thank you for doing so well in getting Frankie and your sisters down here. I knew I could depend on you. Thank you for being clever enough to bring a couple of quilts that make sitting more comfortable.”

Victoria sat and pulled Regina, Hattie, and Mattie close. “Children, do you know Jesus told us not to be afraid? You see, worrying doesn’t help and only steals joy from today.”

Sid stared at her. “What if we can’t help being afraid?”

“Here’s a lesson for you to remember forever. Did we act foolishly or sit lazily and wait for someone else to help us?”

He shook his head. “No, we hurried and took care of things the best we could.”

She smiled at him. “Yes, we have taken every precaution we can. We couldn’t help the cattle but we secured the horses, the milk cows, the dogs, and the chickens in shelter. The swine have a safe place under cover. Cindy took care of the younger children. Since there is nothing more we can do then we must have faith that everything will be all right.”

Cindy looked toward the top of the stairs. “Do you think Papa is coming home?”

Dear Lord, please protect him and the men with him.

Feigning bravado she didn’t feel, she smiled at the children. “Your father is a very smart man. I’m sure if he can’t come here then he’ll find shelter from the storm. Actually, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s back here very soon.”

Even from the cellar they heard the storm raging overhead. Fighting her emotions she sought to find solace in her own words of comfort. In the meantime, she wanted to distract the children from their worrying.

Acting calm and excited to be together—she hoped—she clapped her hands. “Let’s play games. How about ‘I Spy’ to start?”

The children stared at her.

Cindy sighed. “They don’t know how.”

“The person who is it says, ‘I spy with my little eye and gives a clue. You have to be honest and not change the item while people are guessing. If those playing are old enough to read, instead of a clue you say ‘and it starts with... ’ and give the first letter of the object.”

Cindy frowned. “Will you start as ‘it’ and show them?”

Victoria pointed at her eye and made a funny face. “I spy with my little eye and it is something round. Now we’ll start with Frankie and go in a circle. Each person guesses once and then the next around the circle until someone guesses correctly. The one who is right is it next.”

Frankie looked around frantically. “Is it a... a... an apple?”

“No, but that was good guess. Sid, you’re next.”

He pulled at his ear lobe and scanned the cellar. “Is it a lantern?”

“Yes, that’s correct and you’re it now.”

Footsteps pounded overhead and the door at the top of the stairs opened. Four soaked men came downstairs in a rush. Victoria rose and passed Greg one of her towels. She handed the other to Miguel.

Greg wiped his face and passed the towel to Kansas. “Started hailing like crazy as we hit the porch. Thanks for getting the horses into the barn. Hope the cattle aren’t hurt.”

He sat down. “Looks like you’re having a party down here.”

Mattie climbed on Greg’s lap. “We are, Papa. Mama is teaching us a game called I Spy With My Little Eye. Now Sid’s it ’cause he guessed what she spied.”

Victoria touched her husband’s sleeve. “Our dinner is in the oven. Shall I go dish it up and serve it down here?”

Greg sent her a pointed look. “Let’s wait. I want to learn how to play this game.”

The other three men had plopped to the cellar floor as if exhausted. Overhead the storm roared furiously. Victoria hid her fear for the roof and buildings. She was indescribably glad Greg had returned. She scooted a bit closer to him.

At one point she felt as if the storm shook the house.

Sid appeared proud to be center stage. “I spy with my little eye and it’s egg-shaped. Cindy, you’re next.”

“Is it a potato?”

“No. Mattie, you guess.”

She chewed her lip and scanned the cellar. “Is it a pear?”

“Yes, you’re it now.”

She put her finger to her eye as Victoria had. “I spy with my little eye... Papa, what should I spy?”

He whispered into her ear.

She clapped her hands. “I spy with my little eye and it’s something round. Sonny, you’re next.”

Greg held up his hand. “The men are really tired, Mattie. They probably want to rest for a while.”

Sonny shook his head at Greg. “Might as well take part since we’re safely here for who knows how long. He looked at Mattie. “Is it an apple?”

She giggled. “No. Now Kansas.”

He pretended to think hard about the answer. “Is it a potato?”

She clapped her hands and laughed again. Regina and Hattie laughed, too.

Miguel stared at the shelves. “Is it a crock of sauerkraut?”

Mattie laughed out loud. So did the babies, as if they understood the reason for Mattie’s mirth.

“No, now it’s Frankie’s turn.”

“Is it the basket?”

Mattie looked disappointed. “Yes, so now it’s your turn.

The game continued until all the children had had a turn.

Victoria asked, “Would anyone like cheese and bread?”

A chorus of “yes” greeted her question. She cut the bread and then topped it with a slice of cheese. “We have to share the water unless one of those containers holds something to drink.”

Greg stood and brought down two jugs. “Cider from our own apple trees.”

After their snack they switched to Simon Says with Victoria leading the children until only Cindy was left. Victoria laid Regina and Hattie on their stomachs and patted each girl’s back while she told stories. Both girls soon fell asleep. The men shared stories, too. Theirs were about ranching and—if not for the storm—Victoria enjoyed them so much she would have liked them to continue.

When he finished a tale, Kansas cocked his ear. “Sounds like the storm’s quieter. I’ll go check.”

He climbed the stairs and disappeared into the kitchen. Soon, he came to the doorway. “Only light rain now but can’t see a thing. Outside is

dark as pitch because of the clouds. Sure smells good up here.”

Miguel reached for Mattie, who had fallen asleep. “I’ll carry her so you can get one of the babies.”

Greg passed his daughter to his foreman. “Thanks. I’ll take Regina.”

The older children followed the men. Victoria started to rise.

Greg reached for her hand. “Today could have meant disaster in any of several ways. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the way you managed. If you hadn’t been here... well, it makes me ill to think what could have happened to the children especially, but also to the horses.”

His compliment was oil for her inner lamp. Hearing praise almost reduced her to tears. She hadn’t heard kind words in over two years.

She blinked back the moisture welling in her eyes. “You said there was hail. Were you injured?”

He helped her stand then lifted Hattie and handed her to Victoria. “We could have been but we only got soaked. Small hail stung us but wasn’t damaging.”

“When we rode into the yard, a little small hail fell. When we hit the porch the stones falling were large. They could have given a person a concussion. Horses could have been seriously injured or killed.”

“What about the buildings? The wind sounded awful.”

“We didn’t take time to check the outbuildings, just put our horses in the barn and ran for the house.”

“They were frightened and whinnying. The noise is what caused me to look outside. What about your cattle?”

He picked up Regina. “No idea. I’m sure there are injuries. We’ll check tomorrow or the next day. Raced home as fast as we could once we saw the cloud bank.”

“Greg, I was so relieved when we heard your footsteps.”

At the top of the stairs, Cindy waited. “I’ll take Hattie and put her to bed after I change her diaper so you can set out supper.”

“Thank you, Cindy. You’ve been wonderful help.” She handed the baby to her sister.

Greg followed his oldest daughter. At least Cindy had been civil. Victoria hoped it lasted.

Chapter Seven

In the kitchen, Victoria donned a fresh apron and grabbed towels to pad the handles of the pans she removed from the oven. In addition to the large ham she had baked two dozen yams. The large kettle of black-eyed peas on a back burner was warm but not overdone.

Sid and Kansas were setting out plates and cutlery. Someone, no doubt Kansas, had started coffee brewing. Mattie was mostly awake and sat at the table. She leaned her head on her hand with her elbow braced on the table. Freddie sat beside her and looked as sleepy as his sister.

Victoria tested the outside of the meat. "I'm sorry the ham may be a little too dry. The yams look all right, though and the black-eyed peas are about right."

Miguel smoothed a finger over his mustache. "I can guarantee it will be delicious. In spite of the nice lunch you made for us, I'm so hungry I could eat my boot."

The mantle clock in the parlor chimed.

"Ten o'clock, no wonder you're hungry. As a matter of fact, I'm starving."

She quickly transferred the food into serving pieces and set out butter and honey. Thank goodness there were still loaves of bread remaining. She poured coffee for the adults and milk for the children.

Cindy and Greg returned and everyone took a seat.

Greg glanced around the table. "No matter how I feel inside, I'm not an outwardly religious or preachy man. But, tonight I have plenty of reasons to be thankful. I'm grateful that my wife and children are safe. I'm grateful to you three ranch hands. I'm grateful the horses and milk cows and dogs are in the barn and chickens penned."

His face was red, apparently from embarrassment at being emotional. "I'll say grace now." His blessing was brief but touching as he repeated his thanks to God for delivering them from harm.

She looked at her husband. "I guess you didn't catch the rustlers."

“No, we found where they left the road but then we saw the clouds moving this way. I didn’t know what the weather would be like here. As it turned out, the storm was greater here than where we were.”

Kansas shook his head. “We don’t know what it was like there after we left. Might have been worse than here.”

Greg took a sip of coffee. “That’s true. Whatever the case, I’m glad we’re home.”

Miguel speared a bite of ham. “I had worried about the horses in the paddock. I’m glad you got them into the barn, Señora Hardy. Some of them are high strung.”

“You don’t ride them, though?”

The foreman laid his fork on his plate. “We are training horses to sell as well as cattle. One day, this ranch will be famous for the horses trained here.”

As soon as Mattie, Frankie, and Sid had eaten Victoria took one of the lamps and herded three to bed. “Cindy, thank you again for your help. Sleep well.”

She sent Frankie and Sid to their room and guided Mattie into the one she shared with the babies. When she had Mattie tucked into bed, she checked Regina and Hattie then left. In the hall, she found Sid and Frankie waiting.

“There’s water dripping from our ceiling.” Sid pointed at his neck. “A big drop ran down my back.”

Victoria carried her lamp. “Is it on the beds?”

“I don’t think so but it’s on the floor.”

She held the lamp high and saw a spreading pool of water and a steady drip from the ceiling. She tried to step around the moisture but it rapidly spread across the room’s floor. Examination of the two mattresses proved the beds had escaped the leak.

“Sid, bring me a large pan from the kitchen. Frankie, I’ll lift you onto your bed and then help you take off your boots.”

She’d tucked the small boy in when Sid returned carrying the pan and accompanied by Greg.

Greg wore a disgusted expression as he peered at the ceiling.

“Greg, while I put this pan down would you check the other rooms?”

She set the pan under the leak. “There, boys, you have music to lull you to sleep.”

Frankie put his hands over his ears. “It’s too loud.”

“I’m sorry but this is the best we can do until daylight. I’m sure your father will repair the roof as soon as he can.”

She lifted Sid over the water and set him on his bed then helped him remove his boots.

Greg strode back. “We have more problems. Miguel said the bunkhouse roof is lying beside the barn.”

She stared at him for a few seconds as the shock took effect. “All their belongings will be soaked and some ruined. Have you told them they must sleep in our guest rooms?”

“Yes, they’re covering their beds with the groundsheets from behind their saddles. Won’t help much since their beds are already wet, but might prevent them getting more damage.”

“I’ll make sure the guest room has everything they’ll need. Poor men.”

She carried the lamp to the first bedroom and lit that room’s bedside lamp. The room was dry. In the next guest room, she repeated the action. These rooms were on the northeast side of the house while the boys’ room was on the southwest side.

So was the room she shared with her husband. Had Greg checked the ceiling in their bedroom? After she lit the lamp in the second spare bedroom, she went to ask her husband. She’d have to wait until things were not so hectic.

The men carried their belongings into the kitchen and spread them on the floor and table and chairs.

Greg had a fire going in the parlor. He’d brought up the quilts they’d used in the cellar and had them spread over the furniture.

“We should be able to dry out some things on these quilts.”

He looked at Miguel. “Anything ruined?”

“I don’t think so. You know each of us uses a trunk at the foot of our bed for storage. Each trunk is watertight. The chest also protected contents of the drawers. The mattresses and bedding are soaked.”

He held out his arms. “We are soaked as well.”

Victoria held sympathy for the ranch hands. “Miguel, your bedroom is ready for you. You look exhausted.”

“Sí, I will not do so but I think I could sleep for a week.”

“Kansas and Sonny, I’m sorry you’ll have to share a bed but it’s ready for you. Doesn’t matter who chooses which, the spare rooms are the first two on the northeast side of the hall.”

Kansas spread a shirt and pants on a quilt. “I can just about make it that far. Have to admit my tail is dragging.”

His eyes widened as he stared at Victoria. “Pardon me for being crude. I meant no disrespect.”

“I didn’t think you did. You men have had a terrible day that’s been almost twenty hours long. I say you sleep late tomorrow. I’ll try to keep the babies quiet.”

The men bid her and Greg goodnight. Thank goodness Greg and the men had left their muddy boots at the door. She adjusted the heat in the kitchen range.

Her husband came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “I’m proud of you. Seems I got lucky with my mail-order bride.”

She turned and grinned at him. “In spite of the fact you didn’t figure on me having a baby?”

“You have no idea how sorry I am I said that. It popped out of my thoughts.”

“Three times. You sure think a lot.”

He chuckled. “Not nearly enough apparently. Regina and Hattie appear to have hit it off well. Hattie has been in a much better temper since you came.”

“I suspect she has a tooth coming in. If so, she’ll get fussy again.”

“I didn’t think of that. I can’t remember when the children did what. I mean I remember that an event happened, but not their exact ages at the time.”

“Their mother might have written the events down somewhere.”

“Maybe. I’ll get out the family Bible. I need to add our marriage and list Regina’s birth.

She was touched that he’d thought of the Bible. “Thank you for including Regina.”

“I don’t know if you want her name to be Hardy or remain Bailey.”

“I’d prefer her name be Hardy. I’ll tell her about her father when she’s older. The other children will no doubt tell her in a couple of years so I’ll need to explain before that happens.”

He leaned against the wall. “Have you ever been so tired you couldn’t rest?”

“Like now? Yes, I have.” She took his hand. “Come on and get some sleep. Tomorrow will be another hard day.”

“I dread all the clean up facing us.”

“Wait until tomorrow to think about it. Turn off your mind. Tonight—or what’s left of tonight—think about sleep and rest.”

“I’ll give it a try.”

Chapter Eight

The next morning Greg woke with an odd feeling. Something was missing. He rolled over and saw the empty bed next to him. Odd how quickly he'd become used to having Victoria beside him. So far she fit perfectly into his life.

The way she conducted herself and handled the children fit his ideas. The children accepted her immediately, except for Cindy. Last night Cindy appeared to be won over by Victoria.

When he and Cindy had taken the two babies to their room, Cindy wasn't grumpy. Cindy still insisted she didn't need taking care of and they didn't need a new mother. At the same time she talked about the storm and how Victoria thanked her. Apparently, his wife had told his oldest child that they knew they could depend on her. That trust had made a big impression. Would it last? He didn't know.

He struggled into his clothes. He looked around for his boots before he remembered they were covered in mud and waiting by the door. Now that daylight had broken, he and his ranch hands would be able to survey the storm's damage.

When he entered the kitchen, he saw breakfast was almost ready. His wife poured him a mug of coffee. "I think this will help enliven you."

He smiled at her. "Thank you, but I doubt there's enough coffee in Texas to make me lively this morning. The most I hope for is stumbling in the correct direction."

Miguel lurched into the room. "Coffee, please. I'll pay any price for a cup of coffee."

Victoria handed him a steaming mug. "That'll be one thousand dollars, Sir."

Miguel took a large swallow then toasted her with the cup. "Worth every penny today."

Kansas and Sonny staggered in. Both rubbed their eyes like little boys. Sonny was the youngest and especially looked boyish this morning.

Victoria smiled at the men and gave each a mug of coffee. “That must have been quite a party we had last night because you four look as if you have a terrible hangover. Funny, but the cider I drank wasn’t hard liquor.” Although she’d never had one, she felt the way she thought a hangover would feel.

Greg set his mug on the table. “None of it was hard cider. The killer was our hard day that lasted into half the night.”

Miguel plopped into a chair. “I must be getting old. I can’t take these long days like I used to. There was a time when I could go without sleep for a couple of days running. Now I feel like I slept on rocks instead of that fine bed.”

Sonny took his chair at the table. “Not old ’cause I feel the same way and I’m barely nineteen. We might be getting a mite soft with all the good food and sleeping indoors on a mattress every night. I liked sleeping rough fine before I came here. Now I like the bunkhouse—when it has a roof, that is.”

Kansas stretched his arms over his head. “If that’s it, I don’t want to change. Like Sonny said, I’ll sleep rough when it’s needed. I’m not ashamed to admit I sure do prefer a mattress and a roof over my head and good food instead of hardtack and jerky. Guess I am getting soft at that.”

Victoria set the food on the table. “None of you is getting soft. That would mean you were unable to sleep anywhere but a soft bed. Preferring one just shows good sense.”

She took her seat at the table. “I’m letting the children sleep in this morning. They had a bad day yesterday, too.”

Greg smiled at her. “That’s thoughtful. Reckon the cows and chickens can wait a couple of extra hours for their care.”

He glanced at Miguel. “I know you men must be eager to repair the bunkhouse. I’ve had to make a hard decision and plan to go after the rustled cattle.

Miguel nodded. “We work for you and will do what you wish. There is no rain today so perhaps the bunkhouse will dry out some today.”

Greg glanced at each man. “Rain will have washed away the tracks. I still want to go where we found the cattle left the road. If we ride a little ways, maybe we can find sign.”

The three ranch hands left but Greg waited with her.

“I thought you’d want to leave early so I have your lunches prepared. Please be careful. Remember what you said yesterday, ‘Cattle are not worth a human life’. I’m holding you to that.”

“Remind the children to watch for moccasins now that the rain will have raised the creek and interfered with their nests.”

He put his hands on her shoulders. “Do you know how to use a gun?”

“Have you forgotten I lived in the South during the war? My father made sure I was a proficient marksman. Young women had to know how to defend themselves against those from both sides.”

He strode to a box on top of the china cabinet. When he’d set it on the table, he used a key to open it and revealed a revolver and ammunition. “This belonged to Cora but I hope you won’t resent me passing it to you. With rustlers in the area and snakes on the move, I’ll be easier in my mind knowing you have this and know how to use it.”

Here she’d thought she was away from threats and unusual danger. She stilled her shaking hands then took a deep breath. Training was ingrained.

After picking up the gun, she checked to see if it needed cleaning and oiling. Since it didn’t, she loaded it. She wasn’t carrying the gun on her person so she didn’t leave the chamber under the hammer blank.

“My father said a gun was no good unless it was loaded. I’ll keep this one on the pie safe. Only Cindy is tall enough to reach that.”

She shook her head. “If Sid scooted a chair, he could reach it. I don’t think he would but without temptation there is no sin. I’ll put it back where you had it.”

He handed her the key. She put that in the pie safe.

He pulled her into his embrace and kissed her tenderly. “Thank you for taking us on. I know you’ll take good care of the children while we’re gone.”

His tone scared her. “Greg, don’t speak as if you won’t return.”

He caressed her cheek. “I didn’t intend to but want to be sure you know I’ll miss you.”

She rested her hands on his broad chest. “I’ll miss you. In case you didn’t know, I always miss you when you’re not here.”

He grinned. “That’s good to hear. Don’t worry if we’re out late. I’m determined to find the missing cattle and whoever is responsible.”

She handed him the lunches she'd packed. Of course she'd worry. How could she not?

When the men rode off she went to check on the children. Both Regina and Hattie were awake but not crying. She changed their diapers and left them in their beds. Mattie was still asleep so Victoria let her rest. Sid and Frankie were dressing.

Sid buttoned his shirt. "Those cows are gonna be bawling cause we're late. We'll eat after we see to the cows."

"Your father and I thought the milking could be a little late today. You had a very late night and needed your sleep. He also said to remind you snakes would be out from the rain."

Sid tied his boot laces. "We'll watch." He and Frankie hurried toward the front of the house.

Cindy practically flew out of her room. "I'm late getting the eggs and feeding the hens."

"Wait and I'll help." Victoria thought she should learn how to do the milking and care for the chickens.

Cindy carried the basket across the muddy yard to the henhouse. The hens were squawking and fussing as if complaining about their late breakfast.

Cindy strode fast. "I don't need your help, you know. If I'm sick or something then Sid can take care of the hens."

Victoria thought the girl was trying to leave her behind but she kept in step with her. "What if you're both sick? Have you both had mumps and measles and chicken pox? The flu can also attack an entire family."

"Oh, suit yourself." Cindy was angry when she yanked on the pen door and let the chickens run free. They hung around until Cindy opened a barrel and dipped out a scoop of feed. She scattered it on the ground outside the pen then resealed the barrel.

As if she was mad at the world, the girl gathered eggs and placed them into the basket. "At least being late meant they were all hungry enough to leave the nest. I hate having to reach under a hen."

Victoria watched carefully. She couldn't imagine reaching under a hen and not getting pecked. She was surprised none of the eggs broke under Cindy's rough treatment.

Cindy reached for the next space.

Victoria knocked her hand away. Two yellow eyes stared from the nest. "There's a moccasin in that nest."

The head moved their way. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart pounded. If that huge moccasin bit Cindy or her, it could be deadly. There was no one nearby to help them.

Dear Lord, help us.

Cindy squealed, stepped backward, and tripped. She dropped the basket and eggs rolled across her lap, skirts, and the ground. The snake slithered from the nest toward the spilled eggs and Cindy. It was huge—bigger around and longer than Victoria had known they grew.

Victoria didn't know what to do. She glanced around for any weapon but there was nothing close enough to help. The snake was heading for the eggs on Cindy's skirt and maybe even for the girl.

"Cindy, don't move until I say go then roll away fast. Get ready... go." She stomped on the serpent's head as hard as she could.

The large moccasin writhed and she put her other foot on the spine. If she didn't lose her balance it would be a miracle. This was like nothing she'd ever imagined. If that thing managed to trip her, it was sure to attack.

"Cindy, hurry to the barn and bring a hoe or a shovel. Please move fast. I'm not sure I can keep from falling for long."

Cindy raced to the barn. She yelled at Sid and Frankie. Within seconds she was racing back to the chicken pen carrying a shovel. Sid and Frankie and both dogs followed and Sid carried a hoe.

Victoria didn't want them near the snake. "Boys, wait outside the pen. Keep the dogs away, too. If Cindy needs help then we'll talk about how to do that."

Sid held the hoe but stopped at the entrance. The dogs barked until he told them to be quiet. They still pushed their noses up to the wire enclosure.

Cindy was sobbing as she stood holding the shovel. "What should I do? Oh, what should I do?"

Victoria feared her legs were going to collapse. "Take the shovel and place it as close to my boot as you can then shove down with all your strength. I hope that will cut off the head."

The girl was shaking so much she had trouble handling the shovel. Her first try missed the snake.

Victoria laid a hand on Cindy's shoulder for balance. "Take a deep breath and see if that helps you focus... Take your time, dear... There, that's the place... Now, shove down with all your weight."

This time Cindy drove the shovel into the pen's earthen floor and completely severed the snake's head.

"You did it, Cindy. Thank you for working so quickly."

Cindy dropped the shovel. She leaned against one of the enclosure support posts and wept as if she couldn't stop.

Victoria felt like doing the same thing but she couldn't rest yet. She picked up the shovel and scooped up the serpent's head. The head was ugly and disgusting. "This must be buried because it could still kill the dogs if they played with it."

She carried it behind the pen and deposited it while she dug a hole. At least the ground was soft enough for her to make a deep enough hole. She dropped the horrible looking thing into the hole and covered it with dirt.

"Sid and Frankie, we need a couple of rocks so the dogs won't dig up my hole. Be careful you don't tread on another snake."

She leaned on the shovel for support. Soon the boys returned with a large flat stone it took them both to carry. They dropped it on the spot she'd just filled.

"Thank you for your help, boys. I think the chickens can eat the rest of the snake. Would you boys return the shovel and hoe to the barn where they belong? I'll check on Cindy. Then I'll go in and prepare our breakfast."

She walked to where Cindy was still waiting. Tears still ran down her cheeks but she was staring at the snake carcass.

"I didn't know a cottonmouth moccasin got that large. It looks like the pictures of a python."

Victoria picked up the basket and added the unbroken eggs. "I'm surprised that one only went for eggs. They can kill a chicken."

Cindy wiped her mouth with her hem. "I threw up from being so scared. I've never been so afraid in my life. That... that snake looks so scary."

Tears still streamed down Cindy's face when she came up to Victoria and hugged her. "You risked your life to save me after I've been mean to you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I won't be mean to you ever again."

“Thank you for saying so, Cindy. How about we go in and get breakfast for everyone. I’ll bet the babies and Mattie are awake now.”

They went into the kitchen to find Mattie standing there with her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face. “Where has everyone been? Those babies waked me up again and I need my breakfast.”

Hattie and Regina’s wails came from the bedroom.

Cindy dropped onto a chair. “I’ll see about the babies in just a minute.”

“And, I’ll start your breakfast in a moment.”

Mattie stood in front of Cindy. “What happened? Cindy, why are you crying?”

Victoria caressed Mattie’s cheek. “We’ll tell you all about it at breakfast. Go tell the babies that Cindy will be there in a minute and Mama is preparing breakfast.”

Chapter Nine

After the breakfast dishes were done, Victoria took Cindy's hand and guided her to the kitchen table. "Sit down and let's talk."

Cindy did as asked. "What about? I said I'm sorry and I meant what I said."

"I believe you, Cindy. I hope you'll tell me what upset you so much. If others hadn't mentioned you were upset for more than a week before I came, I would have thought it was about your father marrying me. But, you were troubled before you knew about me. Please tell me what had distressed you so."

At first Victoria thought Cindy would refuse. Then, she realized the girl was trying to speak but her lips were trembling.

"When Sonny's brother Sam and cousin Kirk came, I thought they were both handsome. Kirk is sixteen but he talked to me as if I was his age. Then, one day he asked me to go walking by the creek with him. I was so excited. I thought it was like stepping out and being courted."

She sobbed. "Stupid me. He had other things in mind. When I resisted, he called me names. Some I'd never heard before but I'm sure they were dirty and mean. I ran home."

"I'm so sorry that happened to you, Cindy. He should be flogged or worse."

"Every time he saw me after that, he'd say something mean no one else could hear. They ate with us so I couldn't avoid him. I was so glad when they left."

Why she had a crawling sensation up her spine she didn't know. "Did Sonny know?"

Cindy brushed at her tears. "I didn't think so at first. The last day I heard Sonny laugh with Sam and Kirk about me. I was surprised Sonny knew and that he would laugh about how his cousin acted. Since then I steer clear of him, too."

A cold chill seized Victoria. "This is important. Can you recall exactly what Sonny said to his brother and cousin?"

Cindy shook her head. "I was so upset that they were laughing at me that I didn't listen to all of it. Something about the Hardys and a surprise coming. I ran to my room."

"My word, I wonder if Sonny is part of the rustlers. I can't think of any other explanation for his comment, can you?"

Cindy looked up and grew pale again. "Oh no, I should have listened to everything. Now he's with Papa and Miguel and Kansas and they don't know Sonny is a rustler. What can we do?"

"Nothing except pray God watches over them. We have to have faith God will protect your father. We must trust your father to know how to overcome the rustlers. Your father is a smart man and very capable. Miguel and Kansas are clever men also."

All the same, Victoria retrieved the key and got down the gun box. To be safe, she put the revolver in her skirt pocket. It was so large she hoped it wouldn't tear the fabric. Although she hoped she was being silly, she felt better with the loaded gun in her possession.



Greg led the way with Miguel close. Sonny and Kansas followed. They reached the spot where they believed the rustled cattle had turned off. They slowed and kept watch for a likely turn off for the rustlers.

Riding while staring at the edge of the road slowed them. They traveled for several miles.

Greg hoped only his foreman heard, "Miguel?"

"Sí, I see it. Careful."

Greg didn't think the other two would have heard the exchange. He pretended not to see the cattle whose brand he recognized as his. He rode past then turned his horse off to go behind the cabin nearby. Three horses were in a lean-to attached to the cabin. He and Miguel rode to a small copse of trees before they dismounted and pulled their rifles free of the saddle scabbard.

Sonny and Kansas followed to the trees.

Sonny was grinning as he pulled his rifle from the leather scabbard attached to his saddle.

His smile died when he realized three rifles pointed at him. “Hey, why are you aiming those at me. Remember I work for the outfit.”

Greg looked him in the eye. “Yeah, but you’re working for the wrong outfit and rustled cattle. You want to live, toss down your rifle and sidearm on the right side of your horse.”

Sonny didn’t have to think about it long before he complied. “What tipped you off? Was it that girl of yours, Cindy?”

Kansas shook his head. “It was you. You aren’t careful what you say. And, you insisted I fix the fence while you chased after the cattle and pretended to lose the trail. You aren’t as clever as you think you are. I felt like stabbing you last night while you slept.”

Hearing his daughter’s name mentioned increased Greg’s rage. He sure as heck wanted to know what prompted that remark. “Sonny, get down from your horse on the left side. Stand still while I tie your hands. I’m so angry that you’ll be smart not to give me an excuse to shoot you.” Greg bound the cowboy’s hands behind him.

“Hey, that’s too tight. I can’t feel my fingers.”

“I don’t want to hear your bellyaching.” He gagged Sonny with his own neckerchief then led Sonny to a tree and tied his feet together.

“To be sure you don’t wander from your nice shady spot, I’m tying you to the tree.” Greg removed Sonny’s boots, which included a knife.

Greg removed the knife and set the boots near the horses. “I’m sure you won’t mind sitting in your socks with no boots while we call on your kin.” He looped his arm through the rest of the coil of rope so it hung from his shoulder.

They circled to the side of the cabin without a window and approached cautiously. When they were at the wall, Greg and the other two separated. He peeked around the corner and made out a window frame. He waited until the others were in position. He hoped that the other rustlers were in the cabin and not outside.

The privy door opened and Greg aimed at the belly of the young man stepping from the outhouse. Hard to say who was most surprised.

The man resembled Sonny but looked younger. Greg had never seen him but the kid raised his hands. When Greg was near, the young man dived for Greg.

Greg fired and shots rang out from inside the house and outside. Greg shoved his rifle stock into the young man’s head and the man dropped

to the damp ground. Greg quickly used the man's silk neckerchief to bind his hands. He removed the man's boots. With the rope he had carried he tied the man's feet and suspended him through the hole in the outhouse cinched around a corral post.

"You'd better hope that post holds while we finish up with the others."

That used all of the rope he'd carried but Manuel and Kansas had more on their saddles. He hurried to the window to see what had happened inside. Manuel had Sonny's brother Sam against the wall with hands raised.

Kansas was bleeding from his shoulder but he had Kirk in his sites. Kansas wobbled as if he was going to pass out and Kirk rushed him. Greg couldn't fire without risking Kansas.

The kid fired at Miguel and made a dash for the door. The foreman fired at him and quickly cold-cocked Sam. Greg fired at Kirk but the boy was fast out the door. By the time Greg ran around the cabin the kid was riding off on one of the horses from the lean-to. Kirk rode hanging low, Indian style so Greg couldn't hit him.

Greg ran to his horse and rode after the boy. That's how Greg had thought of him because Kirk couldn't have been over sixteen or seventeen. He recalled what he'd been doing at that age—he'd been a soldier killing men for no other reason than they thought differently from him.

He'd thought he was through killing. Now he had to catch this kid. He was angry—too angry. If Kansas died, he feared he'd kill Kirk with his bare hands unless the kid killed him first.

They raced but Greg couldn't seem to gain on him. The younger man turned and fired at Greg and missed. Kirk was lighter and his horse rested. The distance between them widened.

Greg continued his pursuit. Kirk was a speck in the distance, but Greg pushed on and wondered where the kid was headed. He didn't want to be ambushed, which slowed him more.



Victoria tried to keep busy enough that she couldn't worry about Greg, Miguel, and Kansas. She'd have to spin like a top to accomplish that. Her husband remained in her thoughts.

When she decided to become a mail-order bride, she reconciled herself to a marriage without love. She'd hoped for fondness. Now she realized she had developed more than that for her husband.

Cindy was worried her father. "If anyone is hurt it will be my fault."

Approaching her eldest, Victoria hugged the girl. "If anyone is hurt it will be Sonny's fault. I'm so angry with him and disappointed. He sat at our table and ate with us. He even slept in our home last night after he sheltered here in the cellar. All that time he was cheating us. How he could do that, I don't know."

"Did you know Papa gives the men who work for him a percentage of the profit at the end of the year? I don't think other ranchers do that."

"Your father is a fine man, the best man I've ever known. He should have only good things happen to him."

Cindy rested her head on Victoria's shoulder. Victoria was tall, but Cindy was only a few inches shorter.

Cindy said, "I'm glad you married Papa. You're a good mother. We need you."

She hugged her daughter. "Oh, Cindy, you have no idea what pleasure you've given me. I wanted so much for us to be friends."

They both stilled at the sound of hoof beats.

"That sounds like only one horse." Victoria went toward the parlor to look out the window.

She was by the front door when it was kicked open.

Kirk Dorfman stood there with revolver drawn. "Well, hello, if it isn't the mail-order bride. Where's Cindy?"

Using a sultry voice, Cindy called, "I'm in here, Kirk, in the kitchen. Come on in. I have something for you."

He laughed. "And I have something for you, you little tease." He swaggered through the doorway to the kitchen and dropped.

Victoria pulled the revolver from her pocket as she approached him.

Cindy stood over his inert form with a cast iron skillet in her hand. She looked up at Victoria. "That probably wasn't what he expected."

"But, a very good choice, Cindy. I commend you on your kitchen skills." She pointed her revolver at Kirk. "Do you know where there's any rope?"

Sid and Frankie came into the kitchen and stopped, startled. They rushed over to look at Kirk.

Victoria didn't take her eyes off the young man. "Stay back. Sid, do you know where there's some rope?"

"Sure, in the barn."

"No, don't leave the house until we know it's safe. Is there any inside the house?"

"I don't think so."

"You boys go take care of the little girls. Make sure they stay back there playing. Cindy, come here and tear strips from my petticoat. If you make the strips about two inches wide, we can twist them and they won't break."

"Are you sure?"

"I can't think of anything else. I didn't bring old clothes."

"I have an old nightgown. I'll get it quickly."

Cindy returned tearing strips of cloth as she walked. "I'll make it long enough and then twist it together. He's coming around. I'd better hit him again."

Kirk tried to rise up and collapsed. "Don't hit me again. You almost killed me."

Victoria made certain he saw the gun. "We haven't even tried to kill you yet. I'm thinking of ways, though. There ought to be plenty of ways to torture a rapist, don't you think, Cindy?" She winked at her daughter.

"Oh, yes, I can think of a few."

Kirk rolled to his side. "Hey, I never raped her."

Cindy kicked his leg. "You would have if I hadn't kicked you and ran."

"Aw, you females always want it. You were just teasing me to make yourself seem better than you are."

Victoria cocked the hammer on the revolver.

Kirk raised a hand. "Hey, I was just making a joke. You can take a joke, can't you?"

"Can we, Cindy? I don't think I can. Get the meat cleaver."

"Sure, Mama. What shall we cut off first?"

Victoria pretended to laugh. "Guess. What would he hate most to lose?"

The sound of a galloping horse sent Cindy to the window. "It's Papa."

Greg came in with gun drawn.

Kirk reached out both hands. "Get me away from these two. They're crazy. They're going to torture me. You gotta help me."

"Why would I care if they torture you? Do you care that Kansas is hurt badly? Do you care that you cheated and stole because you were too lazy to earn your own ranch?"

"You got it wrong. You've got this real nice ranch and big house. We just took a few of your cows you wouldn't even miss. Didn't hurt nothing."

"Oh yeah? Do you think I was handed this ranch on a platter? I worked hard and started with nothing but my Army paycheck. I bought the ranch from a man who was leaving for New Mexico but I've made a lot of improvements since then. This ranch represents ten years of working six and seven days a week from before sunup to sundown. I didn't steal it from anyone."

Kirk yelled, "He was our grandpa. He shouldn't have sold. This ranch should have come to us as our inheritance. In New Mexico the land he bought was next to worthless because there wasn't any water on the place. He went broke in three years."

"That's not my fault. I paid him what we agreed. What he did with the money is his business."

He looked at his daughter. "You have that so it'll work to tie him, Cindy?"

"Here it is, Papa. Tie it real tight."

Greg did. "Victoria, I have to take the wagon where the cattle are held. Kansas is hurt and we have three more rustlers to take to the sheriff."

"By the way, to whatever charges you make against Kirk, add the cost of Cindy's nightgown. She used it to make strips so we could tie him. I'd planned to gag him, too." She smiled at Greg. "I'll have supper ready when you get home."

"In the meantime, can you watch this man while I hitch the wagon?"

"Oh, I'll be happy to. We never did get to show him how well the meat cleaver cuts."

Kirk scooted on his rear to get away from them but he backed into a wall.

Cindy held the meat cleaver. "You want to unbutton his britches or shall I?"

Kirk was wild-eyed. “No, please. I’m sorry I treated you that way. I think you’re pretty and couldn’t help myself. I’m real sorry. Just leave me be, please, I’m begging you.”

“What should I do, Mama?”

“Let’s ask your father. If he doesn’t mind, he might like to watch. Especially when we tell him what Kirk tried to do to you. Good fathers like yours are protective of their daughters.”

Greg shook his head and chuckled as he jogged to the barn. He was soon seated on the wagon and drove it close to the front door.

Kirk’s hands were trussed but Greg tied his feet when he had him in the wagon.

Greg also removed the young man’s boots and examined them. He pulled a knife from one boot and showed it to Victoria and Cindy.

“Most of these guys have a knife in one boot, some in each boot. Don’t want them cutting themselves loose. A few have a second gun in one book or strapped to their leg.”

He set the boots in the wagon and came to Victoria and Cindy.

“Ladies, I’m sure glad you two are uninjured.”

He kissed Cindy on the cheek then swept Victoria into his arms for a passionate kiss. “Also, I’m sure glad you two didn’t get mad at me. The two of you together are dangerous.”

Victoria grinned at their daughter then at him. “Keep in mind we are capable of dastardly deeds when pushed.” She stood with her arm around Cindy.

“I’m not likely to forget it.” He climbed onto the wagon seat and snapped the reins.

Chapter Ten

Victoria smiled when Greg helped her into their new buggy. Mrs. Jennings had arrived to care for Regina, Hattie, and Mattie. She hated to leave the three at home but she was confident they would be fine in her absence.

Miguel and Kansas were riding their horses. Cindy, Sid, and Frankie were accompanying Greg and Victoria into New Braunfels for the rustlers' trial. The two little boys were acting proud to be included.

Sid was practically bouncing with excitement and leaned over the front seat. "Papa, are we gonna see Sonny get hanged?"

Greg shook his head but appeared focused on the horses. "You're not seeing anyone hanged, young man. This is a trial. The only reason we're taking you is because you know the men involved and your mother and I thought it would be a good lesson."

Victoria glanced over her shoulder. "Sit down, Sid, and don't squirm."

Cindy pulled Sid back beside her. "I'm excited, too, Sid, but if we don't behave then Mama and Papa won't take us to New Braunfels again for years."

Victoria had mixed emotions about today. She and Greg had talked about whether or not the experience would be good for the children or bad. Cindy had been directly threatened and they decided she definitely needed to see Kirk was punished.

Victoria was glad the rustlers' trial was scheduled and that part of their lives would be concluded. The time they waited for today had dragged as if the threat still hung over them. Whether for good or bad, they would finish with that unpleasant experience.

She looked over her shoulder again. "The trial is part of your school lessons. Papa and I thought seeing how the court system works would be better than simply reading about it. There might be time for a treat if everyone behaves."

Cindy leaned forward. "Can we get something for Mattie? She was upset we were leaving her home with the babies."

Victoria nodded. "Of course, Cindy. That's thoughtful of you." She especially wanted Cindy to see that Kirk was punished. Although the youngest of the four rustlers, he was the most vicious. His comments to Cindy had left her feeling there was something wrong with her.

The courtroom was packed but Miguel and Kansas had saved seats for the family. When the four rustlers were brought in, none of them would look at the Hardy family. The three oldest each stared at his hands. Kirk sat with a smug look on his face.

Greg, Kansas, Miguel, and Victoria had to testify. They carefully omitted Cindy's name. When the trial was over, the jury deliberated only a few minutes. Each man was found guilty and the jury recommended hanging.

After the jury's verdict was read, Greg stood. "Your Honor, may I speak to the court?"

The judge didn't look pleased. "Go ahead if it's relevant."

"Due to the ages of the four men, my family and Miguel Dominguez and Kansas Kramer ask that the court show leniency in sentencing. While rustling and attempted murder are serious crimes which should not be excused, we ask that the men's lives be spared."

The buzz of comments rippled across the courtroom. Sonny hung his head and wept into his hands. Kirk smirked. Mike and Sam watched the judge.

The judge banged his gavel. "Silence. Silence or I'll have the courtroom cleared."

He appeared to read notes he'd made. "Mike Dorfman, because you did not fire a shot but did take part in the rustling, I sentence you to five years in Huntsville prison. Sam Dorfman, you receive the same. Lester "Sonny" Dorfman, you cheated the family who fed and housed you. I sentence you to fifteen years. Kirk Dorfman, you shot Mr. Kramer with intent to kill and planned to attack the Hardy family. I sentence you to thirty years."

Kirk screamed, "No! You can't do this to me! He asked you to be lenient and spare our lives. Thirty years isn't lenient." He sobbed and refused to stand. Two bailiffs carried him out of the courtroom. His yelling continued until he was too far away for those in the courtroom to hear.

Sonny stood and looked at Greg. "I'm sorry for what we did. Thank you for speaking up for us and sparing our lives." He turned and left as directed.

With gazes downcast, his two brothers followed him.

Victoria dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. The four on trial had ruined their lives and snuffed out their chances for happiness. They'd almost done more. She thanked God her husband, Miguel, and Kansas were safe. Thanked God that Cindy and she were safe.

After they left the courthouse, Greg spoke to his ranch hands. "Make a day of it, men. You're welcome to come with us to have a meal. Then, the ladies want to do a bit of shopping. You remember I mentioned that item of business we'll conclude here but it won't take long. Kansas, you know where we left the buggy. If you wish, ride home in the buggy and we'll tie your horse on the back."

Kansas rubbed at his shoulder where he'd been shot. "I'm feeling pretty fit. Thanks for the invite but I'd like to look around town a little while. Don't get over here very often. I reckon I'll still be home before you folks."

Miguel smoothed his mustache with a finger. "Sí, I will be home before your family. I am not fond of towns. Now that our bunkhouse is repaired, I am happy there when I am not working or eating."

Miguel leaned close to Greg to speak quietly, "I will stay with Kansas and make sure he does not have a problem."

They bid the two men goodbye and turned toward the restaurant. Victoria held her husband's arm. Frankie walked between Cindy and Sid. Now that the trial was over, she could enjoy an outing with her family—rather, her husband and half their children.

Victoria asked, "Have the children been out to eat here before?"

"Not here. We've eaten at the little café in Ordinary. I don't believe they've ever been to New Braunfels before."

She understood that it was logical for the children to go to the closer town rather than here. Especially the small ones would be tired from the longer drive.

"Good, this will be a special treat for them."

They went to the same restaurant at which they'd eaten on their wedding day. The same waitress took their orders.

Victoria scanned the other diners then smiled at Greg. "A lot has happened since we were here."

"Hard to believe, isn't it? Seems like it must have been at least a year ago with all that's gone on recently."

Their food came and they chatted while eating. After they'd each finished, Greg paid the bill and they went to pick out something for Mattie.

"What do you think?" He nodded toward a board game called The Checkered Game of Life.

She examined the box. "I've played this one and it's educational. We could all play that or the older ones could play without us."

Cindy approached with a book. "This is the second book about Katy. May I have it?"

Victoria met his gaze and nodded slightly.

Greg took the book from her. "You may. Did you find something for Mattie?"

"There's a nice story book with pictures she would enjoy if we read it to her." She showed it to Greg and Victoria.

"All right. Boys, you may choose something." He set an amount for them.

Sid chose a bag of marbles and Frankie chose a toy horse.

Victoria chose a stuffed lamb for Hattie and a stuffed dog for Regina.

He carried the items. "Is there anything you need?"

"No, nothing but thank you for asking. I'm eager to get our other task completed."

Victoria stood aside while her husband paid for their purchases. The trial had caused her heart to ache for the four young men. The men's greed had ruined their lives and almost cost Kansas his. She hoped when they were released from prison they'd be law abiding. Two with lesser sentences would still be young men when released.

She noticed Frankie was lagging. This was his rest time. "I know you're tired, Frankie. Only one more stop and then we can go home." She ruffled his hair.

The three children and she and her husband strolled a few doors down to a lawyer's office.

Sid tugged on Greg's sleeve. "Why are we going here?"

"You'll see. Remember to behave."

The attorney, Mr. Madison, expected them. “Nice to see you again, Mr. Hardy. I have the papers ready for you as you instructed.”

He gestured to two chairs. “I’ll arrange for more chairs.”

Greg shook his head. “Unless this will take a long time, the children will be fine where they are.”

“A few minutes is all that’s required.” Mr. Madison pushed a set of papers across the desk. “You’ll see the first papers are for you to adopt Regina Bailey as your daughter and change her name to Regina Hardy.”

He tapped those he’d pushed toward Victoria. “Those are for you to adopt your husband’s children as yours.”

Cindy leaned near Victoria’s ear. “Why do you need to adopt us? You’re married to our Papa. I thought that made you our mama.”

Greg heard his daughter. “For instance if Kirk had killed me as he intended, then anyone from my family could have claimed you children and Mama couldn’t do much to stop them because she’s not a blood relative. I don’t think any of my kin would do that, but now it won’t matter.”

Mr. Madison looked at Cindy. “You see, young lady, your father’s ranch is quite prosperous and might tempt someone to claim you children in order to secure the ranch.”

Mr. Madison presented another sheaf of papers. “Here is the will as you specified. I’ll keep one copy on file here and you have two copies for your records.”

The girl’s eyes widened. She clutched her father’s sleeve. “Papa, please don’t die.”

He laughed and put his arm around her waist. “I hope to live for a long time but no one can guarantee how long he’ll live. Being prepared is the best plan.”

They signed the papers, thanked the attorney, and walked to where they’d left the buggy.

Back at home after Mrs. Jennings had gone and the children were tucked into their beds, Victoria and Greg went to their room. Her emotions remained in turmoil over their eventful day.

He pulled off his shirt. “You still sad about the rustlers?”

“I can’t help myself, especially about Sonny. I thought he was a nice young man. That awful Kirk was so young. Going to prison seems such a waste yet they had to be punished. At the same time, I’m excited that Regina is now safe from the Baileys.”

“After what your friend wrote about your in-laws hiring the private investigator, I thought we should do something quickly. If he’s good, he could show up anytime.”

“Thank you, Greg. You probably know how much it means to me, but I want to tell you. I had no idea when I came that I would find such a fine man. I wasn’t certain a man as good as you actually existed. I’m so proud to be your wife.”

He pulled her against him. “I’m the luckiest man in Texas. I know we haven’t been married long but I admit I’ve fallen totally in love with you.”

She put her arms around his neck. “That makes my world complete because I love you, I love our children. I’m sure you’re the best man I’ve ever met. I’m fortunate you sent for a mail-order wife.”

“I had no idea I would be so lucky when I wrote Mrs. McCormick. When you stepped off the train I was shocked you were so beautiful. In spite of the fact we disagreed on a few things, I started falling for you that first day.”

Grinning, she leaned back far enough to meet his gaze. “Even if you didn’t figure on me having a baby?”

He hugged her to him. “I swear, Victoria, are you *ever* going to let me forget that?”

“Probably not. Doesn’t mean I love you any less, though. It’s just too easy to remind you. What if I agree to only mention it the first fifty years and then I’ll stop?”

He chuckled, his mouth close to her ear. “I surrender. You can use it for as long as you wish if you promise to stay with me.”

“You have a deal, Mr. Hardy.”

“Mrs. Hardy, let’s go to bed.” He picked her up and carried her toward their bed.

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About Caroline Clemmons

Through a crazy twist of fate, Caroline Clemmons was born in town instead of on a Texas ranch. To compensate for this illogical error, she writes about handsome cowboys, feisty ranch women, and scheming villains in a tiny office her family calls her pink cave. She and her Hero live in North Central Texas cowboy country where they ride herd on their rescued pets—two indoor cats and a dog—as well as providing nourishment outdoors for wild critters who stop by to visit.

The books she creates in her pink cave have made her a bestselling and award winning author. She writes both sweet and sensual romances about the West, both historical and contemporary as well as time travel and mystery. Her series include the Kincaids, McClintocks, Stone Mountain Texas, Bride Brigade, Texas Time Travel, Texas Caprock Tales, Pearson Grove, and Loving A Rancher as well as numerous single titles and contributions to multi-author sets.

When she's not writing, she loves spending time with her family, reading books written by her friends, eating out with friends, browsing antique malls, checking Facebook, and taking the occasional nap. Find her on her [blog](#), [website](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Goodreads](#), and [Pinterest](#).

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