

*Breaking
the Rules*



Ellen O'Connell

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Story Summary

On a cold winter night, Garn Coburn watches from shadows as two lawmen rough up a woman and leave her lying in the dirt looking like a pile of rags in the moonlight. Garn lives by his gun and by a set of rules he hopes will keep him alive. Checking to see if the woman is badly hurt breaks the first rule. *Never mind anyone's business but your own.* Helping Edie Thorne shatters most of the rest.

The bank served Edie notice of foreclosure on her ranch soon after her husband's death, but she expected a final notice telling her when to vacate, not two lawmen bursting through her front door, dragging her from the house, and beating her for resisting.

Surprised by the gunman leaning over her in the night, weakened by injuries and desperation, Edie struggles to her feet and lets Garn lure her into going to town with him. So begins a partnership between a man breaking the rules he lives by and a woman determined to get back a decent life any way she can....

Chapter 1

Late February 1877

Wilrose, Colorado

RHYTHMIC THUDS FROM A DRAFT TEAM'S huge hooves shook the ground as a rattling wagon approached the livery stable. Horses whinnied greetings from inside the barn and surrounding corrals.

Garn Coburn melted into a pool of darkness where blacksmith shop and barn walls met. If he had wanted to be sociable tonight, he would have stayed at the saloon.

Trace chains jangled as the team slowed and halted. The scent of sweating horses floated on the cold air. The passenger stayed still and hunched in on himself as the driver set the brake.

The single outrider reined up and dismounted, a big man, not just tall but massive. Moonlight glinted off a spot of metal on his chest. A badge.

So the rider would be Sheriff Hal Searson. Garn pulled his coat tighter around his neck, doubly glad he'd tucked in here out of sight, and resigned to staying still and quiet until the sheriff and his friends moved on.

Searson tied his horse to the wagon gate and strode forward. One of the others argued with him, their voices a low rumble. The argument ended when Searson reached up and dragged the passenger to the ground, shoving the smaller man so hard he staggered backward. Not a friend after all.

Hindered by an ankle-length coat, the passenger barely got his feet under him before Searson hit him again, going after him, keeping him off balance.

The wagon driver jumped down. A badge shone on his chest too. As tall as the sheriff but no more than half as wide, he must be the young deputy who followed Searson around like a dog hoping for a bone.

To Garn's surprise, the deputy joined the fray, grabbing Searson's arm and holding on.

“Let go, damn it!” Searson shrugged the deputy off and shoved the small man again, this time so hard he fell and crabbed backward on his ass.

The deputy persisted, and after dodging a kick aimed at the man on the ground, he got Searson to stop.

“That’s enough. You know it’s enough.”

“All right,” Searson yelled, throwing his arms in the air. He leaned over and spit, a finger jabbing at the man on the ground. “See how you like laying here freezing. If you make it through the night, you can sell the only thing you got worth two bits.”

Curled in a ball on the ground, the puny fellow didn’t have enough sense to keep his mouth shut. “Go. To. Hell,” he said, his voice husky.

The deputy took hold of Searson’s arm again. “Come on, let’s go. If we wake Todd, he’ll tell everyone he sees about this tomorrow.”

“I don’t give a damn what that old drunk says.”

If the liveryman slept inside his stable and the shouting hadn’t roused him yet, he must have gone to bed thoroughly roostered.

“Neither do I, but he loves to gossip, and he will. A slap or two is one thing, but you don’t want everyone in town knowing you beat a woman. Let’s get out of here.”

“I’d never have let you come with me if I knew you were so lily-livered.”

“If she tells people—”

“Who’s she gonna tell? Who’d believe her?”

They stood there, facing off over what now looked like a heap of rags on the ground. A cloud of steamy breath plumed around their heads.

“All right,” Searson said again. “Let’s park the wagon and get these nags unhitched. I need a drink.”

The wagon disappeared behind the building. Garn waited, staring at the small heap on the ground he might not even have noticed without seeing and hearing the whole ruction. A woman?

Sure it was. What he’d taken for a long coat flapping around a small man’s ankles was a dress, petticoats. Just like the husky voice that had spoken those three words was female.

The lawmen returned from behind the livery on horseback and turned toward the center of town. Garn stared at the woman, willing her to move, stand, walk.

She didn’t.

Avoiding anything to do with lawmen or the law was one of Garn’s rules for living long enough to grow gray hair, but he counted it a minor one. Any sensible person did that as a matter of course.

The first and most important rule was *never mind any business but your own*. That woman on the ground out there was definitely none of his business. Being here was pure, miserable luck.

Not his business. Law involved.

Was it cold enough a woman would die if she stayed on the ground like that until the liveryman found her in the morning? Probably so if she was hurt bad enough, and if she wasn't hurt, she should be moving.

Voices chattered in Garn's head, all four of his sisters lecturing, one after the other. His mother chimed in now and then. He cursed out loud, moved into the moonlight, and squatted on his heels beside the woman.

This close he could see she wasn't still as death but shivering.

"Are you awake?"

His words brought a quick intake of breath but no movement. "Yes."

"Can you get up?"

"I could, but there's no point."

"Here I thought telling that big fatherless son to go to hell was pretty brave. Guess I was wrong, and it was just stupid."

"You heard it all?"

"My bad luck, I did."

Garn touched her arm, ready to help her up.

"Don't touch me!"

He jerked his hand back and muttered another curse. She didn't need his help, didn't want his help, and he should have known better. Women were all trouble on the hoof, including his sisters.

"Who are you?" she asked suspiciously.

A damn fool breaking his own rules.

She answered her own question before he could. "According to Denny, the town is full of Seymour Ellman's hired killers, and I can see a gun tied low enough to show under your coat. That's what you are, isn't it? How many of the five killed did you account for?"

"Just one." Garn rose to his feet, ready to leave her where she lay. The devil take her, and heaven help any wolves that showed up looking for a meal.

"Wait." A soft sound halfway between moan and whimper reached him as she pushed to a sitting position, using only one hand and arm.

Garn stared down. As she could see the bottom of his holster, he could see dark hair straggling around the pale oval of her face, no hat or scarf, no gloves.

"Would you shoot me?" she said. "It wouldn't be any more effort than helping me up, would it?"

"Be glad to. Going rate's a hundred dollars, but since you're sitting still, I'll do it for fifty."

“That’s ridiculous. All you have to do is take your gun out of the holster and pull the trigger.”

“Little do you know. I’d have to cock the hammer and then pull the trigger. You’d be hiring a professional who doesn’t make mistakes like that, knows where to aim, and hits what he aims at.”

“For heaven’s sake, you can press the barrel against my head. No one could miss.”

“An amateur might not have the nerve to pull the trigger, might let the barrel wobble and just wound you. If you want something done right, you have to pay what the job’s worth.”

“You are a despicable man.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“If I had fifty dollars, I wouldn’t want you to shoot me. All I have are the clothes I’m wearing, and I’m fortunate to have those.”

“The sheriff mentioned a way you could make money.”

She said a word Garn never expected to hear from a female mouth and followed up with more of the same. “I am not a prostitute, and I am never going to be one, which is why I asked you to shoot me, but oh, no, you shoot people for a living, but you won’t do it once for charity.”

“I don’t do charity. You can’t tell me there’s no one in Wilrose who would take you in and help you out.”

“I’m sure there are a few who would see it as their unpleasant Christian duty, but by the time I find out who they are, I’ll be frozen just as solid as if I stay here, so as I said to start with, there’s no point.”

“It’s not cold enough to freeze you solid even if you’re stupid enough to stay right where you are all night.”

Garn still wasn’t sure about that, but being pretty miserably cold himself at the moment, he wanted to get her up and moving so the voices in his head would shut up.

“Why don’t you come to town with me?” he said. “I was about to go back and have supper at the café anyway. If you come along, you can warm up, and we’ll discuss it.”

“Ada would burn the place down before she’d let me through the door.”

“Want to bet?”

“I don’t have anything to bet, and even if you can intimidate her into letting me in, she would poison any food she put in front of me.”

“I’ll stake you to a dollar. If you get in and get to eat something decent, I win and you tell me why you’re here and why you don’t think anyone will help you. If you win, you’ll at least have a dollar.”

For a moment Garn thought he’d have to try a different ploy to get her off the ground, like picking her up and throwing her over his shoulder.

“If I tell you to go away and leave me alone, will you?”

“No, ma’am.”

She got to her feet the way a toddler would, rolling first to her hands and knees then pushing to her feet, although she only used one hand again.

Small as she’d seemed with the sheriff shoving her around, she unfolded to a fair height. Standing straight, the top of her head might reach his nose, but right now she had a noticeable list, right elbow pressed tight to her side.

Garn recognized the stance. He’d had cracked ribs once himself. If hers were broken, she could be in more trouble than cold and broke.

She needed a doctor. Garn opened his mouth to say so and closed it again. If a broken rib was going stab around inside and kill her, it would have done it already what with her riding in a wagon and getting yanked and knocked around. A woman who wanted him to kill her wasn’t going to listen to reason about her ribs, which were definitely none of his business.

She started for town without further argument. At first Garn could hardly take small enough and slow enough steps not to outpace her. After a few minutes, she reached something close to ordinary female speed.

A couple of slaps, the wagon driver had said. She couldn’t be hurt much at all. Females bruised easy.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked.

“I have sisters.”

“Sisters!”

She sounded so surprised he could almost take insult. “I suppose you figure men like me crawl out from under rocks full grown.”

“Of course not.” Another thirty feet. “I suppose I did think men in your line of work would be orphans or not have much of a family.”

“I have as much family as a body needs. Mother and four married sisters, eight nieces and six nephews last count.”

“Do you see them?”

“I stop by when I’m in that part of the country.”

A series of gunshots split the night from the direction of the Cattlemen’s Palace saloon.

“What’s that?” the woman gasped, stopping.

“Ellman’s pouring free liquor tonight, a celebration.”

“You mean I could get someone to shoot me just by walking in there?”

“No, ma’am. More than likely they’d put you on top of the bar or a table and want you to dance. At least that’s what they’d want to start with.”

“Why aren’t you there with them?”

“More than a drink or two is dangerous in my business, and I don’t like being around drunks.”

She made a sound that could be interpreted any way, and they finished the walk to the café with silence between them, although sporadic shots, rebel yells, and just plain hoots and hollers continued to reverberate from the Cattlemen’s Palace. At least so far the free liquor was keeping the men close to the saloon.

Light spilling through the café’s front window illuminated the maybe crazy, maybe desperate woman at Garn’s side for the first time, and his jaw muscles spasmed. A better look once they were inside sent something ugly pulsing through him. He should have taken her to the doctor whether she wanted to go or not.

Slap or two like hell. That big bastard had used a fist, and if he hadn’t driven it right into her eye, he’d hit the outer corner. Tears leaked from between lids swollen shut. Red and purple bruising extended up into her forehead and down across her cheek. Her skin stretched tight and shiny over the swelling. If neither her eye socket or her cheekbone was broken, it would be a miracle.

Making it all worse was the contrast with the undamaged side of her face. Pain, fatigue, and dirt couldn’t disguise a flawless complexion tinted pale gold by the sun, distinct cheekbone, straight nose, and lush mouth. Long black lashes fringed a gold-flecked brown eye.

Warm air, humid and fragrant from a day’s baking, frying, and roasting, escaped past Garn as he held the door for his reluctant companion.

Ada Lindstrom hurried toward them, her face distorted by anger. Except for the pale blonde hair, Garn wouldn’t have recognized the curvy beauty he’d admired through three meals a day for the last month.

“I’m closing. My mother and father left already because there’s no business tonight with the big to-do at the Cattlemen’s, and I don’t want to deal with drunks later, so I’m closing.”

Garn hesitated. From what he’d seen, Ada’s folks left her to deal with the café alone more nights than not, but they never should have done it tonight. None of Ellman’s other men were going to pass on the free liquor in favor of apple pie, but come midnight some of those drunken hard cases would spread through the town, and if they found this place open and Ada alone....

Every woman, every ordinary citizen in Wilrose needed be home behind locked doors long before then. Men who would never do more than tip their hats to a respectable woman when sober would be on the howl tonight.

But midnight was hours away.

Coming to a decision, Garn walked straight at Ada. When she held her ground, he spread one hand on each side of her waist, picked her up, and swung her out of his way, ignoring a kick

absorbed by the top of his boot. Miss—Mrs. Whoever She Was stood frozen barely inside the door, ready to flee.

“You can’t win by not playing,” Garn told her. “Do I need to come get you?”

“I mean it. I’m really closing,” Ada said.

“You can close after we eat. Ellman’s men won’t be on the street for hours, and I don’t care how much you two hate each other. I’m hungry.”

He pointed at Ada. “Get back to the kitchen, bring coffee, and act like someone who runs a restaurant should.”

He pointed at Whoever. “Go with her and clean yourself up, and if I hear anything that sounds like a cat fight, I’m going to come back there and hold your heads under the first water I see. Maybe you’ll get your wish, and I’ll shoot you.”

Ada stormed off to the kitchen. Whoever gave him a one-eyed glare and followed.

Garn headed for a table near the edge of the room, shucked his hat and coat, and tossed them on the next table over. He dropped into a chair with his back to the wall with a small sound of satisfaction. At least that was one rule he could keep tonight.

From Ada’s reaction, Whoever wasn’t respectable, so he wasn’t breaking the no respectable woman rule either. He’d feed Whoever, give her a couple of dollars, and send her on her way. His sisters and mother already had stopped lecturing in his head, and the prickly feeling at the back of his neck that warned of trouble had been wrong once or twice. It would be this time too.

Chapter 2

SO MUCH FOR WINNING A DOLLAR. Not that Edie had really believed the gunman for more than a second. She ought to thank him for provoking her out of her attack of self-pity, but that would only encourage him, and dealing with what he'd think she owed him for a meal would be difficult enough without encouragement.

Would he have killed her for fifty dollars?

Ignoring the crash of pots and pans as Ada slung them around in a temper, Edie went straight to the washstand that still occupied the same place it had when she was welcome here and still had the same cracked mirror on the wall over it.

Her own image in the mirror brought a shudder. Most people would turn away or let revulsion show at the sight of her face. Even the gunman had narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw.

Only a little water remained in the pitcher, but it would have to do. Edie wasn't asking Ada for more or going near her to get more.

The most careful touch turned the constant ache on the left side of her face to nauseating pain. Edie gritted her teeth, soaped, and rinsed anyway. Washing up improved her mood, so did heat from the big stoves in the kitchen permeating through clothing, skin, and flesh until it reached her bones and she stopped shivering.

If only she had a brush or comb. No one would guess this morning her hair had gleamed like polished ebony in the sunlight streaming through the bedroom window as she plaited it into an everyday braid. Right now it looked gray with dirt, dust, and muck from the livery yard. Limp hanks straggled around her face, over her shoulders, and down her back.

The gunman must think she was twice Ada's age. Lovely, blonde, curvy Ada. Acid-tongued Ada. Poor Ada, who clung to love for a man who had never loved her, a man now dead and beyond them both.

Edie took out the remnants of her braid. It should be simple to catch up the entire mass at the back of her neck and tie it there, but it would take two hands. She bit back a moan. If she kept her right elbow clamped to her side, she could lift the arm high enough to get her hand to her head.

“I never thought I’d see a woman beat up like that and be happy about it, but I am.”

Ada had snuck up close enough to make Edie nervous. At least Ada didn’t have a knife in her hand, but she wasn’t done cutting with her tongue.

“A killer who beats you is no more than you deserve, better than you deserve.”

Any answer would provoke more rage and the cat fight that would get them both dunked in dish water. Edie said nothing. She didn’t owe the interfering, arrogant gunman a defense.

Ada gave up the effort to provoke a response and went back to the stove. Hefting the coffee pot in one hand, she picked up two thick white cups in the other and disappeared.

Edie concentrated on her hair. Finished tying everything back at the nape of her neck, she leaned over the wash basin panting. How could the pain be so real and everything else seem like a bad dream that had to end soon? From the time Hal and Denny burst into the house, yelling at her, yelling at each other, it all seemed unreal, impossible.

All her work, all her plans had come to naught. The fear in her stomach started to uncoil into something overwhelming. She lifted her arm, using pain to chase fear, and wiped the tears leaking from her swollen eye with the wash cloth.

Ada returned to the kitchen, still stiff with anger, and Edie slipped out. She might as well get a hot meal from the gunman since she’d never get the dollar he’d used as a lure. He had undoubtedly scared Ada out of using rat poison for seasoning.

As she walked toward the table where he waited, for the first time Edie really looked at this man so determined to take advantage of her situation. From walking beside him she knew he was tall. Not quite boast-about-it tall, but in the neighborhood of six foot.

He’d shed his hat and coat and sat all lean and lethal, his chair tipped against the wall. Dark brown hair, bones of brow, nose, cheekbones, and clean-shaven jaw prominent under sun-darkened skin—and cold gray eyes that stole all the warmth of the stoves from her bones.

If she’d been able to see him clearly at the livery, she would have forced herself up instead of talking to him. She would have run off into the night before he made her too angry to be sensible, before he assuaged her justified suspicion of his lies about sisters and lured her to town with talk of a bet she thought she couldn’t lose and he knew she couldn’t win.

If she had anywhere to go, she would walk right out of here into the night. Since she didn’t, Edie eased into the chair across from him and managed not to flinch backward when he let his chair down and moved closer. She unbuttoned her coat but didn’t attempt the contortions getting out of it would require.

Curling her hands around the waiting cup of coffee, she made no attempt to drink. Thirsty as she was, coffee would be a bad idea when her stomach churned and ached with emptiness, but the warmth comforted.

Let him buy her a meal. It served him right for interfering in the first place, and she would find a way to thwart his expectations afterward. Getting a good look at her in the light had probably already changed his mind.

“We’re having beef stew and biscuits. Apple pie after,” the gunman said, studying her over his coffee cup. “I didn’t figure you’d want to chew much, but I suppose you could. The swelling won’t reach your mouth for a while yet.”

“It’s been hours. It won’t reach my mouth at all.” Saying it clearly and firmly like that had to make it true. “This is as bad as it’s going to get, and the swelling will be gone tomorrow.”

A corner of his mouth twitched, telling her he knew about swollen, bruised faces, and the worst was yet to come.

“Was he aiming for your eye?”

“I expect he hoped to break my nose and teeth, but I was moving.”

“Can you see out of it at all?”

“I don’t know.” She should be able to remember if she could see from that eye before it swelled shut, but she couldn’t. All she could remember was the pain. Panic closed her throat for a second.

“You need to let Doc Wallace take a look at that.”

“No, I don’t. Absolutely not.” Dr. Wallace was one of the last people in Wilrose she wanted to see, and her eye was the least of her troubles. Edie thrust away fear about her vision. Dealing with the man across the table was far more important.

Somehow that slight twitch of one corner of his mouth lessened her worries about him. So did the mellow male voice and the way he was dressed, almost like a cowhand really, with dark red bandana knotted loosely around his tan throat and a leather vest over the gray wool shirt tucked into black trousers.

Not that he looked ordinary. Even without the gun tied down on his right side and the knife in a scabbard on his left, he’d look dangerous, which he was. She needed to get away, stop reading too much into the twitch of an admittedly nice male mouth, ignore the effect of his voice and the way his eyes seemed more silvery than icy at the moment.

Once she got away from him she could walk back to the livery, find a way inside, and sleep in the hayloft. Tomorrow she’d swallow her pride and find people in town who would help, no matter how unwillingly.

Ada stomped out of the kitchen. Edie dropped her gaze to her hands while utensils, plates, and bowls smacked down on the table. As if deliberately, her stomach reacted to the scent of food so close with a loud growl just as the thumps that might have covered the sound stopped.

“So I have to stay open because *he*’s hungry,” Ada said nastily.

“He’s thirsty too,” the gunman said. “How about a couple of glasses of water.”

He wasn’t really asking, and neither he nor Ada pretended he was. She brought two glasses of water with no lessening of animosity.

Edie downed one glass of water and barely paused to say, “Thank you,” when the gunman pushed the other toward her before gulping half of it too. “How did you know?” she asked, picking up her spoon and swirling it through the thick gravy of the stew.

“Something about the way you were looking at that coffee. When’s the last time you had anything to eat or drink?” Busy smearing butter on a biscuit, the gunman didn’t look like he much cared.

“This morning.”

“I misled Ada then. I told her you probably couldn’t finish your stew, and if you couldn’t, I would.”

Edie smiled with lips that felt a little stiff on the left side but still weren’t swollen—and weren’t going to be. “That was clever of you. She must know even if she mixed huge amounts of poison in it all, you could shoot her before you collapsed.”

“Empty the gun in her, reload, and do it again. So what did you do to her? Steal some man she was set on?”

No longer worried about what might be in the food, Edie began to eat. “She thinks so.”

“And what has the rest of the town got against you?”

“Ada wasn’t the only one in love with him. The whole town worshiped him, and after I stole him, first I made his life hell, forcing him to drink to bear it, and then I killed him.”

“Since I won our bet, you owe me the whole story.”

No, she didn’t. “That is the whole story.”

Ada brought two pieces of apple pie to the table, rattling the empty dishes she picked up. “I want you out of here. Finish up and get out.”

“How about some more coffee?” the gunman said.

Ada returned to the kitchen, muttering under her breath, and reappeared in the doorway with the coffee pot just as the café door opened.

“Might as well get something to eat now. It’s going to be a rough night before it’s over.”

The voice was Hal Searson’s. Edie scrunched lower in her chair.

“Hey, Ada, darling, bring three cups and leave that pot right here on the table.”

Eddie's back was to the door. Maybe Hal would be too busy flirting with Ada to notice a woman he expected to be still lying in the dirt back at the livery. Maybe he wouldn't recognize her from the back.

Ada took the coffee pot and three cups straight to Hal's table. Without seeing it, Eddie knew the smug, defiant look Ada threw at the gunman as she walked by.

Chairs moved across the floor as the men sat. Denny's voice joined Hal's, then Marshal Lou Banford joined the discussion about how best to handle the drunken men who would soon spill into the streets.

Eddie dared a look at the gunman. He had already eaten half his slice of pie. She frowned as he forked up another bite. Every move the man had made until now had been fluid, but the way he did that was almost awkward because he was using his left hand.

"Why are you—"

Hal's voice roared from behind her. "What the hell is she doing here? Get that murdering slut out of here!"

Her chair crashed to its side as Eddie jumped up. In spite of pain jolting through her side and stealing her breath, she whirled to face the threat, knife raised in one hand, fork in the other.

Her jaw dropped as Hal's charge turned into a crashing fall. He flopped on the floor, his legs tangled with her chair.

"Poor man fell over that chair like a sack of flour and bloodied his nose," the gunman said, getting to his feet. He winked at her when she switched her astonished gaze to him.

Kicking free of the chair, Hal lunged to his feet, blood streaming from his nose. He stabbed a finger at the gunman. "You did that on purpose, and you're under arrest."

"I had nothing to do with it."

The chair was a good four feet from where it had been by the table. Eddie had knocked it over, but she hadn't sent it flying across the floor into Hal's path. The man now beside her, who protested his innocence with obvious insincerity, must have used one of his long legs to give that chair a good shove at exactly the right time.

The handkerchief Hal held to his nose muffled his words. "You made a mistake getting in my way, and you're making a bigger one with that woman. She's a black widow if there ever was one. She killed the best friend a man ever had, the best man who ever set foot in Wilrose. So I'm throwing her out in the street where she belongs and throwing you in a cell where you belong."

"What's the charge, watching a woman-beater trip over a chair?"

For a moment, the gunman's words hung in the air, then Hal dropped the handkerchief and started forward, looking as massive and as murderous as a wounded grizzly.

The gunman pushed Edie further away from him. Marshal Banford, smaller and wiry, grabbed one of Hal's arms and was dragged forward until Denny moved to help.

"Lay off, Hal," the marshal said. "Leave Mrs. Thorne alone, and forget about Coburn. We're going to have enough trouble in town tonight without hunting for more."

"He shoved that chair out on purpose. That's assaulting a lawman."

"I didn't see that. Did you, Denny?"

Denny stood mute.

"Ada?"

Ada still stood beside the table where the three men had been, her hand on the coffee pot. Her eyes met Edie's for a moment, then skimmed over the men. "No, I didn't see it."

"Guess she gets a tip after all," the gunman muttered.

The weight of impending violence filled the room until Hal broke away from both the marshal and Denny. "To hell with it. To hell with you all." The door slammed behind him as he left.

Marshal Banford, gray and grizzled from years of dealing with scenes like this one, studied Edie with deceptively mild blue eyes. "You need to choose your friends with more care, Mrs. Thorne."

"Sheriff Searson was my husband's friend, not mine," Edie said, deliberately misunderstanding him.

Banford shook his head but said no more, leaving without another word. Denny, who had never met her eyes, followed him out.

The gunman—Coburn, Mr. Coburn—picked up Edie's chair and held it for her. "So you're the Widow Thorne."

He didn't look happy about it. What difference could who she was make to him? Not that she cared. "Yes, I am, and we—I need to leave," Edie said.

"We need to finish our pie and another cup of coffee while Ada locks up. Then we're all leaving by the back door."

Ada brought the coffee pot to their table. "I owe you an apology for thinking you were the one who gave Edie that smack in the face," she said to Coburn as she refilled his coffee cup. "But if you're smart you'll listen to Hal and get shut of her. Like he said, she drove the best man this town ever saw to drink she treated him so bad, and she killed him in the end."

Coburn rocked his chair back against the wall again. "Apology accepted, if that was one. So the best man this town ever saw and the best friend your woman-beating county sheriff ever had was a drunk. What was the worst like?"

For a second Edie feared Ada would hit Coburn with the coffee pot. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. You’re not fit to shine his boots. He was—golden.” Ada all but ran back to the kitchen.

Both corners of Coburn’s lips twitched this time. “Golden?”

“Golden, wonderful, superb, respected, beloved, and a dozen more. He was very blond, very handsome, and very charming,” Edie said sadly.

“And the charm wore off on you, so you killed him. How’d you manage that?”

“I didn’t kill him!”

He waited, gray eyes dancing with amusement that transformed his face, made Edie’s breath catch in her throat.

“Let me guess. Your husband drank and gambled until his pockets were empty, set out in the teeth of a storm against all advice, passed out and fell off his horse halfway home, laid there all night, and froze to death. And since you’re the one who drove the golden boy to do all that, it’s your fault. You must have killed him because otherwise his friends and admirers would have to admit he wasn’t perfect.”

It sounded so terrible said flat out like that. Edie wanted to leap to Drew’s defense and her own but didn’t. “You’re not guessing.”

“Not much. I’ve been in Wilrose more than a month waiting for things to come to a head between Ellman and Vickroy and heard some gossip about the Thornes and their AT Ranch.”

“Did you? I heard a lot of gossip today myself. Denny took it on himself to tell me all the latest news in town, including about the cold-blooded killers Mr. Ellman and Mr. Vickroy brought here and how he and Hal would have been out to the ranch for me last week except they couldn’t leave town until the fighting was over.”

Gunfire shattered the night again, closer now, no longer sounding as if it came from inside the Cattlemen’s Palace, but from the street out front. The fighting might be over, but the victory celebration wasn’t.

Ada appeared in the kitchen doorway, and Coburn brought the front legs of his chair down with a bang before Ada said a word.

“I didn’t think they’d be in the streets this soon,” he said. “Lock up and douse the lights. You’re leaving out the back door with us.”

Coburn scouted the back alley while Ada banked the stoves and Edie gathered the last of the dirty dishes and piled them in the wash pan.

All three of them hurried along the alley behind the café in silence, across the street at the end and down another alley until they reached the back of the small house Ada shared with her parents. Without a word of thanks, she accepted the silver dollars Coburn handed her and slipped

inside. The sound of the door closing was distinct in the night, the click and scrape of the lock fainter.

“I need to find a safe place to spend the night too,” Edie said, ready to cut Coburn off sharply if he offered half of his own bed. “I’ll go back to the livery, find a way inside, and sleep in the loft.”

“I’ll walk part way with you,” Coburn said. “We’ll stick to alleys and side streets.”

The look of her had probably put him off his original intentions. Almost sagging with relief over the lack of argument, Edie fell into step beside him.

Chapter 3

COBURN SET OUT ON A PATH EDIE would never have followed on her own. Avoiding streets near the Cattlemen's Palace didn't require going this far out of the way. Telling him that would undoubtedly be a waste of breath. Still, Edie was considering it when he stopped in front of a house she identified in the darkness by the white fence around the small front yard.

"No," she said. "Absolutely not."

"Mrs. Thorne...."

"No. Since you know so much about my problems and how the people in this town feel about me, I'll tell you Dr. Wallace made everything worse when he said he couldn't identify a cause of death for Drew. He said it could have been freezing or poison or any of several things in between. I don't want to see him, he won't want to see me, and I can't pay him anyway."

"He should have kept his mouth shut about cause of death, but he was probably being honest, and don't worry about paying."

"I am not going one penny further in debt to you."

"If owing a couple of dollars is going to cost you sleep, when you have it, you can send it to me."

"The answer is still no." Edie turned and took no more than two steps before he was in front of her, cat quick and wall solid.

"You have two choices, Mrs. Thorne. You can walk in there like a sensible person and let the doctor take a look at you and do what he can for your eye and ribs, or you can be stubborn, and I'll carry you in."

"My eye and ribs are none of your business."

"I know, but I already broke that rule. It's all downhill now."

Broke what rule? What was he talking about? "You are a very strange man."

"Did you forget despicable or revise your opinion?"

“I haven’t forgotten or revised, just added on. You’ve also been generous and helpful, and I thank you, but I’m not going in there.”

“One way or the other, you are.”

A vision of the effortless way he had swung Ada to one side rose in Edie’s mind and weakened her knees and her resolve. “Dr. Wallace dislikes me as intensely as anyone in town. He’d be happy to spit in my good eye.”

“You exaggerate. Look at Ada. You think she hates you, but she lied for you tonight, didn’t she?”

“She lied for you.”

“I don’t think so. Are you going to see the doctor like the dignified widow-woman you are, or are you going to make me carry you in there like a scared kid?”

Edie laughed against her will. Dignified. Groveling in the dirt and muck in the livery yard, begging a stranger to shoot her, jumping out of her chair in a panic to get away from Hal—if there was one thing she hadn’t been for one moment tonight, dignified was it.

“You really do have sisters, don’t you?”

“I told you I do.”

“You aren’t always truthful.”

“Lying to lawmen doesn’t count. The rule is to stay far away from the law and lawmen if possible, but if it’s not possible, lying is better than nothing.” He opened the gate and held it for her.

“Shooting a sheriff would not be staying away from the law and lawmen, and you were ready to shoot Hal.”

“No, I wasn’t. That badge on his chest makes that son of a—gun—safe from me. I’d have let him knock me around and throw me in a cell if I had to.”

“That’s not how it looked.”

“Never give in without trying a bluff. The problem is what would be self-defense with any other man is called murder no matter what the lawman did. The only way to kill a man with a badge and not have to head for Brazil is to do it without witnesses.”

A chill ran down Edie’s spine. For a moment she’d forgotten what kind of man she was talking to.

Dr. Wallace didn’t answer his door until Coburn abandoned the knocker and pounded with his fist. At last the doctor’s long, bony face peered out from a narrow crack. Edie didn’t blame him for the caution. Even though the gunfire and drunken shouts echoing through the night came from blocks away, Dr. Wallace had quieter trouble on his doorstep in the form of a man who didn’t take no for an answer.

“Mrs. Thorne needs your help,” Coburn said.

“I’m afraid I’d rather not—” Dr. Wallace got no further before Coburn pushed by him. Edie half-turned to run into the night before abandoning the idea as foolish and following the men inside.

“There is another doctor on the other side of town,” Dr. Wallace said. “He wouldn’t feel my reluctance to treat Mrs. Thorne, and she wouldn’t be so reluctant to be treated by him.”

“He wouldn’t feel reluctant because he’s always too drunk to feel anything, and Mrs. Thorne may be crazy, but she’s not crazy enough to let that old lush touch her. You’re going to fix her up the way you would your favorite sister.”

Wallace straightened his thin frame, indignant. “I am already treating half a dozen wounded gunmen, some of whom you helped carry here because you wounded them. As a matter of fact, I’m in the middle of trying to reduce the fever in one of those men right now. Mrs. Thorne does not look in immediate danger from whatever manhandling you’ve done. She’ll have to wait.”

Coburn took a step forward. Edie forgot her ribs and leapt between the gunman and the doctor. “Mr. Coburn did not manhandle me,” she gasped through the pain, “but I can wait, and he can go about his business.”

Dr. Wallace took advantage of her interference and left the room. When Coburn didn’t try to stop him or follow him, Edie eased into a chair, limp with relief. Coburn threw a cold look at her and his hat and coat on the sofa across from her and dropped down next to them. He stretched his long legs out so far she had to tuck her own boots under her chair to keep his from getting too close.

“You’re too soft. He’s making you wait just because he can.”

“You don’t believe he’s really treating six of Mr. Ellman’s men who were wounded?”

“Two of Ellman’s, four of Vickroy’s. He got the bullets out and patched them up yesterday. They can’t need anything more right this minute.” He rose and paced the room restlessly, picking up small items and putting them back down, pulling a book from the bookshelf, turning it in his hand, and putting it back.

“I’m sorry everyone assumes you hit me,” Edie said. “I’ll tell him he’s wrong.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m leaving town tomorrow, and I don’t care what anyone here thinks.”

Edie’s heart sank at his words. Not that she wouldn’t be glad to have him gone and far away, of course, but because he could leave, and she couldn’t. “You don’t have to wait for me. I give you my word I’ll wait and have him look at my eye.”

“And your ribs. Forget modesty. If you lose the eye, you’ll still have one to see from. If a broken rib tears into a lung, you’re dead.” As if remembering her foolish request that he shoot her, he added, “Dead slow and ugly.”

“Thank you for that information. I shall throw modesty to the wind.”

“And I’ll stay until you’re done.”

A pox on his sisters anyway.

He moved quietly, gracefully, if that could be said of a man. At the back of his neck, dark hair curled over the bandana. Darker brows didn’t curve over the gray eyes but slanted in wings. Nothing about him was golden, and he not only wasn’t as tall as Drew, he didn’t have the same kind of heavy muscling. He didn’t have anything like Hal’s bulk either, yet from what she had seen in the café when they faced each other, Edie would bet on Coburn in a fight with Hal, and not just a gunfight.

There was something about the way he moved.... Edie banished a twinge of guilt at the direction of her thoughts. Surely she was entitled to any distraction from her troubles that presented itself, and Coburn had definitely presented himself.

He dropped back down on the sofa, and Edie lowered her gaze to his boots. “Don’t stare at me,” she said, as if she hadn’t been doing that very thing to him. “I know I look monstrous.”

“That depends on the angle. You look pretty good from the right side. Are your teeth all right? The corner of your mouth is swollen now.”

“My teeth are fine, and my mouth is not swollen.”

“So the sheriff was your husband’s friend, which makes him Hal to you. What makes the deputy Denny?”

“The year I taught school here, he was in my class.”

“So you came here to teach and married a rancher instead.”

“We didn’t marry until school was out for the summer. I taught for the full year of my contract.”

“Good for you. And what excuse did Sheriff Hal have for beating you, bringing you to town, and leaving you like that?”

Edie stopped staring at his boots and focused on a picture on the wall. The fact that turning that way kept her good side toward him was incidental.

“The least you can do is entertain me with the story,” Coburn said. “So he blames you for his best friend’s death. What set him off today and why bring you to town and let everyone here find out what he did? His chances of reelection won’t be too good once word gets out.”

“Are you going to tell me all about your sisters and every embarrassing detail of your life I’m curious about?”

“If we’re stuck waiting here long enough, sure, although I may wring Wallace’s neck first.”

“How many men have you killed?”

“Four that I know of, not counting the war.”

“That you *know* of?”

“Yes, that I know of. I may be the one who wounded one of those Doc is treating right now, and he may die of it, but I’m not sure about the first—there was a lot of lead flying at the time—and I’ll never know about the second unless he cashes in his chips before I leave town. It happens that way sometimes. Stop trying to put me off and tell me what happened.”

“The bank foreclosed on its mortgage on the ranch and sent Hal and Denny to evict me from its property. I knew the bank was foreclosing, but I swear I never got a notice with a date when I had to be gone or no one would have had to evict me. I would have moved out already.”

“Surely there’s property on a ranch you could sell and not be sitting here penniless.”

Eddie studied the fringe on the shade of the lamp nearest her. “Not much,” she said finally, “and I didn’t sell it in time obviously.”

“So Sheriff Hal got the job of evicting you and used the excuse to beat you, which he’s been wanting to do ever since your husband died.”

“To be fair, I did get a little crazy when Hal told me why they were there. I think I may have said something about running him off the place, and I tried to get to Pa Thorne’s rifle.”

“Good for you. A woman could probably get away with killing the son of a—gun—especially with bruises like yours to show. What stopped you?”

“He did. He caught me before I even got close to the rifle.” Caught her, almost yanked her arm out of its socket, drove one fist into her face and the other into her side.

“If you never got your hands on a gun, he was never in any danger. Like I said, he came up with an excuse to do what he wanted to, and he knew Deputy Denny might squeal like a girl but wouldn’t do anything except stand and watch.”

“Denny did not stand and watch. I think he saved my life. If he hadn’t been there....” She shivered, remembering. “What he did was brave.”

Coburn snorted. “The only thing Sheriff Hal said tonight that’s true is that Denny’s lily-livered. He afraid people around here will dislike his hero more than they do you if they find out he’s a woman-beater.”

“Brave, not afraid. Yes, he worships Hal, and he needs that job now more than ever because his wife just had a baby girl, but he stood up for me today. If it weren’t for him Hal would have done a lot more damage and thrown me in the wagon without even my coat.”

“Brave Denny didn’t hold out for a scarf and gloves, did he? And he could find another job.”

“The same could be said of you.”

“Deputy Denny could find a lot of things to do that pay as well as law work. Considering how measly the pay for a sheriff’s deputy usually is, his wife and baby are probably already starving. Nothing else I can do pays as well as gun work.”

“And excellent pay makes you ready and willing to kill and to die over something as trivial as who owns the Cattlemen’s Palace?”

“Fight, not die. That’s what the rules are for, and if it makes you feel better, Ellman and Vickroy didn’t hire private armies and go to war over a saloon. They were partners in land deals, mines, and a lot else. Whichever one got greedy first, one was as determined to have it all as the other when they started hiring men like me. Vickroy came at Ellman with a gun himself at the end.”

“And died.”

“Yes.”

If she asked Coburn if the man he admitted killing was Vickroy, he’d tell her. Did she want to know? No. Who he killed made no difference, that he killed for money did.

“So what are these rules you keep referring to?” she asked instead.

He laced long fingers over flat belly and leaned back. “Just some things I decided might help keep me alive. Like minding my own business, which I broke tonight along with not getting involved with a respectable woman or tangling with lawmen for that matter.”

“I am not respectable, we are not involved, and you deliberately provoked Hal tonight, which surely qualifies as tangling with a lawman.”

“You do have a mouth on you that makes respectable questionable,” he said, ignoring everything else she’d mentioned.

“So tell me the rest of these rules.”

“Telling you would probably jeopardize every one of them.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes before Coburn rose and went back to pacing the room. “So how are you going to get back out there for your clothes and other things?” he asked finally.

“I’m not. It all belongs to the bank now, and I can’t go back.”

“You think the bank wants your clothes?”

“No, but Hal told me since I didn’t leave when I should have, I couldn’t take anything with me. It’s all considered abandoned now, and going back would be trespassing. It was when he said I couldn’t take the silver-backed hairbrush and mirror my mother gave me when I married, I lost my temper.”

“He told you that, and you believed him? He beat you and told you something that unreasonable, and you just accepted it?”

“Yes—no. It doesn’t matter. It’s not like I can rent a horse and sneak back there.”

Dr. Wallace’s return saved her from having to answer or avoid more questions. If she admitted how much she had lost, she’d break down and humiliate herself further.

“I can see you now, Mrs. Thorne.”

Eddie pushed out of the chair and hurried out of the parlor and down the hall to the room where the doctor examined and treated patients.

The doctor examined her face with far more care than she expected. The scent of the medicines on the shelves lining the walls and of cigar smoke lingering around Dr. Wallace like a woman's perfume brought back memories of other times when she'd come here for diagnosis, treatment, and advice from a man she had trusted and admired.

"If you want to get away from him, you can slip out the back door," the doctor said as he pried her swollen eyelids apart and peered at her eye. "You ought to have time for a good head start before he gets impatient and forces his way in here."

The doctor's willingness to try to help her brought extra moisture even to her good eye. "Thank you, but that's not necessary. As I told you before, Mr. Coburn didn't do this."

Dr. Wallace sighed and pulled her lids apart again long enough to add several drops that burned on contact then soothed.

"Spare me the story of how you fell down stairs or had a clumsy encounter with a door. I know you're in a difficult situation, but you should never have taken up with a man like Coburn."

"I didn't take up with him," Edie snapped, "and whether you believe it or not, he didn't hit me. He saw Hal Searson shove me to the ground and leave me in a heap out by the livery, and in his own pushy, ungallant way, he has been helping me ever since. Hal is the one who hit me."

The doctor's mouth fell open for an instant before tightening into a grim line. "I don't believe you."

Maybe Coburn didn't care what anyone in Wilrose thought, but he should. Edie tried again, although she could no more force Dr. Wallace to believe the truth now than she could last fall when she brought Drew's body to town.

"You don't want to believe me, and you're very good at refusing to believe things you don't want to. Talk to Denny Reston when Hal isn't around and ask him whether I'm telling the truth or not."

After that, neither Edie nor Dr. Wallace spoke unnecessarily again. When the time came, Edie kept her promise to Coburn and let Wallace examine the rest of her injuries and wrap her ribs tighter than any corset.

Chapter 4

GARN STOPPED PACING AND SPRAWLED across the sofa. Mrs. Thorne might be disliked by everyone in Wilrose, but she qualified as respectable. He should have known.

That clock on the mantel must be broken. The thing was hardly moving.

The doctor didn't know it, but as soon as he was through examining Mrs. Thorne and admitting her injuries looked worse than they were, he was going to take over responsibility for his ungrateful patient. After all, a respectable widow needed help from some respectable citizen, not from a man she thought would shoot her on request.

Prickly, defiant, attractive enough to provoke unsettling thoughts even in her current condition, Mrs. Thorne had an exaggerated sense of the blame for her husband's death people in Wilrose laid at her feet. Some rancher or merchant would lay himself at her feet as soon as he realized the opportunity her situation presented, and another husband would solve all her problems.

Too bad about the sheriff, though. Giving him a choking dose of what he'd dished out would be a pleasure. There ought to be a way to do that without ending up in prison.

The door at the end of the hall finally opened, and footsteps approached. The side of Mrs. Thorne's face without bruising had paled even more, and even her good eye appeared bruised with so much dark shadowing under it. She dropped into the chair she'd used before as if staying on her feet was beyond her.

Dr. Wallace fidgeted with the small brown bottle in his hands. "The swelling and bruising will heal in time, of course, and I cannot detect any fractures. I believe Mrs. Thorne's ribs are merely bruised also, but I wrapped them just in case."

No longer looking prickly and defiant, Mrs. Thorne slumped in the chair, her head resting against the back. "However, he won't commit to a prognosis for my eye," she said, without opening the eye that still worked. "Blurry vision is better than no vision, but it may or may not get better, so I may or may not continue through life with a patch over it like a female pirate."

“I’m sure you don’t want me to lie,” the doctor said stiffly, setting the brown bottle on the table beside her. “I believe the chances of normal vision returning are good, but I can’t guarantee it. Use these drops at least three times a day and if you wake in the night. Come see me again when the swelling is gone, and perhaps I can give you a better prognosis then.”

Pleased at the opening the doctor had given him, Garn elbowed on through. “Since Mrs. Thorne needs those drops in the night, and since she also needs a place to stay tonight, she can stay here, and you can treat her again when you’re up and working on your fever patient.”

Mrs. Thorne’s eye flew open. Her horrified expression and the doctor’s matched.

“Absolutely not.”

“Every bed in this house has one of your friends in it. She cannot stay here.”

“Sure she can. She doesn’t need a bed. That sofa right there and a blanket will do fine, and you can give her the medical treatment she needs.” Garn pulled the doctor back into the hallway and handed him a half eagle. “Is that enough for your fee?”

“It’s more than enough, but she cannot stay here.”

“Yes, she can, and she’s going to.” Garn fished a double eagle from his pocket and handed that over too. “Come morning, she’s going to argue over taking that from you. Push it down under that wrapping on her ribs if you have to, but make her take it before you let her out the door.” He hesitated, then added, “And don’t let her out the door before daylight unless you want that drunk on the other side of town treating your injuries.”

Mrs. Thorne stood wavering on her feet by the chair in the parlor. Garn settled his hat the way he liked it and didn’t waste time buttoning his coat. “Good luck, Mrs. Thorne. Dr. Wallace is going to get you a blanket and pillow.”

Moving fast, he made it outside and closed the door behind him before she or the doctor could object. Since the doctor probably couldn’t really stop her if he tried, at least she was in no shape to follow Garn or set off on her own. Wallace would bed her down and take care of her.

Garn headed for the hotel, ignoring misgivings. She didn’t want his help, and she’d be better off without further association with a gunman. Wallace might be reluctant, but he’d do the right thing in the end.

Carefully as he moved, the soft crunch of his footsteps grated on Garn’s nerves, for Wilrose lay quiet as death in the moon-silvered night. Whatever had erupted from the Cattlemen’s earlier had burned itself out. Now the town waited for the expected noisy, destructive rioting that would start after Ellman cut off the free whiskey at midnight.

The hotel was an unlikely target for destructive high jinks. After locking the door to his room, Garn shoved a chair under the doorknob anyway. The hot water he’d brought up the stairs with him cooled on the washstand as he sat on the bed, head in hands.

If he had never heard the words that made him realize the smaller figure that the two men left on the ground by the livery was a woman, would he have gone over there? Probably so. There was something admirable about a man or a woman down and out and still spitting defiance at tormentors.

Admirable or not, Mrs. Thorne was neither his business nor his responsibility. She now had twenty dollars she hadn't had when the sheriff yanked her out of the wagon, and she had admitted there were people in town who would help her.

He was shut of her now and needed to stay that way. Muttering curses under his breath, Garn rose, stripped off, and washed in water now as cold as the room before stretching out on the bed, hoping for a few hours' of undisturbed sleep.

WHETHER THE FIRST LIGHT OF DAWN or Dr. Wallace's footsteps woke her, Edie couldn't say. When the doctor leaned over her, forcing her injured eye open and dropping more medicine between the lids, a foggy memory of lamplight and the same procedure in the night revived.

"I slept so soundly I hardly woke the last time you did that, did I?" she said, sitting up and stifling a yawn.

The doctor handed her a cup of black coffee. Coffee in the parlor didn't bode well for breakfast in kitchen or dining room, but Edie drank gratefully.

"You barely woke then," Dr. Wallace said, "but you need to wake and rise now. Two of the less seriously injured gunmen are on their feet this morning and not looking gentlemanly. Best they don't find you here."

Definitely no breakfast. So Coburn had pushed her off on Dr. Wallace, and the doctor was pushing her off on thin air. Good for both of them, and good for her. She'd manage on her own somehow, and the hollow feeling in her stomach was only hunger, nothing to do with the way Coburn left her here. He was a stranger who had done more than most would, and she wanted nothing more from him.

Edie forced herself up and off the sofa. Everything hurt, but under the overall stiffness, the pain in her ribs throbbed without last night's razor sharpness. Her head no longer seemed to weigh too much for her neck, and her knees no longer threatened to buckle with every step.

Dr. Wallace held her coat as if she were a lady he cared for, which was good. Getting the coat on over the arm that still didn't want to work properly would have been a challenge without his help.

"Here. Don't forget this."

Edie took the small bottle of eye drops and shoved it deep in her coat pocket. At least her eye no longer wept constantly.

“And this.”

“I am not taking money from you,” she said, shocked by the sight of the double eagle he held out to her.

“It’s not mine. Mr. Coburn gave it to me for you. Please, you have to take it.”

In spite of the soreness on one side, Edie’s mouth tightened. “Have to?”

“He threatened me. He implied I would have injuries that required another doctor’s care if I didn’t keep you here until morning and force you to take this.”

In spite of her bleak situation, amusement flashed through Edie. “How are you supposed to force me to take it?”

“I, uh.... I am to push it under the wrappings around your ribs.”

A red flush spread across the doctor’s thin cheeks, and heat crawled up the back of Edie’s neck, over her ears to her face. A doctor who ran questing fingers across the skin over and between each of her ribs searching for signs of fractures was one thing. A man shoving a gold coin between her breasts and under bandages next to her skin was something else.

“Fine,” Edie said after a moment’s consideration. “How much of that do I owe you?”

“Nothing. He also gave me five dollars for treating you, and I wouldn’t have charged so much.”

“I see.” Edie plucked the coin from Dr. Wallace’s hand and smiled. “We wouldn’t want Mr. Coburn angry at us, would we?”

Dropping the false smile, Edie walked out into the frosty morning and turned toward the center of town, her steps slowing the farther she went. The plan she had finally worked out last night when huddled on the doctor’s sofa waiting for sleep, had a few holes, but it would work if she could get the right kind of help.

Edie fingered the coin in her pocket. Coburn would be the right kind of help. In one evening he had tricked Ada into serving her worst enemy, gotten away with bloodying Hal Searson’s nose, and intimidated Dr. Wallace into treating Edie’s injuries. Surely he could ride roughshod over anyone from the bank to the Rafter H. And even if Coburn thought her idea crazy and didn’t want any more to do with her, she needed his address in order to repay him when she could.

No trains left town before noon, so finding Coburn before he left shouldn’t be hard. Even if he came to town on horseback, she could catch him. Men like Coburn didn’t rise at the crack of dawn.

Edie turned onto Main Street, stopped, and stared. All along the street men worked at repairing damage from the drunken gunmen’s spree. What could have possessed Seymour Ellman to give men like that free liquor?

Hammering and cursing rang out as merchants nailed boards over broken windows. Smoke from a blackened pile of half-burned posts in the center of the street drifted in the air. Porches that had protected storefronts from sun and rain sagged unsupported. One had collapsed on the walk.

So much for her plan to watch the street from the bench in front of the mercantile. Like the porch posts, the bench had gone into the fire. Edie searched for another likely position, one that would let her see both Seymour Ellman's Cattlemen's Palace and his Palace Hotel. Coburn would emerge from one or the other eventually.

Perched on an overturned water trough, Edie went over her plan again, trying to ignore the cold already piercing through her coat. Even in the light of day, it was a good plan. Coburn would agree, and in a matter of days she would be at least half as well off as if yesterday never happened.

Better than half, because she always would have needed help in the end, and finding men in Wilrose to help would have been difficult on her own. This way she'd have Coburn. He could hire more men if needed.

Concentrating on the hotel, Edie almost fell sideways at the sound of a newly familiar voice in her ear.

"What are you doing here, Mrs. Thorne?"

"Me? The question is what are you doing sneaking up on me like that?" Edie pushed to her feet, hoping he couldn't hear her little grunt of pain as she did it. "Where did you come from?"

"I walked out of the barbershop and across the street, no sneaking involved. I take it none of Dr. Wallace's other patients would agree to shoot you, so you decided to sit here and contract pneumonia? Have you had breakfast?"

"I ate at the doctor's," Edie lied. "And don't shame me with mention of my fit of self-pity last night. I didn't mean it, and you know it." She eyed him thoughtfully. "And neither did you."

"Sure of that, are you?"

"Yes, I am, and I'm here waiting for you. I have a proposition for you."

As soon as the words left her mouth, she wanted to fetch them back. Coburn said nothing, but the gray eyes took on a wicked gleam as they roved over her from the matted, dirty hair on the top of her head to the muddy boots on her feet.

"Not that kind of proposition. A business proposition."

A corner of his mouth twitched, and Edie let out a stream of breath that plumed white in the cold air. "Stop that. I mean I want to hire you."

"You have no money to hire me."

"Not yet, I don't, but I have a hundred and four head of cattle still at the ranch, and if you help me get them, I'll give you half what I sell them for, plus your expenses."

“A hundred and....”

He was going to agree. The gleam disappeared, and his eyes narrowed as he did the arithmetic. Then, curse him, he shook his head. “You told me anything left at the ranch is considered abandoned and belongs to the bank now.”

“That’s what Hal said, but how can that be true? They came to get me with a wagon. Why did they do that except to bring my things to town with me, furniture even? Then Hal lost his temper and decided to punish me for everything he thinks I did. You said yourself the bank can’t want my clothes and my mirror and hair brush.”

“Maybe not, but you won’t pry a windfall like a hundred head of cattle from any banker.”

“No one knows about the cattle. They’re hidden.”

For a man who barely twitched a facial muscle now and then, he could project skepticism clearly. Edie talked faster, her words tumbling over each other as she tried to convince him.

“I received all sorts of notices about the foreclosure, but never anything that said when I had to be off the ranch. If the bank did that on purpose or in error, doesn’t that mean I should have more time? And really, no one knows about the cattle except me. Drew told everyone he swept the range and sold everything, but there are always a few hidden here and there, and I spent all winter hunting them. I didn’t mean to hide them, but I needed a place to keep them, and I found—”

“I’m not rustling cattle for you, Mrs. Thorne. I’m not risking hanging or prison. I don’t do illegal.”

“This wouldn’t be illegal. They’re mine.”

“So you say. Look, you’re shivering so hard you’re going to chip your teeth. You need to get someplace warm.”

“I need help getting my cattle and clothes and other personal possessions,” Edie said stiffly, “and if you help me, it will be worth your while.”

“You need a hot bath and clean clothes. Did Wallace give you the twenty dollars?”

“Of course he did. You threatened him, and I can’t believe what you told him to do to me.”

“He didn’t do it, did he?”

“Of course not. When he told me....” Edie clamped her mouth shut, the pain making her angrier at this uncooperative killer of men and plans. He had manipulated both her and Dr. Wallace. Throwing away all hope of his help, she pulled the coin out of her pocket and held it out. “Here. Take it back.”

“No.”

His hand, as warm as hers was icy, curled around her fingers, forcing them tight around the coin. “You use that to get a room and a bath at the Palace Hotel, buy some clean clothes, and

meet me in the lobby at eleven. You can take another shot at convincing me to rustle cattle for you then.”

Standing on the street arguing with him wasn't going to work, and he was right about her shivering, shaking really. Edie pulled her hand free, gave Coburn a curt nod, and headed for the hotel.

Hot tears spilled across her cold cheek from her injured eye, and the other eye leaked right along with it. It was the cold, just the cold.

Chapter 5

GARN WATCHED MRS. THORNE UNTIL she disappeared into the hotel, head high, shoulders squared. In other circumstances he'd enjoy the sight, even if her coat hid most of the female sway, but the way she favored the side of her injured ribs brought a flare of anger. There really ought to be a safe way to teach Sheriff Hal a thing or two about cracked ribs.

He should get back to the hotel himself, pack up, and turn in his room key. First he'd take one last turn around town, maybe poke his head into the Cattlemen's and see how much damage it had suffered last night.

Then he'd meet Mrs. Thorne, hear her out, tell her no again, and be on his way.

If nothing else, the story of how she managed to round up a hundred four head of ornery, dangerous Longhorns would be entertaining. She'd have to admit to having lured some other foolish fellow into helping her. For some unfathomable reason that thought irritated Garn, so he set himself to doing sums.

Even canny old Longhorns that had avoided her husband's roundup would bring thirty-five dollars or more a head at the stockyards right here in Wilrose if beef prices were as high as last year. Half. She was offering half. Ellman had only paid three hundred, and that was with the bonus. It wouldn't hurt to listen to her and investigate the situation a little.

Garn finished packing and strolled around town, impressed by how much damage his former cohorts had done. He settled in the lobby of the Palace Hotel with the latest edition of the *Wilrose Clarion*, not reading but working on an optimistic scenario where the cattle were hidden on open range. No rustling involved.

He'd hire some out-of-work cowpoke riding the winter grub line to help drive the herd to the stockyards, negotiate the best deal possible on Mrs. Thorne's behalf, and pick up all the expenses out of his half. Mrs. Thorne would have enough to keep her in style until she could find another husband almost as fine as the golden boy—another irritating idea Garn banished as quickly as it arose.

He had less success banishing images of Mrs. Thorne in the tub he'd used himself yesterday. The bathing room in the hotel was as luxurious as the rest of the place. Here in the lobby, Garn had dark red velvet upholstery behind his back and under his ass and thick carpet under his boots.

She would be in the deep tub in the warm, steamy room, thick towels on the chair beside her. The room had no window, only lamps on the wall, which would show a woman in soft light as she undid buttons and peeled off dress, petticoats, and unmentionables warm from being next to her now naked body. She would step into the tub, soap her wash cloth, and run it over curves and planes wrapped in silky skin.

Ignoring the reality of bruises, Garn conjured up a vision in rosy pink and ivory white, visible in spite of soapy water. He worked himself into a fine state before throwing the paper aside with a curse and painting large areas of that imagined perfect body black and blue and splashing on some red for good measure.

Would the maid who had agreed to take Mrs. Thorne his comb and some tooth powder help her wrap her ribs again? Did Mrs. Thorne have enough sense to let the woman to do it, or would her infernal pride get in the way? He'd drag her back to the doctor if he had to—or wrap her up himself.

No, even thinking about that invited more than rule-breaking trouble. Those cattle had to be on open range, or there had to be some legal way to get them for her. Their sale would reverse her fortunes and pay him handsomely for his time. That's all. It would be just another job, one that would pay better than most and give him more money to purchase the land he coveted than he'd been able to save in the last several years.

The real Edie Thorne appeared in the hall doorway and walked toward him. Clean skin glowed. Even the massive swelling and bruising looked better. Dust and dirt no longer dulled crow-black hair caught loosely at the nape of her neck and hanging free past her shoulders. A one-eyed female in a plain brownish dress slightly too big for her shouldn't be able to stop a man's heart with a lopsided smile, but that's what she did.

Garn reached her in three strides. "Feeling better?"

"I am. Thank you for letting me use your comb and tooth powder."

She handed both items back to him, and he shoved them in a pocket.

"Did you wrap your ribs again?"

Her nose wrinkled as she nodded. "That maid you sent to help me is almost as officious as you are, and she wrapped me up tighter than Dr. Wallace did."

"Good. You can proposition me while we eat."

Garn could do without the white linen cloths on the tables, fine china, and polished silverware that made the hotel's dining room more elegant than the café, but Mrs. Thorne, just

out of a hot bath and with that thick mane of hair still damp, didn't need to be outside in the cold air.

He steered her to a corner table where his back would be to the wall and hers to the room, minimizing the curious gawking at her like a traveling show exhibit. The way the waiter stared was bad enough. Garn cleared his throat loudly to catch the man's attention, narrowed his eyes to slits, and tapped his holster. The waiter paled, seated Mrs. Thorne without looking at her again, and scurried off.

Contrary to expectations, Mrs. Thorne didn't continue her persuasion efforts as soon as her bottom hit the chair. She chattered about the healing effects of her hot bath until a different, rigidly correct waiter brought coffee and took their order.

As they ate she moved on to how she had bought clothes at the mercantile without trying anything on for size because she didn't want to stay under the disapproving eye of other customers and the proprietor one minute longer than necessary. Which explained the brown dress.

Garn waited for her to wind down, enjoying her pleasure in being warm, safe, and clean, taking his own pleasure in the contrast between the animated woman sitting with him now and the hostile creature he'd stumbled upon last night.

Sure enough, Mrs. Thorne fell silent as she wiped the last bit of gravy from her plate with the last forkful of mashed potatoes.

As Garn waited for her to broach the subject of cattle, Seymour Ellman appeared in the doorway to the lobby. A stranger in Wilrose who had never heard of him would know instantly Ellman owned the hotel from the assurance in every line of his bulldog's body, from the confident attitude, and the cut of clothes tailored somewhere far east of Wilrose.

Ellman spotted Garn and headed not for his usual table but straight across the room. "With such a lovely companion, it's no wonder you haven't left town yet." His jovial expression hardened when Mrs. Thorne turned toward him and he saw the damaged side of her face.

Ellman counted several brothels among his properties, and word was he didn't tolerate rough treatment of his whores. It must be true, for his reaction to a respectable woman with one eye open a mere slit and half her face distorted and discolored was worse than the doctor's.

"I wish you were still working for me, so I could throw you out and refuse to pay," Ellman said to Garn. "I won't have a man who hits a woman around, and you'd better get out of town before I rehire some of the others to run you out."

Men had been killed for less insulting words. Either Ellman was truly a brave man, or more likely he counted on being unarmed in his own hotel and surrounded by witnesses to keep him safe. All around them, conversations stopped. One last fork clinked against a plate, and silence reigned.

Garn leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, giving Ellman his coldest stare. If Mrs. Thorne reacted now the way she had to Wallace's assumptions, Ellman was about to get a shock.

Mrs. Thorne didn't quite leap between Garn and Ellman, but she jumped to her feet fast enough to be clutching her side. To Garn's disappointment, she only waved a finger in Ellman's face, not a knife or fork.

"You have no reason to assume such a thing, much less to say it. You should know Mr. Coburn better than to say such a thing. He had nothing to do with my appearance. In fact he's helping me."

Garn met Ellman's disbelieving look with raised eyebrows and a slight nod.

"Don't you look at him except to apologize," Mrs. Thorne said, her voice loud enough and clear enough to carry to Kansas. "Mr. Coburn was nowhere near when it happened. My injury is the result of a misunderstanding with the sheriff."

She shouldn't be taking hide off Ellman in public and pussyfooting around about Sheriff Hal. "Misunderstanding my—hat," Garn said, also making sure his voice carried. "The sheriff found an excuse to beat her when no one except his spineless deputy was there to stop him. And it's injuries, not injury."

Ellman's always ruddy complexion darkened. Garn almost felt sorry for the man. Having to eat his own words in front of a crowd would probably spoil his appetite, but to give him credit, he did it.

"I apologize for jumping to unwarranted conclusions," he said slowly.

"You should have considered before speaking," Mrs. Thorne said in a quieter tone. "He has sisters, you know."

Ellman looked lost at that, as well he might. He sketched a slight bow and retreated almost as fast as the first waiter.

Garn threw a couple of bills on the table and rose. "I appreciate you saving me from a coat of tar and feathers, but I think we've worn out our welcome here. Let's find somewhere quieter to discuss business."

As he escorted her out of the restaurant, Garn had to suppress an urge to bow himself.

SO LONG AS THEY KEPT THEIR VOICES LOW, the far side of the empty lobby from the reception desk provided decent privacy.

Garn got right to the point. "Tell me these cattle of yours are on open range."

"Oh, no, we have—had—quite a bit of broken land at the western side of our deeded land. The Wilrose Creek runs through there, so of course Pa Thorne wanted title to that land, and that's where I found this perfect box canyon to hold the cattle."

A pang of regret shot through Garn. Deeded land. Of course it was.

“It wouldn’t be rustling,” she continued hurriedly. “They’re mine, and if I’d had any notice of when I had to be off the ranch, they’d be off already too.”

He could still make the noon train. All he had to do was tell her no and walk away. He would. Then again, if he could make her see reason, maybe she wouldn’t get herself into trouble doing something illegal on her own after he left town.

“It’s hard to believe the bank never gave any notice of a foreclosure. Could it be sitting with mail you didn’t get to town to pick up?”

“None of the others were mailed, and there were lots of them. Several about how many payments we missed and adding on all sorts of interest and fees and notice of a court hearing, but I never got one saying I had to be gone by yesterday, or I suppose even earlier since Denny said he and Hal would have been out last week except for Mr. Ellman and Mr. Vickroy.”

“So someone from the bank brought the notices out to the ranch?”

“I don’t think so. I’d come home after a day searching for cattle and find them tacked to the door, but I was home once when Denny brought one, and that gave me the idea the bank paid to have the sheriff’s office deliver them.”

Garn said nothing and watched her thoughts catch up with his.

“He can’t hate me that much.”

“He strikes me as a pretty good hater, but it’s more likely those cattle aren’t as big a secret as you think, and even old, stringy Longhorns are worth good money.”

“They’re not old, they’re not stringy, and they’re not Longhorns!”

“Tender, young Shorthorns?” Garn said sarcastically, not believing old man Thorne could have been that far ahead of the times.

“Not really. Pa Thorne started with Texas cattle before the war back when miners were the only market, but he brought in Hereford bulls the year before Drew and I married. So figure eight years of culling anything that didn’t look Hereford. Anything wearing the AT brand now is mostly Hereford.”

She had him now. He should have walked away without ever asking a question. The siren song of temptation hummed sweetly in Garn’s mind. He forgot about the train.

“Are you still offering half of what you have?”

“I am.”

“What if I only want she-stuff?”

Surprise swept across the part of her face not too damaged to show expression. “If you think you can sell them to ranchers around here for more than beef prices, you’re wrong. The Hannemans are the only ones who could afford that, and they won’t do it.”

“I wouldn’t sell them. I have my own place a hundred miles or so west of here.”

“Your family is here in Colorado?”

“Kansas. The only cows they’d be interested in are milch cows, but I found this valley....” He wasn’t going to make a fool of himself telling her how he felt about the valley the minute he laid eyes on it. “I’ve been buying it up section by section and figured to wait to stock it until I had the land locked up safe from nesters.”

“Why buy it? Isn’t it open range?”

“Every land war I ever fought in or heard about is over open range or the water on it—to get it, to keep it, to take it from someone else. I’ve got ten sections now. Another ten, and I’ll have the whole valley and some timbered land on the slopes to the south.”

“Ten sections would support the AT stock you’ll have fine, and I suppose another job or two like Ellman’s and you can retire and be a cattleman.”

“A few more than that. At the current rate I figure another seven or eight years.”

She frowned at him, the way her thoughts were racing obvious. “You should just sell your half then, although why you want land a hundred miles west of here I can’t imagine. Cattle won’t survive a winter that high in the mountains.”

“That’s what some say. I bought three half-starved cows and a scrawny bull when I claimed the first quarter section and turned them loose up there. Those four are six now even though Jack and I butcher a couple every year. We do have to put up hay and feed them when the snow gets deep.”

“Jack?”

“Busted up old cowman. He needs a roof over his head and three meals a day, and he keeps an eye on things when I’m gone. It works out for both of us.”

The music in Garn’s head stopped. He was down a rabbit hole, and straying off onto the subject of his hope for a different future wouldn’t get him out.

“We’re talking about something impossible,” he said. “I’d like to take you up on the offer, but I’m still not going to turn rustler, not even for fifty Hereford crosses.”

Except for those few moments of weakness out by the livery, which were pretty understandable, Mrs. Thorne didn’t have much quit in her. “It wouldn’t be rustling, and if anyone tried to accuse you, I’d say it was my fault, that I misled you.”

Disabusing her of the notion that would work wasn’t worth the time it would take. “How far are they from open range?” Garn asked.

She closed her eyes as if calculating. The only question was what she was calculating.

“I can’t say in miles, and Jim Hanneman has already moved his Rafter H stock onto what was AT range. We’d be certain to run into his hands there.”

“Free range, your cows, once we’re there, we’re safe.” At least from the law. Garn tried to ignore her hopeful expression. “Suppose you draw me a map. I’ll ride out there tomorrow and

take a look-see. If anyone catches me, I can say I'm thinking of trying to buy the place from the bank. Make me a list of what you want from the house that I can pack on a horse while you're at it, and I'll see what I can bring back with me."

"I'm going with you."

"No, you're not. You have cracked ribs. It will be weeks before you can ride."

"My ribs are only bruised. They're better already."

"Like your face is better already."

"Do you think riding a horse will be any worse than sitting on that wagon seat?"

"I don't care. You're not going."

"I couldn't draw you a map that would let you find them, and I'm not going to try. So you have to take me."

"That's where you're wrong, Mrs. Thorne."

With that, Garn did what he should have done before it got so late he couldn't make the train. He jammed on his hat, picked up his coat, and walked away from the woman and her problems.

Chapter 6

INSUFFERABLE, ARROGANT, OVERBEARING, DESPICABLE. Edie suppressed the urge to run after Coburn and stayed in her chair.

She should have let Dr. Wallace and Mr. Ellman believe the worst and encouraged Hal to throw Coburn and his rule-bound, mercenary soul into jail last night. Tar and feathers would be too good for him.

Not that she needed him. All she needed was a man who could herd cattle, and she wouldn't have to give up half her small herd either. A few men hoping for ranch work always hung around town this time of year.

She would offer a few days' work for the usual dollar a day. Men like that knew they wouldn't see the money until the cattle were sold. There should still be enough food at the ranch. Discussing legalities wouldn't be necessary, and hired men would have a firm understanding of who was boss. Maybe she should hire two.

Coburn's idea of getting the cattle onto open range did have merit, though. Once her little herd made it off AT land, the bank, Hal, and everyone else could go whistle.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Thorne?"

The clerk's concerned voice brought Edie out of her daydream of gathering more cattle, selling for top dollar, and leaving Wilrose in triumph.

"I'm fine," she said, "just deep in thought."

"Well, that's all right then. I'll leave you to it. Only you've been sitting there alone so long I was a little concerned."

She had been here a long time. The bit of street visible through the nearest window showed the shadows of mid-afternoon already, and darkness came early this time of year.

Edie hurried to her room for the coat one of the hotel maids had managed to restore to a semblance of decency, donned the scarf and gloves she had purchased along with the brown

dress and a few other necessities, including a comb and tooth powder, which she should have told Coburn rather than let him think she wasn't smart enough to do that.

The kind of men she needed would spend their waking hours in town drinking and gambling. Since the Cattlemen's Palace was closed, Edie headed for the Royal Flush, one of Wilrose's other half dozen saloons, and the next most respectable, if that could be said about such an establishment. It didn't have soiled doves working there anyway, not that Edie would admit to knowing such a thing.

In her daydream, the kind of man she needed strolled out of the saloon minutes after she stationed herself across the street. Then he agreed to her proposition—no, she had to remember not to use that word—offer of employment—instantly. Now, as she watched, two men in suits, definitely not cowhands, entered the Flush. Time passed. No one else left or approached the saloon.

Edie had changed her plan to accosting the next man she saw, suit or not, and asking him to announce the opportunity for a few days' easy work waiting outside when a man she recognized rode down the street. He dismounted in front of the Flush, and tied his horse to the hitch rail.

She hurried across the street as fast as her ribs would allow. Rain, Rainer, no, Reinert, and he was a cowhand, if not a very good one. He had worked at the AT for a while a few years ago.

Even so.

"Mr. Reinert."

He turned, his puzzled expression changing to a grin as he recognized her. "Miz Thorne. You look like you lost a bad fight."

The sharp scent of whiskey came to her with his words. The Royal Flush must not be his first stop of the day.

"It was an accident, not a fight," Edie said, not caring if he knew she lied. She backed away from the saloon door, pleased Reinert followed her along the walk. "I'm looking for a couple of hands. Just a few days' work, but I thought this time of year I might have some luck. Would you be interested?"

Steps sounded as someone walked out of the saloon. "No, he's not interested, and neither is anyone else."

Coburn. Edie glared at him. "This is none of your business, and how did you know I was here?"

"The saloon has windows, and you are not hiring drunks off the street."

"Hey, I'm not drunk," Reinert protested.

"Then go do something about that," Coburn said, handing the man a dollar.

Reinert hesitated only a moment before pocketing the dollar and disappearing inside the saloon.

Eddie sniffed. "You're as drunk as he is, and you can't stop me hiring men to do what you won't."

"I had two beers. You should be proud. I've known you less than twenty-four hours, and you're already driving me to drink. I'll probably start gambling away everything I own tomorrow."

"I suppose you missed the train, and that's my fault too."

"I'm serious, Mrs. Thorne, you can't be approaching drunken strangers on the street."

"He isn't any more drunk than you are, just a little fuddled, and he's not a stranger. He worked at the AT once."

"Top hand, was he?"

"What do you care? I've driven you to drink, so go drink." She waved her hand at the saloon.

"It's a tempting notion. Have you always been this difficult, or has losing the AT brought it on?"

"Me? You're the pushy, arrogant—"

"Despicable. Don't forget despicable."

"I won't, thank you." Her anger and outrage at his interference drained. She really didn't want any part of Reinert or anyone like him.

"What would you have me do?" she asked quietly. "I'd ask what you'd do in my shoes, but you'd never be in my shoes, would you? You're male and strong and smarter than I am and would never be caught in my situation."

"I'm not smarter than you."

"You're educated. It's in your manners and vocabulary."

"I have no more schooling than what you gave Deputy Denny back in the day, although Ma did make sure we all had some manners. I read when I can, but if grunting some ain'ts at you will make you happy, I can do that."

She ignored the last. "Self-educated is still educated, and you definitely never married anyone who left you, left you...."

The words stuck in her throat, and Eddie stopped trying to say more.

"You have kin. You mentioned your mother. Go home."

"I'd rather go to prison for cattle rustling than go home."

"The ranch is what three, four hours away? Then there's getting to the cattle and coming back. That's nine or ten hours in the saddle."

A tiny spark of hope flared in Eddie. She crossed her fingers behind her back. "Not that bad. Seven maybe."

"If we start out and you can't make it, will you stop being bullheaded and give me directions?"

Eddie pretended to consider. He wouldn't believe a quick answer. "Yes."

"All right, we'll leave at first light and see how far you get."

Light-headed with relief, Eddie resisted an urge to hug him.

Late that night, staring into the dark of her hotel room, her own inconsistency struck her. She had planned to pay men like Reinert only a few dollars for the same work for which she had offered Coburn half her herd.

Inconsistent maybe, but a good estimation of the relative worth of the two men. Eddie fell asleep smiling.

EDIE DRESSED IN THE DARK THE NEXT MORNING, no longer smiling at the idea of Coburn's help being worth so much more than that of an ordinary cowhand. Honesty compelled admitting the extra worth came with his gun and cold-eyed willingness to use it.

What if luring him into helping her did end with him arrested for rustling—or worse? What if the bank had guards posted at the AT now or Jim Hanneman, who considered the AT already his, took exception to Coburn helping her take the cattle?

No one would shoot a woman or send her to prison for rustling. Hanneman or some bank guard might run her off the ranch, but Hal's level of violence toward a woman was inconceivable. What they would do to Coburn on the other hand...

No matter how easily Coburn brushed most people out of his way, if the bank had hired guards, they'd be men just as hard and just as likely to use a gun. Jim Hanneman and his sons were tough men, and they could summon the entire Rafter H crew for backup. She and Coburn weren't going to drive more than a hundred head of cattle off AT land to the stockyards north of Wilrose without someone noticing and trying to stop them.

Eddie squirmed into the trousers she'd bought after Coburn agreed to the trip to the ranch. Visions of Hal Searson, one of the Hannemans, or an anonymous bank guard shooting Coburn out of the saddle played in her head and slowed her fingers on the buttons. She would watch him shot down, blood soaking his chest, light fading from the gray eyes, and it would be her fault.

"I've changed my mind," Eddie said, opening her door at the sound of a soft knock. Unlike her, Coburn already had hat, coat, and heavy gloves on and was wide awake.

"Good. I'm glad you finally came to your senses. Now draw me a map of where the cattle should be and make a list of what you want from the house, and I'll see what I can do out there."

At least he didn't make some typical male comment about her outfit, although the way he assessed everything from hat to boots scorched a trail over every inch of her. She should have learned a lesson from the brown dress and tried these clothes on at the mercantile, but the flannel shirt was only slightly too tight across her chest, and the wool trousers not much worse.

Face flaming, Edie grabbed up her coat and held it in front of her. “My senses are fine, as they were yesterday, but much as I hate to admit it, you’re right about the risk of rustling charges and,” *I can’t stand the thought of you wounded, killed, or imprisoned because of me*, “I’ve decided to accept that the cattle are lost to me.”

“I told you yesterday, today will be safe enough. I’m not going to herd anything anywhere, and I can claim to be looking the place over thinking about buying. That desk over by the window will have paper in it. Pull out a couple of sheets, draw me the map, and make your list. If no one’s out there, I’ll bring you as much as I can.”

“You aren’t listening. I changed my mind, as in, neither one of us is going out there. Thank you very much, but it won’t be necessary. I’ll pay you back what you’ve already spent as soon as I can. Just tell me where to send it.”

Coburn moved to the desk, yanked the top drawer open, pulled out several sheets of paper, and slapped them on the desktop. “It’s too late for you to change your mind. Map. List.”

“Stop being stubborn. You didn’t want to do this, and I talked you into it. Now I’m admitting it was a mistake. You can catch today’s train.”

“Me stubborn? You, Mrs. Thorne, are the most bullheaded, irritating, difficult woman I’ve ever met. It’s a wonder every man who ever crossed your path isn’t a hopeless drunk.”

A fist pounded on the wall in the next room. “Some of us are trying to sleep here. Go argue somewhere else, will you?”

If Coburn got shot, locked up, or hung, it would serve him right. “I am not drawing anything and not listing anything,” Edie whispered. “If you’re going to be so unreasonable, fine. I’m coming with you.”

For a moment she thought he was going to keep arguing, but he didn’t.

“Then get a move on,” he said, not lowering his voice at all. “It will be daylight by the time we get the horses.”

Edie managed to get her coat on without help and got a move on.

She walked beside Coburn to the livery where their strange relationship had begun, feeling something akin to anticipation. This early, the stable would be closed up as tight as it had been that night. Watching Coburn roust Todd from his bed and try to force the cantankerous old man to saddle horses in a hurry would be a pleasure.

Close now, the shadowy forms of three horses at the hitch rail outside the livery’s main doors came into sight. Coburn really did intend to take things from the house—one of the horses bore a pack saddle. Of the other two, one looked a close-coupled, useful sort, one stood with drooping head, a pathetic nag. Edie’s lips tightened. The half dead one would be for her, of course. If Coburn planned to manipulate her into giving up before setting out, he could think again.

She checked the cinch for tightness and stirrups for length before swinging aboard. If this poor animal couldn't keep up, she would leave it and put the saddle on the packhorse. In the meantime she wasn't going to give Coburn a single excuse to leave her behind.

Minutes later Edie silently thanked heaven she hadn't complained. Her horse had a ground-covering walk that rocked her softly. At a touch of her heels, the long-backed gelding moved into a smooth jog. Enduring the faster gait would require standing in the stirrups and holding the saddle horn, but this ride was going to be less hellish than she had expected.

"I suppose you asked Todd for the horse with the best gaits for me," she said, reining in beside Coburn.

"I doubt he's ever ridden any of them. I tried a few late yesterday."

"Thank you." The words were inadequate. She should apologize for every name she had called him. Not that he cared. He must really be tempted by the thought of so many cows for what he would consider minimum effort.

Not that saddling and unsaddling horse after horse and taking each for even a short ride was exactly a minimum effort. Most men would have gone right back to that saloon after talking to her yesterday afternoon, not spent so much time searching for something soft gaited for her. Maybe he paid Todd to do all the saddling. He could have done that—on one of the old man's rare good days.

The sun rose warm in a cloudless sky, a reminder that spring was almost upon them. Edie unbuttoned her coat and pretended every step of her horse, easy as it was, didn't reverberate in her ribs. If Coburn was waiting for her to cry uncle, he could wait forever.

"I never rode astride until I moved to the ranch," she said cheerfully, catching him glancing her way. "I always used a sidesaddle in town if we didn't come in with the buggy or buckboard. I suppose you realized astride would be easier for me today with my ribs."

"The old man couldn't come up with a sidesaddle, and you shouldn't be riding at all."

"I'm fine. This really isn't too bad."

He made a sound of disagreement but didn't argue.

"What if the bank has a guard on the place?" she asked.

"You shuck your coat and distract him in that outfit, and I'll sneak up behind and buffalo him."

So much for her relief that he hadn't commented on her outfit. "That's not amusing."

"No, ma'am, it's a plan."

Not much of a plan but better than anything she had come up with, and right now minimizing the effect of the ride on her ribs was taking all her strength. Further argument could wait.

Chapter 7

HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN A WOMAN with admirable courage would also have a less than admirable stubborn streak. Any other woman and the vast majority of men would give in and give up in the first mile if battered half as much.

Mrs. Thorne had her jaw set and good eye scrunched and wasn't going to admit to pain if Garn had to pry her fisted hands from the reins and haul her out of the saddle head first when they reached the ranch.

After a pleasant few moments imagining how Mrs. Thorne would come out of the saddle and where he would have to put his hands to help her, Garn gave himself a little shake. The only reason for her to insist on coming along on this ride was because she didn't trust him not to steal her cattle, although how she expected to stop him if he had such a notion was beyond him.

And why was he making this waste-of-time ride, especially when she was ready to back out this morning? The trousers.

Which either made him despicable in a different way than she meant it or a normal red-blooded male. One way or the other, helping her on and off that horse would be a pleasure.

Garn reined up. "Hungry?"

"Very. I've been hoping no one took the food I had at the house."

To Garn's disappointment, she didn't need help dismounting. Before the end of the day she surely would need help getting back in the saddle, though. All he had to do was figure out how to give her a friendly little boost without making her mad enough to go for that rifle she'd tried to use on Sheriff Hal.

He pulled the package of beef sandwiches Ada had reluctantly put up for him out of his saddlebags. "These aren't exactly breakfast fare, but they'll fill the hole."

She devoured half a sandwich and chased it with canteen water before returning to her worries. "If there is a guard, we can just turn back."

"The bank isn't spending money on a guard."

“If there’s no guard and the cattle are there, maybe we could just take them today.”

“Because you’re in such fine fettle for herding cattle today.”

“I could manage.”

“No rustling, remember?”

She bit into the second half of her sandwich and treated him to a one-eyed dirty look. Not so one-eyed. A small band of gold-flecked brown glinted from between the swollen lids of the damaged eye this morning. Daggers flew at him from there too, which was a shame because he’d annoyed her enough she made it back on her horse in a single try.

Watching her crawl up there wasn’t as good as getting to help her, but it was a memorable sight, with the coat riding up enough to expose the trousers stretching even tighter across a delectable bottom. And the day was yet young.

The closer they rode to the ranch, the more carefully Garn scanned the empty range stretching in all directions. A hawk circled overhead, the only sign of life.

Ignoring the ranch road, Edie led the way across rolling grasslands, staying so far from the ranch house that it and the outbuildings were mere dots in the distance. The land didn’t change gradually but fell off abruptly in a long, steep slope to a fast-running narrow creek.

Garn followed Mrs. Thorne down, rode beside her along the creek bank, and dropped back when she turned into a brush-choked, sandy gully too narrow to ride abreast.

“If you left cattle down here, they’ve starved already,” he said when the trail widened and he pushed his horse beside hers.

“Wait and see.”

“I can’t believe Thorne Senior fought with neighbors over this. The creek must run through better land somewhere. No decent cowman would want this.”

“He never fought with the Hannemans. They postured and accused each other of encroaching. Since we owned this land, it was never in contention, and you’re probably right that Hanneman didn’t covet this. The creek runs through Rafter too.

Another mile and the country changed again. Gullies ran wider and deeper, small valleys and canyons really, their bottoms grassy. Cattle could hide out here and stay fat all right. Garn followed Mrs. Thorne into a narrow slot that opened into a steep-sided canyon, and there, spread across vast acres of last year’s grass were dozens of red-bodied, white-faced cattle.

“Son of a—gun,” Garn muttered. Even with a map he might have searched for days before finding this place. “You couldn’t have hidden them better if you tried.”

“I wasn’t thinking of hiding them so much as bunching them close to where I found them and in a place they might stay. There’s water at the far end this time of year. It will disappear in late June or early July.”

Her lips moved and eye darted as she counted. Garn did the same.

“Ninety-three,” she said, disappointment in her voice, “and that’s with the new calf.”

Garn had counted only ninety-two but didn’t say so, and with two calves, one maybe a week old and one no more than a day or two. Neither one could make it to town on its own, but he didn’t mention that either. Every she-cow except a couple of yearlings looked to be carrying.

“I really thought they’d all still be here. It’s only been three days since I had over a hundred.”

“At least you know no one bothered to run off just a dozen. They’ve gone back to their old haunts is all.”

“I suppose. Back to their friends.”

Garn stopped assessing the cattle. “Friends?”

“I only finished searching about half the area down here, and I left a few of what I did find in place.” She colored a little. “They’re not like Pa Thorne’s descriptions of Longhorns, but when the one bull I came across stared at me with those mean little eyes and started tossing his head and pawing, I couldn’t get away from him fast enough. He had a couple of heifers with him, and he can keep them.”

Garn fought a wave of frustration. He was no expert, but to him all but a few of the cattle here could pass for purebred Herefords. Thorne had to be one of the first ranchers west of the Mississippi with stock like this. The bank shouldn’t benefit and neither should a buyer of foreclosed property who was only paying for land and buildings.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll drag enough dead brush across the narrowest part of the entrance back there to discourage any more from leaving. There has to be a way to get them out of here without trouble, and we’re going to figure out what it is.”

She didn’t argue, but the certainty of success she had shown back in town was gone. Shoulders slumped, she sat her horse and watched him drag brush and pile it chest high in the slot leading to the canyon. “If we can’t get back, will they be able to get out of there?” she asked. “They’ll starve soon if they can’t.”

“They’ll go through that brush like it’s not even there the minute they take a notion. It takes something a lot more solid than that to stop a notional cow.” Garn remounted. “Lead the way. We’ll grab everything out of the house that will fit in the packs and get back to town.”

Halfway to the house, Mrs. Thorne roused from the melancholy the missing cattle and reality of the situation had brought on when they spotted horses in the distance. “Oh, I bet that’s Sunny, Ned, and the wagon team. I sold everything else, but Sunny is my saddle horse and Ned was Drew’s so I kept them, and I thought I’d need the wagon and team. Hal and Denny turned them loose and ran them off, but look at them, they’re following us hoping for grain.”

Good. Those horses were coming back to town along with everything Garn could fit on the packhorse.

The bright sorrel mare with matched stockings behind and a narrow blaze had lady's horse all over her and would fetch top dollar. The bay was a good, solid animal.

Mrs. Thorne could put sentiment aside and sell them. If there was no way to get the cattle, at least she'd have that much.

Only the saddle horses followed all the way to the barn. Mrs. Thorne gave them their expected reward of oats and surprised the livery horses with the same.

Garn led the packhorse and other livery horses out and tied them to the hitching rail in front of the house without waiting for them to lip up the last grains from the feed boxes. The prickly sensation at the back of his neck warned of trouble on the way. The sooner they were done and gone from here the better

Inside the house, Mrs. Thorne hurried from one room to the other, ending in a bedroom with soft blue walls, polished furniture that had to have come from the East, and a double bed neatly made up with a colorful quilt. Her room. Once hers and the golden boy's.

"Everything looks just as it did when I left. Look, here's my hairbrush and mirror right where Hal put them after he took them away from me."

As if she sensed Garn's desire to be gone, she threw clothing from cedar-lined chest, wardrobe, and bureau drawers onto the bed and bundled it all into the quilt and sheets. He carried everything outside and stuffed it into the panniers on the packhorse.

Wrapping photographs and smaller keepsakes in towels to protect them slowed her down.

"There's a little more room in the packs and in the saddlebags," Garn said. "I'm going to get the other horses."

She nodded without looking up from the small wooden box in her hand. "There is something missing after all. I don't have much jewelry, and it's all here, but the cash I had is gone."

"Into Sheriff Hal's pocket."

The box went into the flour sack. "He did poke his nose into every room. I'm surprised he didn't take the jewelry."

So was Garn. He left her to the packing. On the way to the barn, he took down the rifle from its pegs on the wall by the door. It hadn't done Mrs. Thorne much good the day Sheriff Hal had stopped her from using it on him, but a Winchester like this one would bring her a good price from any gunsmith. If he couldn't find a scabbard for it, he'd unload it and shove it into the packs.

In the barn Garn moved fast, cinching saddles on the extra horses and lashing a sidesaddle and one more on top of them along with every bridle and other piece of equipment of any value he could find. The sound of riders approaching at a gallop reached him while he was checking the balance of the loads.

Garn slipped off the thong securing his revolver in the holster, drew the gun, and cracked the barn door enough to see the yard.

EDIE FROZE AND SWALLOWED HARD as Jim Hanneman and his sons reined up only a few feet from her. If she hadn't been concentrating on finding space in the packs for a few more things, she would have had time to get into the house, or at least up on the porch rather than have the Hannemans catch her here with her arms full.

She glanced toward the barn. If only Coburn would stay where he was. Hanneman would make her leave, but he wouldn't hurt her. He wouldn't know the three horses tied here were from the livery. She could pretend only her sad-looking mount was from town and the others were AT horses she was trying to take away.

Jim Hanneman spurred his horse even closer, forcing her to look up. "You shouldn't be here, Mrs. Thorne. This ain't your place now. You're trespassing, and you're stealing."

So she was trespassing, and he wasn't? Edie glared up at him with her good eye narrowed to as much of a slit as the injured one. "It's not your place either, Mr. Hanneman, not yet, and I'm entitled to my personal property."

"You're evicted and not entitled to anything."

"I may have been evicted, but I don't believe the bank would begrudge me some clothing and keepsakes. And even if your opinion mattered, your daughter-in-law wouldn't want my things."

Edie managed to smile at Rick Hanneman, the younger son, and the one in his family who had always been friendly when they crossed paths.

"I hear as soon as you marry, you and Barbara are going to live here, and I'm glad. It would be a shame for this house to sit empty and fall into disrepair. I hope you're happy here. It's a good home."

Rick colored slightly under his tan and shifted in his saddle but didn't say anything.

"He don't need your permission or your good wishes," Hanneman growled. "Now you get on your horse and get out of here, or we'll tie you on and run you off. I hear you gave the sheriff a bad time when he came to lawfully get you off here. I don't hold with roughing up women, but you're leaving one way or the other."

The barn door creaked open, and Edie almost shouted, "No," as Coburn stepped out.

"She's leaving with me when she's good and ready, taking anything she wants to take, and the first one of you who tries to lay a hand on her is a dead man."

His voice was flat and deep and didn't sound like it belonged to the man Edie had spent the last two days with. The Hannemans' horses bumped into each other as their riders looked over their shoulders and reined around to face the threat.

Coburn stood just outside the barn, revolver drawn and pointed at Jim Hanneman.

Hanneman pushed his horse forward. "Who the hell are you?"

"Mrs. Thorne's new hand."

"Gun hand."

Coburn shrugged.

"Is she paying you enough to die for her? How many of us do you think you can get before we get you?"

Coburn tilted his head as if considering. "Two dead, one wounded. You're first."

Hanneman leaned forward, and Edie grabbed for the pack saddle as the bottom dropped out of her stomach. Rick put a hand on his father's arm.

"For God's sake, Dad, it's only clothes and personal things. Let her have them."

The old man hawked and spit, reached one hand out, and pointed a gnarled finger at Coburn. "You get off this land and get her off. Come back, and you'll be shot on sight."

Hanneman led the way out of the ranch yard at a walk, as if that made it less of a retreat. Finally all three men gighed their horses to a trot and then a lope. When they faded from sight, Edie tore her eyes away.

Coburn sauntered across the yard to her. "That's a mean old man. Good thing he has a sensible son."

"Good thing for you, or you'd be dead, full of holes and bleeding in the dirt." Exactly like her worst imaginings.

"You think so? I figured my chances of getting back behind the barn door with no more than a wound or two were pretty good."

She gaped at him, unable to think of a response to such insanity. He sighed, closed one hand over her bottom, the other on her waist, pulled her close, and kissed her, his lips warm and possessive. Edie barely had time to react, to begin kissing back, before he raised his head.

"Sorry about that. It must be a reaction to my close brush with death." He gave her a little pat on the rear and dropped his hands. "Now let's finish up and get out of here."

Coburn walked back to the barn as if nothing had changed. Maybe for him it hadn't. Edie picked up the flour sack she had dropped, still shaky from the way he had turned her innards inside out and her world upside down.

WHEN COBURN LED SUNNY AND NED out of the barn, the mounds of equipment piled high on their backs resembled humps on camels. Edie flicked a brief glance over them but couldn't focus on what they carried.

He was sorry he kissed her. He stopped kissing her as soon as she started kissing back. Was her breath terrible after a day on the trail? She cupped one hand around her mouth and surreptitiously tried to tell.

Did she kiss that badly? Drew had always liked her kisses well enough, at least until he lost interest in her and everything else but whiskey and cards.

As the sun began its afternoon journey west, she forced thoughts of the kiss, Coburn's reaction and hers from her mind by trying to decide how to word the apology she owed him. He had wasted both time and money on her and wasn't going to get a thing out of it.

Well, yes, he was. He was going to get his money back. She had to stop being sentimental now and let go of Sunny and Ned. Two good horses with saddles would bring enough to pay Coburn and leave sufficient funds for her to buy a ticket to Denver.

All she ever had planned was to find another teaching position to support herself. Without a financial cushion, she would have to search harder and settle for the first position offered. If necessary, she would accept a menial job until something more suitable came along.

Edie twisted in the saddle to look at Sunny and Ned, finally assessing the extra equipment distorting their outlines. They might as well be carrying dollars. She smiled as the realization struck her. Coburn never missed a trick.

Sharp pain stabbed through her side as she straightened to face forward. Clamping both hands around the saddle horn, she gritted her teeth. At least with Sunny and Ned loaded like that, they wouldn't be moving any faster than a walk for fear everything would shift and fall.

Shadows elongated as the hours passed. Numb with pain, cold and tired to the bone, Edie barely noticed when the horses stopped.

"Here, button your coat."

In spite of telling her to do it, Coburn reached over and buttoned her coat for her, fished her gloves from her pockets and started her hands into them.

"I'm fine," Edie said.

"Sure you are. How about I put you up on this fellow and get up behind you?"

He was sorry he kissed her but was going to ride double and hold her on the horse?

"Absolutely not."

"All right then. Keep hanging on."

A slight pull, and the reins slipped through her fingers. He was leading her horse along with the others, but protesting was beyond her.

As darkness closed around them, Edie clung to the horn with numb hands, disappointment and fear of the future blending into a cloud of misery she could only endure with a blank mind.

The lights of town roused her. Coburn halted in front of the hotel, dismounted, and reached her side while she was still contemplating the effort required to reach the ground in any semblance of an ordinary way.

“I’m fine,” she muttered as he reached for her.

“Sure you are. You’re just humoring me. Kick out of the stirrups and lean down a little. I’ll catch you.”

“Hurts.”

“I bet it does. Do it anyway.”

Edie leaned. He caught her, eased her to her feet, and half-carried her into the hotel. The clerk at the desk hesitated when Coburn asked for keys to both rooms.

“If you’ll wait here, sir, I’ll find one of the maids to help Mrs. Thorne.”

“Don’t be a prig,” Coburn snapped. “Mrs. Thorne isn’t feeling well and needs to be off her feet. Hand over the keys before I take them.”

“Perhaps I should get the manager.”

“Perhaps I should shoot you where you stand.”

“Don’t make a fuss,” Edie managed. “I can—”

“You can be quiet before I leave you here in a heap.”

The clerk handed over the keys.

Beyond caring if Coburn shot anyone or who, Edie leaned against him, only dimly aware when he switched from half-carrying her to carrying her. What registered was warmth and strength, the scent of his wool coat and cold face. Did cold skin have a scent? It must because that’s what he smelled like.

He set her down on the bed in the dark and lit the bedside lamp before removing her gloves and coat and tugging off her boots. When he peeled off her tight trousers, a tiny awareness that she should stop him sprang to life, but she lay quiet as he unbuttoned her shirt and unhooked her corset.

“Not that it matters much with your ribs wrapped like that,” he muttered.

He tucked the blankets around her as if she were a child. She roused again when he gently forced her swollen eyelids wider and drops plopped into her eye. The light went out. In the darkened room, he smoothed her hair back and kissed her forehead.

Did he do that because he didn’t like kissing her mouth? He really would make some woman he did like kissing a good husband.

Tears leaked from both eyes and ran in cold little trails into her hair. Anyone he married would have to be strong enough to stand up to him now and then, of course. All four of his sisters must have to act in concert to get anywhere with him.

The door opened and closed. The key turned in the lock. Edie let go and fell into a deep and dreamless sleep as the tears dried on her temples.

Chapter 8

IN SPITE OF THE KIND OF FATIGUE that came with disappointment, or maybe because of it, Garn only slept a few restless hours. He stared at the darkened ceiling, trying to see some way to get those cattle off the AT without risk of rustling charges.

Short-legged, built square and heavy, those Herefords might be more and better beef on the hoof than Longhorns, but they'd move even slower. Starting them out of the canyon at night wouldn't see them clear of the ranch by dawn.

If the bank would give permission.... Garn whacked the pillow in frustration. The banker never lived who would politely nod and say, sure, take your thousands of dollars worth of cattle we fell into through foreclosure, and good luck to you.

Throwing a little scare into the bank's president to encourage generosity wouldn't work either. As soon as he felt safe again, he'd go running to the law. Sheriff Hal.

Garn gave up on sleep and rose. If only Mrs. Thorne had some friends in town. One friend. A friend with enough influence with the bank to inspire cooperation.

He certainly had no friends here himself. Aside from Mrs. Thorne, he was barely on nodding terms with anyone except Seymour Ellman. His former employer. Who owned this hotel, two saloons in addition to the Cattlemen's Palace, and several other businesses around Wilrose.

Garn pulled on enough clothes to venture downstairs to the bathing room. Everything he needed to do today would go easier for a man scrubbed, shaved, and looking more like a businessman than a gunman.

Hours later, after finishing easier chores, Garn ignored the closed sign and pushed through the unlocked door of the Cattlemen's Palace.

Before the victory celebration, the saloon had been as elegant as anything west of Kansas City and east of Denver, the long mirror behind the bar, glasses, and bottles gleaming with the light of dozens of wall lamps.

Today a sad and sorry wreck remained. Piles of swept-up broken glass dotted the floor, but broken glass still crunched underfoot. The red and gold papered wall and pressed-tin ceiling sported bullet holes. The chandeliers had disappeared.

The place buzzed with workmen painting, patching, and replacing. Garn preferred the scents of fresh cut wood, paint, and plaster to the usual smoke, whiskey, and sweat, but he'd bet Seymour Ellman didn't.

"Ellman here?" he asked the bartender supervising the workmen.

"In his office."

Ellman answered Garn's knock with, "Yeah," which Garn took as an invitation to enter.

Working over a ledger in his shirtsleeves, Ellman looked more like a clerk than owner of the place. The dark green painted walls in the windowless room, scarred furniture, and threadbare carpet contrasted sharply with the gaudy opulence of the rest of the saloon.

Ellman made several entries in the ledger before raising his head, thick lips compressing in displeasure at the sight of Garn. "I expected a carpenter with more questions, not you."

"You must get lots of those. Maybe free liquor for a bunch of hard cases wasn't such a good idea."

Ellman waved a meaty hand dismissively. "The place needed renovation anyway, and getting rid of Vickroy was worth it. You got out of here before all hell broke loose, didn't you? You may be an unsociable cuss, but you're smarter than your friends."

"They're not my friends. I'm surprised no one drank himself to death."

"A couple tried. Now since you don't care what happened after you left, sit and tell me what you're here for, although I'll tell you right now if you came to call me out for assuming you rearranged the Widow Thorne's face, don't waste your breath. You'll have to be satisfied with the apology."

"I am." Garn dropped into the ladder-backed chair facing the desk. "You only said what everyone in the hotel was thinking, but if you feel bad enough about it to do me a favor, that would be good."

"I don't."

"Too bad because that's what I'm here for, to ask a favor."

Ellman's expression changed from defensive to shrewd. "Do I owe you a favor?"

"No, grant it, and I'll owe you."

"So you would. And what is it you want me to do for you?"

"Convince the bank to let Mrs. Thorne back on the AT long enough to get her personal property."

"That's not a favor for you. It's for her, and why should I put myself out for a woman who embarrassed me in my own hotel?"

“Because her husband spent a lot of money here? Because you know she’s getting a raw deal? Because you can?”

Ellman snorted. “Drew Thorne blew the tens of thousands he got for his cattle in San Francisco, not here, and she hasn’t had any more of a raw deal than most widows. They manage.”

Garn gave a low whistle. “I figured he lost the money here. How long were they out there?”

“Him, not they. He took the lion’s share of the money and ran. He lost it all in less than a year, came crawling back more miserable than ever, and killed himself in an early blizzard last fall.”

“You think what happened was suicide?”

“It always seemed the best explanation to me. I don’t think he intended to come back, and when he had to, it was the final straw. I never saw him sober after that.”

“The more I hear about him, the more spineless and useless he sounds. Why was he held in such high regard?”

“Tall, handsome, generous, due to inherit one of the biggest and most successful ranches in the area. He was one of those jovial men who made everyone around him feel good. I liked him myself and didn’t see the weakness till the end. Losing both father and son would set any man back, but most get over it sooner or later. He fell apart.”

The last bit of information shocked Garn too much to hide.

Ellman noticed. “What part of that surprised you? Maybe you don’t know the widow as well as either of us thought.”

“She never mentioned a son. No reason she should I suppose.”

“She has you fooled if you think after snagging Drew Thorne she’s doing anything except using you.”

Garn stifled an urge to bloody Ellman’s nose and walk out. He wasn’t quite ready to give up yet.

Ellman’s chair creaked in protest as he reached forward to pluck a cigar from the humidor on the corner of the desk, clipped the end, and leaned back to light it.

Garn watched, trying to come up with a lever to use to get what he wanted. To him and to Mrs. Thorne the dollar value of her cattle was a fortune. A man who raked in that much from his saloons every week wouldn’t be tempted by anything they could offer. Or would he? Ellman’s little war with Vickroy proved him a greedy man.

While Ellman worked to get his cigar burning perfectly, Garn weighed the risks of leveling about what was at stake. Maybe nothing would motivate the man. Maybe offering most of the herd would get him out of that chair and to the bank. Maybe he’d refuse to help and use the

information to finagle the whole herd for himself. At least if he did the last, Jim Hanneman wouldn't get the cattle, which was some consolation.

"She's not using me," Garn said when Ellman looked up. "She has more than a hundred head of cattle out there and offered me half if I can get them for her. Hanneman's guarding the place like it's his already, and the bank isn't going to let her waltz off with thousands on the hoof, even if they're rightfully hers. What would it take to get you to help with the bank?"

Ellman blew a smoke ring at the ceiling. Hard as Garn tried he could see no spark of interest in the man's dark eyes.

"I have heard a lot of uncomplimentary things about the widow, but no one ever said she was stupid. Why didn't she sell them before the bank took possession?"

"Because your bastard of a sheriff didn't give her notice of when that was."

"He's a bastard, all right. In fact, now that you mention the sheriff, maybe we can strike a deal after all. You take care of Searson for me, and I'll take care of the bank for you."

It had been worth a try. Garn rose and turned toward the door. "I'm not killing anyone for you."

"You already did."

"That was war. You're talking murder."

Ellman smiled like a fat coyote. "Now you're the one jumping to conclusions. I don't want him killed. Sit down and let's discuss it."

Garn sat again. He didn't relax.

Ellman dropped the cigar in the heavy glass ashtray on the desk and leaned forward, intent. "Killing Searson would only mean one of his deputies stepping up. What the sheriff and his minions need is a lesson in how excessive greed doesn't pay."

"Excessive greed."

"Searson notified every business in the county they'd have to pay him a protection fee as soon as he was elected. We told ourselves it was just a small tax and paid."

"So what's the problem?"

"He ups the ante every year. What was a minor nuisance has become a serious burden, and it needs to stop."

"Tell him to suck eggs."

"The reason the town no longer has a dentist is the one we had tried that. He ended up beaten so badly he left town as soon as he could get out of bed. The reason the hardware store looks newer than the buildings on either side is because Macon tried saying no. He was burned out. Repairing this place after the other night's celebration is one thing, rebuilding after a fire another."

“You had men working for you who would kill a brother for the right price. Maybe one of them is still in town.”

“I said I don’t want him killed, and I mean it. I want him taught a lesson, one that also impresses his deputies and maybe Banford and his men.”

“If they’re all in on it, it’s no wonder he wanted more. That’s quite a payroll. Searson must have three or four deputies, and Banford another couple.”

“I’m not sure if Banford and his men are in on it, but something has them looking the other way. It needs to be stopped.”

Garn considered. He’d already broken the *never tangle with a lawman* rule, and the thought of going after Sheriff Hal tempted him more than reasonable, safe, or sane. He argued with himself as much as Ellman.

“Maybe he needs to be stopped, and I’d like to be the one to do it, but I already had a run in with him. I’d be the first one Banford would arrest.”

“All you need is a rock-solid alibi, and you’ll have one.”

“No disrespect, but I’d hate to have my future depending on a jury believing you.”

“Me and two more respectable citizens, both on the town council. One is so desperate he’d bushwhack Searson himself if he knew how. The other is close to that point. If all they have to do is alibi you, they’ll jump at the chance.”

“No alibi is rock solid. People change their minds, get religion.”

Ellman pulled a piece of paper from a drawer, wrote, and pushed it toward Garn. “If you agree, you stop by here tonight about seven to thank me for helping Mrs. Thorne. Jacob Luntz and Moses Foreman will be here having a friendly game of cards, and we’ll invite you to stick around and join the game. All three of us will sign that and give it to you. It will be your guarantee against any of us changing our minds. I can’t think of anything better, can you?”

What Ellman had written was an affidavit of sorts stating that Garn had played cards with the men signing it from seven in the evening until after midnight.

Garn pushed the paper back toward Ellman. “And what guarantees the bank will cooperate?”

“I do.” Ellman lumbered to his feet and pulled on his jacket. “Let’s get that over with right now.”

WILROSE BANK WAS LIKE EVERY BANK Garn had ever seen, all dark wood and gleaming brass meant to look solid and secure to customers. Of course Frank and Jesse James never bought into the image, which was one of the many reasons Garn remained skeptical about banks.

A short man with thinning hair and pock-scarred face, Stewart Mease didn't meet Garn's expectations of a bank president except for the quality of his suit. Still, if a bank president ever greeted Garn the way Mease greeted Seymour Ellman, he might change his mind about banks.

Mease didn't greet Garn at all, just nodded when Ellman made the introduction. Garn kept quiet while the two other men exchanged small talk and did the usual fussing over cigars.

Mease got down to business first. "So what can I do for you today?"

"I'm sure you know the details of your foreclosure on the AT Ranch," Ellman said smoothly. "Mr. Coburn and I are here to request that you allow the Widow Thorne back on the property to remove her personal possessions, including livestock."

The banker's expression changed from accommodating to adversarial in a flash. "I can't do that, and there's no reason to. She received notice of the proceedings every step of the way."

"She says she never received notice of when she had to vacate."

"She's mistaken. I have an affidavit from Sheriff Searson that he personally served that notice."

"Come now, Stewart, we both know more than we want to about the sheriff, don't we?"

Could Searson be collecting protection money from the bank? If so, Garn had to admire the sheriff's gall.

"I know I have a valid affidavit of service, and Jim Hanneman is willing to buy the place for enough to cover the balance due on the mortgage, expenses, and a small profit for the bank. And Jim's already impatient."

Disappointment surged through Garn. Believing Ellman could get the bank to make an accommodation had been foolish.

Ellman's heavy features drooped, and he shook his head. "That's too bad, but I suppose it's no more trouble for me transferring my business to Citizens Bank than it would be bringing Vickroy's here. As the surviving partner, I need to consolidate, you know."

"Are you threatening me with the loss of your business?"

"No threat, but I do prefer to do business with a bank that can bend a rule now and then for the benefit of a widow—or a good customer."

Mease chewed his cigar to shreds and threw the soggy remains in his ashtray. "How much time does she need?"

Ellman tipped his head toward Garn. "Mr. Coburn is representing Mrs. Thorne."

These men weren't used to dealing with small sums or small favors, and Garn was going to have to shred a rule worse than that cigar over this deal. To hell with a few days to gather the cattle remaining in the canyon. There were more out there.

"Thirty days," he said. "That's if she can stay on the place while we're rounding up any strays left out there."

“Thirty....” Mease’s eyes bulged. “Hanneman will never agree.”

“He doesn’t have to,” Ellman said.

“He’s the only prospective buyer we have.”

“He’s wanted that place for years. He’ll buy it if you make him wait till next Christmas.”

“The bank is not willing to wait until Christmas for its money.”

“It won’t have to.”

Mease sighed. “All right.”

Outside the bank, Garn shook Ellman’s hand. “So that’s how it’s done. No wonder you own half the town.”

Ellman tapped the pocket where he had the bank’s letter giving Mrs. Thorne and anyone employed by her for the purpose permission to stay on the AT for thirty days and to remove any personal possessions, including livestock. “You can have our alibi guarantee before you leave tonight, but you have to finish your half of the bargain before you get this.”

“Good enough.”

Garn headed for the hotel. He’d have to tell Mrs. Thorne something, the whole truth wouldn’t do, but something.

EDIE OPEN GRITTY EYES to a hotel room bright with sunlight. The morning was already more than half gone.

Closing her good eye, she assessed her vision from the injured one. Only a little blurry and maybe that was because it still didn’t open all the way.

She sat up with a groan. Yesterday’s long ride had left every muscle sore and aching. She twisted slightly one way and then the other. At least her ribs didn’t hurt any worse than yesterday morning.

Her trousers and shirt hung over the back of the room’s only chair, corset and stockings folded on the seat, and boots side by side underneath. She fell back on the bed, heat flooding through every part of her. Coburn had stripped her down to drawers, chemise, and rib wrappings, and she hadn’t so much as squeaked in protest.

She had insisted on riding to the AT with him, been no help at all, not apologized that he’d wasted so much time and money on her, not told him she would reimburse the money, and he had ended up carrying her into the hotel and putting her to bed. And kissed her on the forehead as if she were a child. If he hadn’t bought a ticket on the noon train already, it would be a miracle.

Getting up required both hands and feet. Edie staggered to the washstand, scraped her hair back, and dressed as fast as her aching body allowed. The room key lay on the floor inside the

door. Coburn had locked her in, safe and already asleep, or as good as, then shoved the key under the door for her.

She needed to apologize, needed to tell him she'd pay his expenses. Silence greeted her knock on the door to Coburn's room. Limping only a little, not enough to matter really, Edie hurried downstairs.

The young clerk on duty at the reception desk wasn't the same one Coburn had threatened last night, but he didn't appear any happier to see her.

"Good morning," she said, forcing a smile. "I'm looking for Mr. Coburn. Have you seen him?"

"Yes, ma'am, he went out early, but he returned long enough to leave this for you." The clerk's thin lips tightened with disapproval as he handed her an envelope thick not just with paper but also with something solid and heavy.

"What time is it?" Edie asked in a panic. It couldn't be noon yet.

"Ten minutes past ten."

Almost two hours before the train would leave Wilrose. Could she stop him from leaving? No. He'd done more for her than she could expect, but it hadn't worked out. Even she could see there was no safe way to get the cattle off the ranch. They were lost to her.

There was no reason for Coburn to stay, and wishing wasn't going to conjure one out of the air.

Edie dropped into one of the lobby chairs and opened the envelope.

I sold the extra saddles and other equipment. You need to decide about the horses, their saddles, and the sidesaddle, but don't try to talk to Todd yourself. He'll skin you.

Everything from the packs is in my room. Help yourself. I have some other business in town but will be back to talk about what to do next later today. Stay in the hotel and don't let Sheriff Hal catch you alone.

No salutation, no signature, just the words in a strong, upright hand. Edie ran her fingers over the paper and smiled. She'd have to count the bills in the envelope out of sight of the clerk, who had already guessed quite correctly the envelope contained money and a room key and drawn the worst conclusion. Let him.

Let the whole town think the worst. Coburn wasn't leaving yet.

Chapter 9

AFTER TRANSFERRING ALL HER THINGS from Coburn's room to her own, Edie sought out the workroom in the hotel where the maids pressed clothing for guests and ironed her favorite dark green dress herself. The dress always boosted her spirits, made her feel pretty.

At least this one time, Coburn would see her looking decent instead of like the penniless charity case she was. Not quite penniless thanks to him, but definitely someone who needed to be careful.

Back in her room, she removed the wrappings from her ribs and cast them aside. Yesterday had proved her ribs were no more than bruised, and her corset would provide quite enough support and protection from now on.

Stockings, drawers, chemise, corset, petticoats, the green dress, shoes, not boots. Unable to put it off longer, Edie stepped to the mirror to deal with her hair. Too bad there was no way to hide her bruises behind a veil of the thick mass.

Peering closely, her nose almost touching the glass, she decided the bruising had less black and purple and more blue than yesterday, and the swelling had receded to no more than a small area over her cheekbone and around her eye. Still, an eye half open didn't look any better than one swollen shut. No one else would notice such a slight improvement.

The green dress worked no magic this time. Edie sighed and turned to putting everything she had brought back from the ranch in the room's wardrobe and bureau drawers as best she could, piling what wouldn't fit on every flat surface. A trunk and cases of some sort would be one more expense. Everything she needed sat wasted out at the AT.

If there was a safe way to do it, she'd really like to give Hal and Denny a piece of her mind. More than that, she'd like to....

A soft knock sounded. Edie all but skipped across the room, barely remembering at the last second to make sure it was Coburn before throwing the door open. His eyes raked over her the

same way they had the previous morning. Edie backed away, and he followed her, closing the door behind him.

“You look like a new woman today,” he said.

“Is that good?”

“Very good.”

“My face is still terrible.”

“Half the swelling’s gone, and the bruises are starting to fade. You’ll be the envy of every woman in town within a week.”

Edie’s mood lifted. Of course he noticed. He noticed everything. “You look good in that suit yourself.” He did. More than good. Handsome. Distinguished in a predatory way.

He spun his hat onto the bed. “I’m dressed for the occasion. Seymour Ellman and I went to the bank and talked to the president. He didn’t like it, but he agreed to let you back on the AT for thirty days. He’s going to write you a letter. I figure thirty days is long enough to find the dozen cattle you had that wandered off and a dozen more, maybe that bull that you backed off from and his heifers.”

For a moment Edie couldn’t take it in. When she did, she first gasped then hugged him, realized what she was doing, let go, and retreated.

“I can’t believe it. I’d given up. And Drew always made Mr. Ellman sound like a hard-hearted businessman, not at all like a man who would do that for someone else. Did he feel guilty about jumping to conclusions about you?”

“Being called out about that bothered him all right.”

“I apologize for getting so carried away. That was presumptuous of me. What I just did, I mean. I shouldn’t have done it.”

A slight smile changed his whole countenance, or maybe it was the way the sunlight through the window reflected in the gray eyes. “If we get to a hundred fifty head, you can do it again.”

“I wish that were possible,” Edie said wistfully. “I’ll be happy to get back to a hundred.”

“You need to think bigger. If there’s another fifty out there, we’ll find them.”

“Forcing cattle that don’t want to come out of their hiding places to go where you want them isn’t easy, you know.”

“I do know. I did some mavericking down in Texas after the war, just enough to convince me it was a better way to end up dead or crippled than to make a living. If you had a bunch of Longhorns out there, I’d be all for driving what you’ve got to town and calling it good enough.”

“Herefords may be easier, but they’re not exactly docile, you know, and these still have Longhorn blood.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know.”

“Will you stop that?”

He frowned at her.

“Calling me ma’am. For that matter I’m tired of Mrs. Thorne. We’re partners, aren’t we? My given name is Edith, but I’m not fond of it. Edie please.”

“Garn.”

The harshness of it suited him. She rather liked it. And him. A gunman. Whoever would have believed it?

“Now that we’ve got that settled, how about braving the café again with me?” he said. “I can do without the white tablecloths, and I’d rather have better food.”

Still giddy with his news, Edie agreed. She would have agreed to hug Ada if he asked. Thirty days. Maybe they really could round up another fifty head with that much time.

A CLOCK ON THE WALL SHOWED a few minutes after seven when Garn walked into Seymour Ellman’s private card room, a smaller version of what the Cattlemen’s public rooms had been a few days ago.

All signs of Ellman the clerk had vanished. A tailored dark suit flattered his bulk, a diamond stick pin flashed when he moved, and a heavy gold ring adorned his right hand.

Garn held out the box of cigars he’d purchased earlier in the day. “Sorry to interrupt your game, but Mrs. Thorne wanted you to have a token of her appreciation for your help with the bank.”

Ellman grinned, making no attempt to disguise their purpose. “Good idea. I hadn’t considered what we’d use as a reason for you being here.” He introduced the two men sitting at the table with him.

Garn had encountered both during his time in Wilrose and dealt with Luntz at the mercantile a few times. Now he turned a more critical eye on men who would be the only barrier between him, arrest, and prison.

A thin, stooped man, Jacob Luntz fingered one after another of the chips before him. His pale eyes only met Garn’s for a fleeting moment before skittering away. His luxuriant gray mustache emphasized a bald pate shining in the lamplight.

The owner of Wilrose’s lumber yard, Moses Foreman would be the one ready to ambush the sheriff. Catlike green eyes met Garn’s in a bold stare. He acknowledged the introduction with a jerky nod, nostrils flared, color high.

“Sit down,” Ellman said. “Since you’re here, you may as well have a drink and sit in on a friendly game of poker.”

Garn took the one empty chair at the table. He wasn’t across from the door, but at least his back wasn’t to it. “Losing everything you paid me isn’t part of my plan.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Ellman took a glass from the sideboard behind him, poured a healthy three fingers from the decanter there, and pushed the glass, along with several stacks of chips, Garn’s way. “Let’s get business out the way first.” He rose, went to the door, and called down the hall. “Stanley! I need you back here.”

The bartender who had been supervising repairs earlier in the day appeared in the doorway. “Yes, sir.”

“Before you leave for the night, I need you for a witness,” Ellman said. “We’re mixing a little business with our pleasure tonight.” He pulled pen, ink, and the written alibi he’d composed earlier from the top drawer of the sideboard, signed with a flourish, and pushed everything toward Luntz.

The three men must have debated every word on that paper long before Garn arrived, but Luntz still read it carefully, fingers plucking at his mustache. He started to say something, glanced toward the bartender waiting patiently by the door, pursed his lips, and signed.

Foreman signed quickly and shoved pen and paper back toward Ellman, who covered all but the last words on the page and the signatures with his hand and instructed the bartender to sign and print “Witness” after his name.

“We’d rather keep the content of this secret for a while,” he said. “It probably won’t ever amount to anything anyway.”

The bartender did as instructed. “Is that all?” he asked uncertainly when finished.

“It is, and you’ve put in enough time here today. Go on home, or go have a drink somewhere with lights and music.”

The bartender disappeared so fast he must have feared a change of heart. Ellman shoved the signed paper across to Garn, who read it before tucking it away.

“What if something goes wrong and that’s found on him? What will we do then?” Luntz said.

Luntz would be the one to welch if a man had to depend on his word alone.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Garn said. “I’ll hide it somewhere the first rain will ruin it and pick it up when I’m done. If you want a better guarantee, I can’t give it.”

“That son of a bitch threw a live match in sawdust the last time he came to see me,” Foreman said. “I don’t need a guarantee, I need him stopped, and I’d rather have a permanent solution.”

“Too bad,” Garn said. “That’s not the deal.”

The flush across Foreman’s cheeks spread to the rest of his face, but he said no more.

“We’re all agreed then,” Ellman said. “Now let’s play cards.” He cut the deck on the table and pushed it to Foreman, who dealt without asking anyone’s preference.

Luntz drained his glass in two swallows.

Garn tried a small swallow of his whiskey, just to verify his suspicion Ellman and his friends drank something very different from what was served to ordinary customers. He paid little attention to the cards, faked an occasional further swallow, and threw in most hands as fast as he reasonably could. The sooner this business was over and he could get back to Mrs. Thorne the better.

The smile she'd given him when she realized she'd be on her own for the evening had been as fake as a wooden nickel. She probably skipped supper rather than eat alone.

She had believed Garn's excuse of wanting a drink and a few hands of cards before settling in to a month-long cow hunt. Of course she was used to watching a man leave to get drunk and throw away money on cards. Leading her to believe he had anything in common with the golden boy bothered Garn more than it seemed like it should.

She'd be alone in her room now, passing the evening reading one of the books she had slipped into the packs along with clothing yesterday. The chair in her room wasn't comfortable, so she'd be propped up in bed.

She'd be wearing one of those soft white night dresses he'd carried up to his room with all the other frilly, feminine things. Her hair would be loose on her shoulders and down her back, shining from a brushing.

"Your deal."

The words and sound of the deck of cards slapped on the table in front of him snapped Garn back to reality. He picked up the deck and shuffled, annoyed at the necessity.

At eight he rose and left Ellman and his friends without a word, picked up the oak wheel spoke he'd already scavenged from behind the wheelwright's shop, and slipped through the shadows of Wilrose's back alleys.

Much as he'd wanted an opportunity to pay Searson back for what the big man had done to Edie, Garn liked tonight's violent business even less than the gun jobs he had worked. A fair fight was out of the question. A man beaten in a fair fight came out of it mad, most times determined to try again.

Searson needed to be hurt, humiliated, and thoroughly frightened, to experience what he'd done to Edie ratcheted up to size. And to know why.

During the weeks of waiting for Ellman's private war with Vickroy to break out in its one and only battle, Garn had learned much about the town. The sheriff shared the marshal's office. He left the rest of the county to his deputies unless they encountered big trouble and called for reinforcements.

Except when called to outlying areas, Searson made a production out of helping the marshal with routine chores like night rounds. The sheriff checked the stores along Main Street. The marshal and deputies walked back streets with less fanfare.

Garn had watched the sheriff's show a few times, listened to Ellman's other gunmen boast about how easily they could rob one of those stores and never get caught, and agreed with the premise if not the proposed methods.

The only thing that mattered tonight was the way Searson routinely cut through the narrow space between the gunsmith's and saddle maker's to get behind the stores and check back doors. Now Garn slid into that space, flattened against the outer wall of the gunsmith's shop, and waited.

Finally. Boots echoed on the boards of the walk, stopped, started again, and came closer. The size and mass of the shadow moving into the gap between the buildings put to rest Garn's slight concern that the marshal or a deputy had for some reason taken the sheriff's place tonight. Oblivious, Searson brushed past Garn.

"Hsst. Sheriff."

The big man whirled, and Garn swung, hoping for cheekbone and eye, but knowing from the sound, he'd hit jaw. In spite of the tremendous blow, Searson lurched forward with a roar.

Garn backed up two steps and swung again. Ribs this time. Grunting with pain, Searson kept coming. A huge fist smashed into one side of Garn's face and slammed him against the wall. Gasping for breath, he jabbed the end of the spoke into the bigger man's diaphragm, doubling him over and knocking him back. Garn used the space gained to swing again, this time for the legs.

Wood and bone cracked, Searson went down screaming. The acrid scent of urine rose on the night air. Garn shoved the end of the spoke under the sheriff's chin, shutting him up and cutting off his breath.

"How do you feel right now, big man? I think maybe you feel the way a woman does when a man beats her and she can't fight back and can't get away."

He let up a little, hearing the sheriff suck in a sobbing breath. "Oh, and the businessmen around here want you to know this is just a taste. You try to collect another penny of protection money, and what will be under your chin will be a rifle barrel, and the man holding it will pull the trigger."

The moment they heard those screams, the marshal and deputies would have started this way at a run. Garn dropped the wheel spoke and cat-footed to the alley. All that mattered now was getting back to the Cattlemen's without being seen.

When Garn walked in, Ellman, Luntz, and Foreman still sat as they were when he left, whiskey glasses to hand, cards and poker chips spread on the table.

"So?" Ellman spoke, but three pair of eyes asked the question.

"It's done."

"Did you give him the message?"

“I did.”

“Was he properly impressed?”

“He sure seemed to be.”

“We didn’t hear shots,” Luntz said, his hands fidgeting more than ever.

“That’s because there weren’t any. If there’s a way to shoot a man in the dark and be sure not to kill, I don’t know it.”

“Well, what did you do!”

“Impressed him, like I said.”

Luntz buried his nose in his glass and subsided when Ellman spoke. “Whatever you did, he hit you hard enough to leave his mark.”

“He did.”

“I’m not giving you the bank’s letter until I know for sure you hurt him a lot more than he did you. In the morning.”

Ellman would hand over that letter in the morning, or Garn would find another wheel spoke. “Sure, morning’s fine,” he said. “Now since we’re all stuck here till midnight, let’s play poker.”

Chapter 10

EXPECTATION OF A SWARM OF ANGRY LAWMEN breaking into his room kept Garn awake the rest of the night, not reassured by the lack of reaction. If Sheriff Hal had made no accusations because he planned a private revenge, it didn't bode well.

The arrest would fall to the town marshal. Maybe Banford wanted a warrant in hand or extra sheriff's deputies backing him, neither of which was a comforting thought either.

The sheriff's one good punch had done some damage. After wiggling his jaw back and forth and probing for loose teeth, Garn fingered the swelling and bruising. A day's stubble wouldn't cover the damage but was better than nothing, and shaving would be touchy anyway. He washed, dressed, and went to wake Edie.

She didn't need waking. Instead of peering at him through a crack in the door and telling him to wait, Edie threw open the door, radiant in a blue dress.

"I'll change to trousers when we're ready to leave but this is better here in town," she said.

"Good idea." Garn stifled his disappointment. If things went as they should, he would see her in those pants every day for the next few weeks. Better that no man with less self-control ever got a glimpse.

Another woman might be too polite or delicate to mention beard stubble, but Edie squinted up at him with one and a half eyes and said, "You might as well have shaved because those whiskers don't hide the swelling. You even look a little bleary-eyed. You drank too much and got in a fight, didn't you?"

"No, ma'am, not exactly."

"Don't ma'am me."

"Yes, ma'am." He smiled at her, expecting a lopsided smile back. Instead she turned abruptly away.

If she could see the swelling that easily, so could anyone else. She was right, he should have shaved. At least that way he could have had a smile out of her before the day went to hell.

By the time she had her coat on, she'd put aside her annoyance. "If only we'd known what would happen, we could have left all this at the ranch," she said, waving a hand at the clothing piled on every flat surface in the room. "Now what are we going to do with it? Haul it back there?"

"The hotel will have somewhere to put what we don't need. They'll charge, but not as much as keeping a room."

"The stores won't be open so we can buy supplies for hours."

"The café's open. We'll eat and see about horses first. Yours are good horses, but we need more, so let's rent that gelding I had before and one other. We can use them as pack horses today and take what we need back out there."

"I gathered all those cattle with just Sunny."

"Did you go at it can-see to can't-see?"

Her silence was an admission she hadn't.

The clerk called out as soon as they reached the lobby. "Mrs. Thorne. I have another message here for you."

The plain envelope had nothing but her name on it.

"Give it here," Garn said, slitting it open with his knife when she did and handing it back. The single sheet Edie pulled out and unfolded had "Bank of Wilrose" and the address printed at the top.

Garn read enough over her shoulder to be sure what she held was the letter Stewart Mease had written the day before. It was. One of the knots in Garn's belly unwound.

Both her eyes glistened when she finished reading, and she smiled at him after all. "Thank you. I should find Mr. Ellman and thank him too."

"I saw him last night and thanked him for you, took him a box of cigars."

"Oh, good, but I'll thank him personally before we leave. Maybe he's having breakfast here right now. Let's eat here and see."

"It's too early for him."

"You just want to go to the café."

Yes, he did. Before he said so, the hotel's front door crashed open. Marshal Banford and Deputy Denny stormed in, drawing guns and yelling as they came.

"Hands up!"

"Get your hands up, you're under arrest."

So much for breakfast anywhere. Garn raised his hands and waited. Edie paled and stepped back, the envelope and letter falling from her hand. Garn started to move between her and the lawmen and stopped.

Fool that he was, Deputy Denny had his revolver cocked and his finger on the trigger. His eyes shone with fury. Any movement could set him off.

Banford lifted Garn's revolver from its holster and his knife from its scabbard.

"Get Mrs. Thorne out of the line of fire," Garn said through his teeth.

Banford ignored him, shoved gun and knife behind his belt, and searched Garn from head to toe, his hands rough, invading and emptying pockets onto the floor.

Eddie recovered from her initial shock. "What are you doing?" she demanded. "Arrested for what?"

"For trying to kill the sheriff last night, that's what. Doc says he'll never walk again." Spittle sprayed from Denny's mouth with every word and bubbled on his lips.

"He couldn't have. He was with me last night. He—"

Garn cut her off, raising his voice to drown hers out. "I had supper with Mrs. Thorne, left her here about seven."

"Nobody cares about your damn supper, you low-down, yellow-bellied bushwhacker."

"That's enough!" The marshal closed one handcuff bracelet tight on Garn's right wrist, yanked both arms behind him, and fastened the other. "He's disarmed and in custody now. Put the gun away."

Denny stood there, hunched forward, arms outstretched and gun wavering slightly, his desire to pull the trigger in every line of face and body.

Muscles in Garn's chest tightened as if they could stop the bullet that idiot was about to fire. Or the way Denny was shaking, he might hit Eddie or the clerk.

Garn cursed himself for ever going near Eddie this morning. He should have anticipated how violently Wilrose's law would react to the end of whatever bribes Sheriff Hal had been slipping them.

"Eddie, get behind the desk with the clerk, will you? Then both of you get down." Garn said softly.

"He's going to shoot you."

"Please."

She tore her gaze from Denny's gun, searched Garn's face, then walked around behind the desk. The clerk ducked out of sight. Eddie didn't.

Not good enough, but better. Garn spoke as if to a spooked horse. "After I left Mrs. Thorne, I stopped by the Cattlemen's, and Mr. Ellman invited me to stay and play cards. I didn't pay much attention to time, but it must have been after midnight when the game broke up."

"The Cattlemen's is closed and everyone knows it," Denny shouted.

"Not to Mr. Ellman."

"He's lying. Look at him. Hal says he hit him. Look at his face."

“I had a little too much to drink and stumbled into a porch post on the way back to the hotel in the dark.”

“The hell you did. You lying—”

Garn saw the hardening of intention in Denny’s eyes and dove head first under the extended gun and into the deputy’s gut. The shot meant for Garn’s heart went into the ceiling as Denny fell on his ass. Garn used his weight to pin man and gun to the floor until Banford twisted the gun from Denny’s hand and yanked them both to their feet.

“Get back to the office before I tear that badge off you,” Banford said.

“It wouldn’t have happened if he hadn’t jumped me. It’s his fault,” Denny said defensively.

“You’re the one who pulled the trigger, and the badge wouldn’t protect you from a murder charge. Get.”

Still full of righteous fury, Denny started to argue, tore his eyes from Garn long enough to really look at the marshal, and what he saw in the older man’s face changed his mind. He stalked off.

“Hope no one upstairs took that bullet,” Garn said as the hotel door closed behind the deputy.

The marshal swore viciously. He pointed a finger at the clerk, who was on his feet again.

“You. Go upstairs and check.”

More and more people who had been in the hotel dining room crowded around the doorway, the bravest among them spreading along the far wall of the lobby, all curious about the gunshot and raised voices.

Seymour Ellman pushed through the gawkers. “What’s going on here? If you need to shoot someone, do it somewhere other than my hotel.”

“I’m sorry about that, Mr. Ellman. Deputy Reston felt threatened.”

“Threatened? By Coburn? Is that why Coburn’s in handcuffs?”

“He’s under arrest for assaulting Sheriff Searson last night.”

“Ah, yes, the dining room has been buzzing with the story. Sometime around eight if the gossips are right.”

“About twenty after. A lot of us heard some of it.”

“Then you’re arresting the wrong man. Coburn was playing cards with me, Jacob Luntz, and Moses Foreman at the Cattlemen’s from just after seven till right around midnight.”

“The sheriff says it was Coburn. There were things said, and he recognized the voice.”

“He’s hurt and must be confused.”

“He heard Coburn, and no one sat in a chair playing cards all night. You all stepped out back now and then.”

“Customers need to step out back. My private rooms include a water closet.”

The marshal's mouth tightened into a thin line. The man must be as angry as Deputy Denny, but he controlled it better. Banford wasn't going to argue with Ellman. He was going to march Garn off to a cell and lock him up for as long as he could justify.

The thought of a few days in the Wilrose jail didn't bother Garn. The thought of Deputy Denny and his gun on the other side of the bars did.

The clerk's return from upstairs broke the tension.

"No one's hurt. A maid helped me check the rooms where no one answered the door, and we found the bullet hole in 205 in the floor right in front of the washstand. We couldn't find the bullet, but there's no hole in the ceiling so it must be there. It must have rolled under something."

Marshal Banford drew in a great breath and let it out so hard the hairs of his mustache fluttered. "I know Luntz and Foreman are going to sing the same tune, but don't even think of leaving town until I give you the say so." He unlocked the handcuffs.

"Fine," Garn said, rubbing his wrists. "How about my gun and knife. I don't want to be unarmed in the same town as Deputy Denny."

"Too bad. Hide in one of Mr. Ellman's private rooms with a water closet," the marshal said, spinning on his heel and slamming the door on his way out.

AS SOON AS THE MARSHAL DISAPPEARED, Edie ventured out from behind the desk, her heart still racing. Garn already had everything the marshal had thrown on the floor back in his pockets, and he gave her no chance to say a word. He swooped the bank's letter up off the floor, shoved it back in the envelope, and handed it to her.

"Here. Put that away. I'll be right back."

His long legs took the stairs two at a time, and Edie ran after him. He wasn't going to avoid telling her the truth that easily.

She followed him to his room, too close behind for him to shut the door in her face, and stood in the doorway as he rummaged in a leather valise, brought out a revolver, loaded it, and shoved it in his holster.

"If the marshal wouldn't give your other gun back, he doesn't want you to have one."

"I don't care."

"You did it, didn't you? You and Mr. Ellman and the others are lying, and the marshal and Denny know it but won't be able to prove it. And it's all got something to do with this letter, doesn't it?" She held up the letter still clutched in her hand.

"Are you going to stand there and shout down the hall for everyone to hear?"

"I am not shouting down the hall."

“Neither am I. Let’s go for a slow walk to the café.”

If there was anything Edie didn’t want, it was to sit in the café with Ada smirking at her and everyone else staring and whispering. “I’m not hungry.”

“I am, and if you’re not going to take decent care of that, give it to me.” He plucked the envelope out of her hand, tucked it in his inner coat pocket, and lifted her out of his way as easily as he had lifted Ada the awful night Edie first met him.

She hurried after him again, slamming the hotel door behind her slightly less loudly than Marshal Banford only because she didn’t have his strength.

A few people moved along the street, none close. Edie stopped halfway to the café and crossed her arms over her chest.

Garn’s expression was as closed and eyes as cold as that first night. The stubble darkening his jaw might even make him look more dangerous to a stranger. None of it affected Edie any longer. His smile was what made her turn away, unable to deal with the feelings it evoked.

“All right, no one can hear us now,” she said. “You did it, didn’t you? That’s why your jaw is swollen and bruised. He hit you, and you crippled him.”

“I no more crippled him than he blinded your eye. You know what Dr. Wallace is like. He told them what could happen if every unlikely thing that could go wrong did. I broke his legs. Legs heal. I had a broken leg myself once. Am I a cripple?”

“Mr. Ellman didn’t go to the bank with you as a favor. He got the letter for you, and you beat Hal for him. Why? Why did he want that? Why would respectable men like Mr. Luntz and Mr. Foreman go along with it? And why did you do it?”

“He wanted it because the good sheriff has been extorting protection money from every business in the county for years. They put up with it when it was small amounts, but he keeps demanding more, probably because he’s paying Banford and every deputy enough to get them to look the other way. He sucking the county dry, and they’ve had enough.”

“I’m surprised they didn’t want him killed.”

“Some of them did. Ellman thinks one of the deputies would just step up. This way they’re all warned.”

A man left the hotel and walked toward them. Edie and Garn moved closer to the front of the dress shop behind them and fell silent until he passed.

“So you traded a beating for the letter.”

“I did.”

“How did you do it?”

“Wheel spoke.”

Bile rose in the back of her throat. How could he? “He’s lucky you only broke his legs then.”

“I whacked his jaw and ribs pretty good too. I suppose if Dr. Wallace isn’t predicting he’ll never chew again or breathe again, those can’t be too bad.”

“You shouldn’t have done it. You had to know I’d rather not have the letter. I suppose you want half the cattle that badly.”

“What I wanted was to beat that big bastard to a pulp. I didn’t like him from the first time I saw him swagger into the Cattlemen’s, but since that night at the café, it’s been an itch I’d pay to scratch. There wasn’t much satisfaction doing it this way, but it was better than nothing.”

“I wish you’d watch your language. I’m not in trousers now, you know.”

“This from the woman who can out-cuss a muleskinner.”

“That was an extreme situation.”

“Uh hunh.”

The reminder of the way she had cursed that night brought back memories of the pain and the fear, the hopelessness that made her want to give up and just lay there in the cold until Garn had materialized out of the night, luring her back into the world.

“If you want to call off our deal and hire someone else to help with the cattle, it’s all right,” he said. That was exactly what she should do. Edie stared down the street without seeing it.

“With that letter you can back Hanneman off and hire decent help,” he added.

Doing what she should hadn’t saved Drew or the ranch or her, and she was the one who had spent considerable time these past days imagining using various Medieval torture devices on Hal.

“I have a partner, and I expect him to back Hanneman off for me,” Edie said. One corner of Garn’s mouth twitched, and she smiled at him. “And now I am hungry.”

“If you want to eat at the hotel, we can go back.”

“Absolutely not. You know I love eating at the café.”

Chapter 11

EDIE RODE TOWARD THE AT BESIDE GARN, ignoring her achy ribs, which were better than yesterday, much better than the day before, and the least of her worries.

Breakfast, packing what needed to go back to the ranch, storing what didn't at the hotel, buying two extra horses because Todd wanted the price of a horse for a month's rental, getting and loading supplies—it all took time, until the morning disappeared.

On top of that, Marshal Banford had held off until early afternoon before admitting he had no basis for demanding Garn stay in town.

With such a late start, they would be lucky to arrive at the AT by sundown—if they went straight to the AT. Another hour and she'd wish for a heavy sweater under her coat. An occasional glimpse of green at the base of a clump of winter-brown grass promised spring. Edie imagined the new grass shared her feelings and wished it were somewhere warmer.

“If we go to the Rafter H first, we won't get to the AT before dark,” Edie said, repeating an earlier argument in different words. “If we hold off on seeing Jim Hanneman until morning, we can unpack while the house warms up, get a good night's sleep, and set out early.”

“Setting out early enough to be sure of catching him before he heads out for the day would mean miles in the dark in the morning instead of tonight. And not talking to him before he finds us out here is liable to bring him and his whole crew storming down on us, none of them willing to listen to anything we say.”

Edie turned up her collar and huddled deeper in her coat. “I'd really rather not face more shouting and threats today.”

“Banford ought to follow through and yank that badge off Deputy Denny. He doesn't have the temperament for a lawman. Next time he goes loco, someone may take him on.”

“So long as that someone isn't you.”

“I don't plan on crossing paths with him again.”

Edie tipped her head forward a bit, using her hat brim to hide the way she studied Garn. He rode with an ease that few men, even those who spent their lives in the saddle, attained. The dark stubble that intensified the dangerous air earlier only made him more attractive.

As if she needed that.

Gunman, dangerous, manipulative, unscrupulous, arrogant, high-handed. Edie silently recited the litany of reasons to keep her distance—without any effect whatsoever on the lightness she felt in his presence, the quickening in her blood she recognized all too well.

She focused on the road ahead for long minutes before her resolve crumbled. Finding out more about him wouldn't hurt.

“Were you in the cavalry in the war?”

“No, cannon fodder infantry.”

“You must have been very young.”

“I didn't think so then. Pa kept me home until I was eighteen, and I was afraid it would be over before I got there. I signed up in late '63 and wished every day he'd hogtied me for another two years. At least he lived long enough for me to thank him.”

Edie did a quick calculation. So he was thirty-two now. Not that much older than her own twenty-eight. She could ask where he'd served, or she could ask....

“Tell me about your sisters.”

“There's not much to tell. Two older, two younger. They're all married and working on big families.”

“What are their names?”

“Diamond, Emerald, Ruby, and Pearl.”

“Oh, now I know you're making it up.” Or maybe not. “So Garn is from Garnet.”

“It is, but it's like Edith. Di and Em feel the same about theirs.”

Edie laughed so hard she had to clamp her right arm against her side and lean that way.

“Are you all right?”

“It hurt for a minute, but it's worth it. My mother is the only one I let use Edith. ‘Let’ is the wrong word. I can't stop her.”

“Our ma is the same. She says she worked hard enough producing her own jewels, and no one's going to keep her from calling us by our rightful names.”

Asking more about the sisters, their husbands and children would be prying even if she wanted to know. How did they feel about a brother who earned his living with a gun? Did they even know?

About the time another question burned on her tongue, the entrance to the Rafter H ranch road appeared. Edie's curiosity disappeared, and her stomach roiled in anticipation of the coming confrontation.

AFTER THE TURN ONTO THE RANCH ROAD, Garn unbuttoned his coat and loosened the spare revolver now in a shoulder rig then unfastened the thong on his Colt. Hoping for a trouble-free encounter was one thing. Being foolishly optimistic another.

“For a man who thinks putting Hannemans on notice first thing will avoid trouble, you’re sure fussing over your guns,” Edie said.

A woman really should be less observant. “Being ready never hurts. You wait here. I’ll deliver the news.”

“No, absolutely not.”

“I could put you afoot and take the horses with me. It’s probably another mile or more to the house.”

“But you won’t.”

No, he wouldn’t. “Then at least stay off to one side.”

She didn’t answer because she wouldn’t do that either.

“Suppose I give you my spare revolver?”

She reined up and gave him a one-and-a-half, maybe even one-and-two-thirds, steely-eyed glare.

“The only one who waved a gun around last time we saw the Hannemans was you. If there was any way to avoid this, I would, but that’s because there’s going to be anger and shouting and maybe threats, not because anyone is going to start shooting.”

“I never waved a gun around in my life.”

“Fine. Aimed with steady precision.”

“Last time they threatened to lay hands on you, to tie you on a horse, and run you back to town.”

“You just threatened to tie me up and leave me, and you didn’t mean it either.”

“You make my sisters seem docile, and until now I thought they were tough. Not only that, you’re giving me a sudden yen for whiskey.”

“Fortunately we didn’t pack any,” Edie said primly.

Garn laughed, and Edie’s eyebrows rose. If she was surprised after a few days’ acquaintance, she’d fall off the horse if she knew how long it had been since he laughed out loud.

The ranch headquarters came into view. The AT had the look of a prosperous working outfit. The Rafter H had been set up as a showplace. The ranch house sat on a small rise, two storeys of gray stone with a wide porch along the length of the first floor. Multiple outbuildings all bore fresh coats of dark red paint and white trim.

Sneaking up on the place would be difficult to impossible. Two black and white ranch dogs raced toward Garn and Edie, barking but never coming close enough for a horse to catch with a well-timed kick.

Three men appeared on the porch. Garn narrowed his eyes, not that he expected that would make the rifle Jim Hanneman cradled disappear.

Garn reined up at a polite distance and tipped his hat. Edie stopped so close beside him their stirrups touched. He should have hogtied her and left her back by the county road when he had the chance.

“You’re trespassing again,” Hanneman said. “Turn around and head right back the way you came.”

“We’ll be gone in a minute,” Garn said. “The bank has agreed to give Mrs. Thorne thirty days to clear what’s hers off the AT, so we’ll be staying there for the next four weeks. We figure you need to know.

“I don’t believe you.”

Garn had seen men shot for those exact words and never understood the impulse more clearly. Of course the man taking offense at being called a liar never had a rifle pointed at his middle or a stubborn woman beside him when he drew his gun, and Hanneman’s rifle now pointed straight at Garn’s belt buckle. There ought to be a rule against days like this one.

“We were afraid you wouldn’t believe us,” Edie said. “That’s why we brought a letter from the bank with us.” She turned to Garn. “Show him.”

Garn stared at Hanneman, unwilling to reach inside his coat. Hanneman stared back, unwilling to lower the rifle.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Edie reached over and pulled the letter from Garn’s pocket.

“I don’t believe it,” Hanneman said again. “Mease would never do such a thing.”

Rick Hanneman stepped off the porch and took the letter from Edie.

The rifle barrel lowered enough only Garn’s horse was in line for a bullet. Someone needed to take that Winchester away from the old man and bend the barrel over his head.

Rick took his time reading the letter. “That’s what it says all right.”

“They forged it.”

“It looks real to me.” Rick handed the letter to his father, who dropped it to the boards at his feet without a glance. “If that’s real, you must have stuck a gun in Mease’s ear and forced him to write it.”

Garn leaned an arm casually on the saddle horn. Showing anger would be like showing weakness. “I asked him for some consideration for a widow who never got notice of when she had to vacate the property, and he was decent enough to give it.”

“That’s another lie. The sheriff delivers those notices in person.”

“The sheriff’s the liar, and you know it, and he wouldn’t have done it for free, so someone paid him to tell that particular lie and not to help himself to anything he liked the look of on the place.”

Hanneman’s nostrils flared and color rose. His older son looked down and away, shifting from one foot to the other. The movement caught Hanneman’s eye. He said nothing, but his expression and attitude changed.

“All right. You showed your letter. I’ll go see Stewart Mease tomorrow and find out the truth. If that thing’s genuine, you’ll have your thirty days, and the bank will do without Rafter H business so long as I’m above grass.”

That was an empty threat if Garn ever heard one. The old man was going to have the AT or die trying.

Rick picked up the letter and returned it to Garn.

“Thanks for your help,” Edie said so softly Garn almost didn’t catch it. Rick turned and smiled at her before joining his father and brother on the porch.

A thank you from her was more than enough. Garn spun his horse around, made sure the two on leads followed without tangling, and headed back on the ranch road.

“Didn’t you say young Hanneman is getting married soon?” he asked as soon as Edie caught up.

“Yes. Sometime this spring I think.”

Good. Rick Hanneman needed to save his charm for his fiancée instead of throwing it at widows who were none of his business.

“So I’m the only one who would pull a gun instead of sticking to shouting and threatening, am I?” he said as they turned onto the county road.

“Do you want an apology?”

“No, but I’m warning you—I’m going to kill the next man who points a gun at me, so you stop being foolish and stay out of the line of fire.”

“If it happens again, I will borrow your spare revolver. I’ve had enough of uncalled-for belligerence myself.”

The uncalled-for belligerence tensing Garn’s every muscle faded away. Stubborn, difficult, and foolishly courageous she might be, but if he had to choose a woman to ride the river with, Edie Thorne would be the one.

Chapter 12

AFTER A RESTLESS NIGHT OF BROKEN SLEEP and strange dreams, Edie lay awake waiting for the dawn, or the first sound of Garn rising.

The house that had been home since her marriage almost seven years ago no longer felt familiar. How could every stick of furniture, book on the shelves, picture on a wall, and dish in the cupboards be the same as it had always been, yet seem foreign?

The sound of Garn leaving to feed the horses came as a relief. Edie hopped out of bed and pulled on clothes as fast as possible, hurrying to the kitchen and the warmth of the stove.

She stirred the coals, added wood, and had coffee boiling and bacon frying by the time Garn returned, a gust of cold air following him through the door.

“What happened to your other trousers?” he said, pouring a cup of coffee and leaning against the wall, too close, too tall, too male. Another day’s whisker growth made him look more wickedly attractive than ever.

“They didn’t fit properly. I threw them in with what needs to go to the church for the poor.” Her wool shirt and trousers had once been Drew’s and didn’t fit well either. In spite of her best efforts at taking them in, they hung off her much smaller frame.

“I like the other pair better.”

“I can’t imagine why.”

“Sure you can.”

She didn’t even have to see one side of his mouth twist up to know he was doing it, and for it to have an unwanted effect on her pulse and breathing.

“These are warmer,” she said, concentrating on pouring hotcake batter as if perfect circles were the most important thing in her life.

They ate in silence until Garn shared out the last of the coffee. “If the Thornes ate like this every day, they were lucky men.”

“Supper last night didn’t convince you I’m a terrific cook?” Cold and tired, after hauling everything they brought from town inside and storing it away, they had shared bread from town and beans from a can barely warm before mumbling their good nights and heading for beds.

“Not hardly, but you’re improving.”

He rose. “Let’s get going. I can’t help cook, but I can help clean up, and the water in that kettle ought to be hot enough now for me to get rid of these whiskers.”

“I thought you’d keep them. Don’t they keep your face warmer?”

“They itch. If my face needs warming, I’ll use a scarf.”

Edie filled the dishpan with hot water and handed Garn a dishtowel. Neither Pa Thorne nor Drew had ever touched a dish rag or dish towel in his life. There was something to be said for a man raised with four sisters.

Clean-shaven was good too.

GARN FOLLOWED EDIE THROUGH the maze of gullies and broken land, still regretting her cavalier discard of the shirt and trousers she’d bought in town. Not only did what she wore now remind him of her dead husband, everything bagged and sagged where the others stretched tight.

She handled her little sorrel mare with quiet competence, but neither Edie nor the mare would last all day working this rough country, which posed a dilemma.

Talking her into going back to the house when she wore out was no good. She’d be vulnerable there alone. The chances of Jim Hanneman causing more trouble or Deputy Denny showing up still on the prod had to be small. Small but not nonexistent. Getting her to settle down by a fire in some out of the way spot would be safer, but not much fun for her.

If only she didn’t look so tired. She must not have slept any better than he did, although her reasons would be different. His night had alternated between heated visions of Edie that kept him awake and aroused and vaguely disturbing dreams of his family every time he managed a short spell of restless sleep.

Dreams of Edie took no imagination to interpret. She’d ridden right under his nose in the good trousers all afternoon yesterday. The luxurious size of the big bed he slept in, which had a lot of extra woman-sized space, didn’t help.

Old Man Thorne and his wife had once shared the room and bed. Their ghosts didn’t haunt the room, but that extra space in the bed kept a man’s imagination going.

Family? The small room between Edie’s and his held a bed the right size for a child. She shut that door without a word the first time they walked down the hall. If there was a better way to react to that than pretending not to notice, Garn still hadn’t come up with it.

The small bed had to be the reason his own family appeared in the dreams. Several of his nieces and nephews were about that size now. They weren't the only ones to appear, though. His father, mother, and three of his sisters sat around the long table in the big kitchen of the farmhouse, looking exactly the way they had before the war.

Em and her husband, who had the farm now, appeared as they had on his last visit, and theirs were the children he saw, sitting at the same table, laughing, talking, eating supper. He could only watch them, though, never take part, because he wasn't really there.

Eddie caused those dreams too. The two of them sitting at the small table in the kitchen last night had been an echo of long ago times, of visits home—of family.

Garn touched a spur to his horse and jogged up beside Eddie. A partner was not family, and temporary partner was all Eddie Thorne could ever be.

The brush barrier he'd made across the entrance to the canyon with the cattle appeared ahead, as did a big gap torn right through the middle. Eddie turned the air blue with mule-skinning language.

With an effort, Garn kept a straight face. "Didn't you tell me you saved that kind of language for extreme situations?"

"This is extreme. What if another dozen are gone?"

"What if only one or two are? Let's go see."

This time Garn's count matched hers.

"Eight-six," she said bitterly, "and that's with another new calf, and they don't count." She bit her lip and turned her head away.

Garn couldn't change the fact the calves were too young to trail a hundred miles, so he ignored everything but the count. "So figure eighty-three," he said. "There's not enough good graze left here, so you can't blame them for heading off after better. Is there another sheltered place we can move them to?"

"A few. Nothing this large."

"We only need enough grass for a few weeks. Let's move steers one place and cows another. Those mama cows don't want the steers close right now anyway, and we have to separate them sooner or later."

"All right." Eddie squared her shoulders and eased her horse toward a small bunch of steers already lifting their heads and eying the horses and riders suspiciously.

WHEN GARN SAID HE HAD DONE SOME MAVERICKING in Texas and quit before he got killed, Eddie had taken it as a confession of lack of skill. Now she saw her mistake. He was as good with the cattle as most cowhands she'd known on the AT and better than a few.

The steers moved out of the overgrazed canyon with very little encouragement. Some needed cutting out from the cows, but not many. Discouraging the cows from coming along was the hard part.

“If the split stays like this, you’re going to get the short end of this deal,” Garn said as they started the thirty-nine steers along a draw.

“The ones that escaped are probably steers. They’re ornerier.”

“You haven’t dealt with many mama cows with new calves if you can say that.”

Eddie thought about it. “No, I suppose I haven’t. Pa Thorne was careful what he let me get into.”

“Rounding up this lot on your own took some doing. You’re a good hand.”

The compliment banished her fatigue for the moment. “Not really. It took me all winter, and I backed away from anything that challenged me.”

“Your mare’s too small and pretty to impress them.”

“You will never convince me a cow cares about pretty.”

“Delicate then. Tomorrow you try the dun we bought in town, and you’ll see the difference.”

“If you’re right about pretty, I’m sure he’ll be wonderful. He’s homely enough to scare a cow into the next county.”

“Whoa.” Garn reined up, pointing. “Do you see what I do?”

“It’s just another side canyon, too small for what we need and half-filled with brush.”

“Brush and at least two sneaky cow critters.”

Shoving the escapees in with the rest brought their total up to eighty-five.

By the end of the day, Eddie’s knees wobbled when she dismounted, but in spite of sore and tired muscles, she hummed as she cooked supper. On her own, rounding up the five head they had found and added back into the herd today would have taken a week, and she would have given up on the big steer Garn roped and hauled out of its hiding place.

With twenty-seven days to go, Garn could be right about a final tally close to a hundred fifty. Having help made everything about the gather easier, even fun now and then.

Flipping their steaks in the frying pan, Eddie raised her voice to reach Garn, who was leafing through books on the parlor shelves the way he had through Dr. Wallace’s books. “At least in this weather the beef we brought from town ought to last a while. Was there anything in the smokehouse when you took it there?”

“Half a ham.”

“That’s all there was when I left. Do you really think someone paid Hal to say he served me with that last notice and not do it? And to evict me but not take anything? No one would know he took the money. There wasn’t much of it.”

“Extorting money from businessmen proves he’s willing to cash in on his office. Not only do I think someone paid him to cheat you, I think it was Hanneman’s older son. Did you see how shifty he looked when I mentioned it?”

“No. I missed that, and much as Pa Thorne disliked Jim Hanneman, he would have defended him as honest.”

Garn abandoned the books and joined her in the kitchen, leaning against the wall close enough to touch again. “I don’t think Old Man Hanneman knew about any deal with Sheriff Hal, but I think that outfit knows better than you do exactly how many of your cattle are still on the place, and at least the one son was willing to do something to keep them.”

“Rick wouldn’t do that.”

“The other son.”

“That’s JJ. James Junior.”

“Well, James Junior looked as guilty as a man can look. I saw it, his father saw it, and his father knows I saw it.”

“That must have made for an unpleasant evening in that house. I’m not sure I’ve ever spoken to JJ, but I hate to think he paid Hal to do that to me.”

“At a guess he wanted you gone and the cattle and anything else of value left. You’re probably right that since they came for you with a wagon, the plan was to let you take enough so you wouldn’t be destitute, but then Sheriff Hal lost his temper. I bet he had an eye for you once and lost out to your husband, didn’t he?”

“Oh, no. He took me to a church picnic one time, and I danced with him now and then, but I danced with most of the men in town back then. He couldn’t have.... He was Drew’s best friend, and he blames me for his death.”

“Maybe so, but I bet he thinks you should have gone on more than one picnic with him.”

Eddie shook her head as she put the food on the table. Not Hal. She had only gone on that picnic with him to find out more about Drew.

Tired and hungry, they ate in silence for a few minutes before Garn said, “You really are a good cook. I was too stingy with what I said at breakfast.”

“As good as Ada?” What was it about the man that had things that made her want to bite her tongue off tumbling out of her mouth?

Garn showed no sign of recognizing her petty attitude toward Ada. “I think her mother and father do most of the cooking.”

“I’m not sure how much her mother does. Ada helps her father in the kitchen and waits on customers too. It’s small wonder she’s short tempered.” There that sounded adult. Eddie toyed with a forkful of potato. “She really does dislike me, and it’s mutual, but when I came here I didn’t know.”

Garn swallowed coffee and raised his eyebrows.

“Before I came to Wilrose, Drew had been keeping company with her, and she had expectations. He stopped seeing her that fall and began courting me.”

“She ought to be glad he changed his mind before he married her.”

“She’s not, and they might both have been happier if he never met me.”

She shouldn’t have said that either. Edie forced herself to finish her meal, appetite gone.

Garn polished his plate with a biscuit, rose, and refilled both their coffee cups before saying, “So you weren’t happy with him?”

“Oh, I was. The first years before Pa and Andy died were wonderful, but it was never the same for Drew. He didn’t want any part of the ranch. He didn’t like being out here with only family and the hands. I knew when I married him he planned to sell out when he inherited the ranch and move to a city, but it took me a long time to understand how strongly he felt. He liked to be around people, to eat in restaurants, go to dances, have a drink with friends, and play cards. When a traveling troupe came to Wilrose, he’d be the first to buy tickets, even if we had seen their performance three times already.”

“I sympathize with him in a way. My folks were farmers, and I was born knowing I didn’t want to follow a plow.”

“Drew was an only son, and he loved his father too much to hurt him by telling him the truth.”

“I’m an only son, and I loved my father. Maybe I was lucky because Em married a farmer, and they took over the farm even before Pa died, but they all knew when I left for the war I’d never come back to stay.”

“Drew couldn’t bring himself to do that. He put all his hopes in the future, and I made a terrible mistake right at the beginning.”

Again the eyebrows.

“I fell in love with the ranch. It didn’t seem like it should make any difference. He knew when the time came I’d go with him to San Francisco, or anywhere else for that matter, and I would have been happy with him there too, but he took my not sharing his feelings as a betrayal. It put a distance between us.”

“He put a distance between you.”

“No, we both were guilty. Looking back, I think what made me more appealing to him than Ada was that I came from an Eastern city. When I first got an inkling of how strongly he felt, I should have pretended to feel the same.”

Garn’s expression made it clear his sympathy for Drew had gone south. Edie hurried to defend her husband.

“I don’t mean things weren’t good between us, they were. Those years were wonderful, and Andy was a blessing. When they died, Drew felt as if he’d wished Pa’s death and losing Andy was punishment. But it wasn’t true. It was the natural order of things that Drew would inherit someday and be able to start the life he wanted. He never wished his father’s death.”

“I’m sorry, and I’m sorry about your boy. That’s a bitter thing to bear.”

“The influenza was terrible that year. We weren’t the only family affected. We were all so sick, and then the grief on top, and for Drew such terrible guilt. Nothing I said or did helped. He just fell apart. I shouldn’t be spilling this all over you.”

“Any time. If there’s more, spill away.”

“No, just that even if I knew for sure Ada would have been better for him, I wouldn’t change anything. I’m too selfish to give back the good years, and I could never give Andy back. He was—joy.”

“They were all lucky to have you. Don’t regret what you got or what you gave. Come on. You wash, I’ll wipe.”

Eddie rose and shook soap flakes into the dishpan. Not only did listing Garn’s faults no longer work to quell her burgeoning feelings, right now she couldn’t even remember one of those faults. Garn Coburn was strength and comfort. He was the first good thing to come along since Pa and Andy died and because of him she would be able to go to Denver, take as much time as necessary to secure a good teaching position, and make new friends.

Why the thought of achieving everything she’d worked so hard for all winter depressed her so much she couldn’t understand. It must be fatigue.

Chapter 13

BRIMMING WITH ENTHUSIASM, Edie jogged the big dun gelding along a deep gully on the tenth morning of the cow hunt. Garn's prediction of a final tally close to a hundred fifty head now seemed possible—even likely.

Her single-handed efforts at gathering during the winter had been a few hours a day in spells of good weather. Working all day with only a short break for a noon meal made a difference. So did the way Garn went after animals Edie would find impossible to move on her own.

The weather continued dry with no sign of snow. In fact the day had already warmed so much Garn had stopped to shed his coat.

Dull brown walls rose more than ten feet overhead, bare except for an occasional bush clinging to an invisible outcropping. The thin carpet of grass along the gully floor showed signs cattle had grazed here. Edie pushed her horse along faster.

"I see red hides," she called back to Garn. "More than one. There's...." Her words died in her throat as the largest of the three animals she'd ridden up on swung around. She brought her horse to a sliding halt at the sight of a seven-foot span of horns crowning a bull with no more Hereford blood than the horse under her.

Edie's breath rasped loud in her own ears as her mind raced. In spite of the lowered head and mean little eyes, he wouldn't necessarily charge. Most cattle on the range were as keen to get away as any wild animal.

So long as he didn't feel cornered.... Behind the cattle, the gully walls met. He was trapped unless he ran past her and then Garn.

The bull tossed that huge head and pawed.

Her horse fought against her tight hold and danced in place. He wanted away from the bull as much as Edie did. If she let him whirl and run, would it provoke a charge? Could the bull overtake the gelding? Edie hesitated too long. The bull bellowed and charged.

She reined hard to the left. The dun almost spun clear. A smashing blow to her leg and her horse's struggle to stay on his feet threw Edie half out of the saddle.

She lost a stirrup and grabbed leather as her horse fell to his knees. In a killing fury now, the bull would swap ends and attack again, hooking and ripping. Her mind screamed *let go, fall clear, run*. Her body refused to obey. Her hands stayed clenched on the saddle horn.

A rifle cracked once, twice, a third time. The dun lurched to his feet, still wanting to run. Garn appeared on foot as if from nowhere, clamping a hard hand on the reins. The bull was the one on its knees now. It slowly collapsed to its side and lay still.

"Get off and hang on to this horse," Garn ordered.

Edie pried her hands from the horn and dismounted, clinging to the saddle for a second until a wave of dizziness passed.

Garn walked to the bull and put a last bullet in its brain with his handgun.

"My horse is hurt," Edie said when he looked up.

"To hell with your horse."

He reached her in a few long strides, grabbed her by the shoulders, and kissed her hard. His mouth possessed, his tongue invaded. Edie kissed him back frantically, hanging on to him as desperately as she had to the saddle horn.

When he finally left her mouth and trailed small kisses across her jaw and down her neck, she buried her face against his shoulder, sure she could hear his heart racing as fast as her own.

Garn pushed her back enough to look in her eyes. "Are you all right?"

How could he find breath to talk after that kiss? Edie had to work at taking in enough air to answer.

"Yes, I'm fine. My horse—"

"What about your ribs? You almost went off."

"My ribs are fine. I'm fine. Please—"

"Yeah, yeah, the horse."

He let her go and moved to the off side of the dun. Edie dared a quick look at her leg. Fiery pain had spread from her calf to her ankle. The overlarge chaps that had been Pa Thorne's had a gaping tear where the bull's horn caught, but the wool of her trouser leg was intact underneath, no blood. One more bruise wouldn't matter, not even the huge ugly thing the pain guaranteed.

The bull's horn had only grazed her. Edie worked at calming the quivering dun even while waiting for another gunshot. If that horn had torn into the horse's belly....

The shot never came.

"It's not pretty, but he'll be all right if I stitch it and there's no infection." Garn finished his inspection by running a hand down each foreleg. "Get back on. If those other two get ideas, you better not be on the ground."

The two AT cows had retreated as far as possible and watched wide-eyed. If they bolted toward the open end of the gully, they'd trample anything in their way.

Eddie remounted. Garn's horse had retreated down the gully, reins dragging. "You need to get up too," Eddie said. "You can get up behind me."

He shook his head. "My leg would be right on that gash, and Mister Ugly would dump us both on the ground. Head for my horse, and I'll stay close."

Garn walked along with a hand on her knee until they reached his horse. Did he know the warmth of his touch stopped the shaking in both knees? He swung into the saddle and gestured toward the open end of the gully. "After you."

Eddie leaned to the side as she rode, peering at the dun's wound. Raw flesh gaped wide, blood oozed and dripped. Once she turned onto the wide trail along the creek bank, she slowed until Garn pushed his horse up beside her.

"You aren't lying to me about my horse so I'll ride him, are you? He may be ugly, but if he hadn't moved so fast, we'd both be dead."

"You know, I've lost count of the times you've called me a liar. If you were a man you'd be deader than that bull."

"You admit you lie."

"To lawmen, and they don't count."

"So I count?"

"Women I kiss always count."

"It's nice to know I'm one of a favored group."

Eddie caught the slight twitch at the corner of his mouth only because she watched for it. "You didn't answer about the horse," she said.

"I already told you. When we get back to the ranch, I'll stitch him up, and his chances are good."

"What about the cattle?"

"After the horse doctoring, I'll round up the wagon team, come back, and drag the carcass far enough away it won't bring coyotes and other varmints right to the cows and calves. Those two with the bull probably hightailed it out of there as soon as we left, but if not, I'll push them in with the rest."

"*You* will not come back. *We* will come back. I'm going to help."

"You're going to help with the horse. Have you ever held a twitch?"

"Yes." And hated every second of keeping a loop of rope twisted so tight around a horse's upper lip the poor thing didn't move for the pain. Pa Thorne claimed it didn't really hurt a horse the way it would a person, it distracted, but Eddie never believed it.

“After that,” Garn said, “you’re going to soothe your nerves in a hot bath. I’ll bring that tub in the tool shed inside, you’ll climb in, sit back, and relax.”

It sounded almost as good as hiding under the covers of her bed. “I’m fine. A hot bath would be lovely after I help you haul the body away and round up those two cows.”

She prepared for an argument, but the man who didn’t take no for an answer simply pushed his horse on ahead. Edie trailed behind without trying to catch up. Now wasn’t a good time to argue anyway. She might break down.

HOURS LATER EDIE LEANED BACK in the tub Garn had hauled in the house and filled with the water that heated while he worked on the horse. She shivered in spite of the hot water.

Holding the twitch so long they had to stop and give the horse breaks now and then had used the last of her fortitude. To her shame she hadn’t even tried to argue with Garn about staying at the house while he took care of the bull’s carcass.

One vision after another of what would have happened if Garn had been slower in catching up with her or less deadly with a rifle paraded through her mind every time she closed her eyes. She sat up and scrubbed vigorously, soaped her hair, stood, and rinsed from head to toe with the pitchers of water waiting on a nearby chair.

Garn wanted her to sit and soak, read a book, or take a nap, but he was wrong. Only keeping busy and occupied with other thoughts would stop the fear in her mind, and she could find plenty to do.

Combing the tangles from her hair required concentration. Running a brush through it over and over close to the stove so the heat dried it didn’t. Edie stopped the unwanted flashes of not only what had happened in the gully but what could have happened by listing every chore she could do.

Bread. She could bake bread this afternoon. First, mix the dough, knead, set to rise, then sort through and start packing what she wanted to take when they left here.

Garn wouldn’t make it back before dark, and he’d be cold and tired. They had barely started on the venison from the deer he’d shot day before yesterday. He must be tired of bacon, stew, and steaks, and there was plenty of time for a nice roast.

A pie would be easy too. Not dried apple, though. Peach! They had enough cans of peaches for a pie. Two.

As her list lengthened and expanded with details, Edie relaxed. Banishing the frightening memory had been easy really. She only regretted reliving Garn’s kiss led straight to what she didn’t want to relive. Still, that was bound to change soon, maybe once she had the bread out of the oven—or the roast in.

In the meantime, she went to look out the front window again. Garn wouldn't be back for hours, but it never hurt to look.

GARN LEFT EDIE TO HER BATH and strode to the barn. Catching the wagon team would be easy since Edie fed them each a handful of oats every morning and evening. He'd never give her grief over babying horses again.

The dun horse laid its ears back and turned its rump as he approached the box stall where it worked on a pile of hay large enough for two. The ugly hammerhead ought to be grateful to trade a little pain for extended treatment as royalty. From now on Edie would fuss over it as much as she did over her pretty mare.

Edie. Garn leaned against the stall wall and closed his eyes. She almost died today because he'd frozen like a raw recruit at the sight of that bull working up to a charge. The only other time fear had paralyzed him like that was the first time he'd seen the elephant.

From that day to this he'd dealt with enough death and destruction to immunize him to it. After the carnage of the war, there had been the cowhand who fell under stampeding cattle, another pulled under the water by his panicked horse during a river crossing, a family killed by Comanches, a miner caught by Apaches. A job like Ellman's paid so well because of the chances of having to kill or be killed. Garn had been shot three times.

None of it ever brought a flood of fear that numbed his mind and immobilized his body. None of it ever brought a wave of rage so fierce afterward. Only the feel of Edie's eyes on him stopped him from emptying his gun into the dead bull, reloading, and starting on the cows.

Nothing else ever made him want to hold a survivor against his chest, bind her to him, and never let go. This wasn't supposed to happen, none of it. If he hadn't broken every rule because of Edie, because of her defiant courage, because of the earnest way she looked at him with one gold-flecked brown eye when proposing this deal, none of it ever would have happened.

Garn's mind veered away from acknowledging exactly what had happened. He shook off useless thoughts and feelings, scooped a quart of oats in each of the buckets Edie used, and went to catch the wagon team. He'd be lucky to get back here before dark even without standing around wasting time daydreaming about things that couldn't be changed.

Chapter 14

A GUSTY WIND CARRYING THE PROMISE OF SNOW chased Garn back to the ranch. The rising moon only provided light on the rough trails now and then when a break in the heavy clouds floated past.

Eddie's face appeared at the front window of the house as he rode into the ranch yard. She disappeared so quickly he had no time to lift a hand, but the sight of her lifted his spirits.

He stripped the harness off the big horses and the saddle off Ned, rubbed each horse down, and led it into a stall with a manger full of hay and another quart of oats in the feed box.

The draft horses had needed way too much coaxing and bullying to get them anywhere near the bull's body, but once hitched to it, they'd settled down and done a good job. They might even deserve coddling.

As he approached the house, tantalizing scents of baking bread and roasting meat swirled on the wind. So much for the idea of Eddie resting.

Once inside, he barely had hat and coat off when quick footsteps sounded, then slowed. If she almost ran to him, she must still be upset. Too bad she caught herself.

"Is everything all right?" she asked. "I mean, did it go the way you...."

"It's fine. The cows were gone, but I didn't have time for them anyway, and the carcass is up on the flat lands, must be close to two miles from the cows and calves."

"Good. It's so late I... I'm glad you're back. Supper's ready," she said, retreating.

He followed her through the dark parlor to the light and warmth of the kitchen, pausing in the doorway to enjoy the sight of her, looking as domestic as a woman could with a white apron over a gray dress, strands of ebony hair straggling on her neck, and her face flushed from the heat of the stove. And beautiful. Also looking as beautiful as a woman could.

The injured eye opened fully now. Only a few splotches of fading yellow and green remained on the side of her face. She woke a hunger that had nothing to do with food.

"So how are you doing?" he asked.

“Fine.” Busy pulling a roasting pan from the oven, she threw a smile over her shoulder. “Really, I’m fine.”

No, she wasn’t, but she would be. A woman who bounced back from the losses she had endured in the last years wouldn’t be laid low for long by a single brush with death.

“Having a whole afternoon here at the house gave me time to fix a proper meal.” She pointed toward the sideboard.

Garn barely glanced at the perfect loaves of bread and pies with golden crusts. Every meal she’d put on the table after the first night had been excellent. “It smells good in here,” he said. “For that matter it smells good all the way to the barn.”

“It will taste better. You wait and see.”

“While I’m waiting, I’ll get that tub out of here. You should have left it for me to empty.”

“Don’t move it yet. More water can heat while we’re eating, and you can have a bath too.”

Submerging in hot water sounded good. His feet still ached from walking behind the team as it dragged the carcass out of the gully, along the creek, and up out of the maze of broken land.

Maybe he could have ridden one of the draft horses back to where he’d left Ned, but rather than find out the hard way neither one would tolerate a rider, he had kept ground driving them on the return trip.

A stroll around town in boots made for riding was one thing, miles over rough ground another. On top of that, the bitter wind whistling through the gullies and across the prairie had chilled him through. Hauling more water would be a cheap price to pay for a long, hot soak.

The roast venison tasted as good as Edie promised. Garn mopped the last gravy from his plate with a slice of fresh bread and let go of guilt and anger.

No one, including the horse, should complain about the events of the day. In the end, Edie wasn’t hurt, the two of them had enjoyed a pleasurable, if frantic, kiss, and Mister Ugly landed in a better situation than most prized racehorses.

Edie chattered non-stop through the meal. She should have rested instead of baking and packing, but a good night’s sleep would take care of the last of her nerves.

Her conversation usually ran more to questioning him about his family and life than talking about her own. Tonight she hardly paused long enough for him to insert an encouraging word between bites as she told about growing up with no family except a mother who turned their home into a boarding house to support them.

“That’s how I learned to cook. No one wants to live at a boarding house that doesn’t serve good meals.”

Garn almost made the mistake of telling her she was a better cook than Ada. Before she gave him an opening to say anything, he remembered his sisters’ reactions to any comparison of skills, no matter how favorable, and bit back the words.

She told about her mother's despised second husband as they cleared the table. "He makes Mama feel secure, but he made me feel caged. When he picked out the son of one of his friends for my husband, I was ready to run away, and Mama knew it. I don't know how she convinced him to pay for me to go to normal school, but she did."

Garn had an idea how the mother had done the convincing, but as with Ada and comparative cooking skills, he saved himself grief and kept quiet.

He wiped dishes in silence as she washed and told about normal school. "It was wonderful," she said wistfully after describing the place and her classes in detail. "I always loved school."

How much she loved teaching wasn't as clear. "The first day I was so scared my knees knocked, and I never did get over feeling a little intimidated by some of the older boys, but I don't think they knew."

If Garn had been around back then, he would have demonstrated real intimidation to the older boys until they slunk around so respectfully she'd never worry. If the golden boy didn't have the decency to do that much for her, she should have known not to marry him.

She finally wound down when she ran out of chores and sat watching him as he poured first cold water from the pump then boiling water from the big kettles on the stove into the tub, mixing until he had the temperature to his liking.

"You can stay here and keep me company," he said, unbuckling his belt and draping it over the back of a chair.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. I'll just get a book and read for a while until I'm sleepy."

She darted into the parlor and returned with a book so quickly he would have known she grabbed the first volume that came to hand even if it weren't so dark in there she couldn't see to read titles. "I'll just—go, and you can have a nice bath."

"Eddie."

She turned back, book clutched to her breast.

"The way you feel right now will pass. Don't think about what could have happened or what you could have done different. No one was hurt. That's what matters."

"Mister was hurt." She smiled at his questioning look and added, "I'm not calling him Mister Ugly and neither are you. He was hurt, and you had to kill the bull."

"That horse would have slashed himself to get where he is now, and the bull needed killing. Better that I shot him today than him killing or crippling some cowhand come roundup."

"I cornered him."

"You weren't that close, you stopped and weren't moving any closer, and he could have backed away like the cows or even bolted past you. The Rafter hands ought to thank us."

"They won't."

“No, they won’t. I better get over there tomorrow, tell Hanneman what happened, and offer to pay.”

“*We* had better ride over there, and *we* will offer to pay.”

“Right. You can ride ahead of me and do the talking.” Garn pulled his shirt out of his waistband and reached for the buttons. “Are you going to keep me company after all?”

Her chin came up. “No, I am not. Good night, Mr. Coburn.”

“Good night, Mrs. Thorne.”

Garn gave her time to reach her bedroom before stripping off and sinking into the hot water, wishing he could follow his own advice and stop picturing her so close, too close, to more than half a ton of an animal determined to kill and equipped to do it.

The whiskey rule was one of the few he hadn’t broken these last weeks, and tonight he’d like to throw it out along with the rest of them, but as Edie had once pointed out, they hadn’t packed any of that. Too bad. A few drinks would help both of them tonight.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, letting go of the bad parts of the day and holding on to the good. He pictured Edie chatting away, emphasizing some point with flourishes of her fork, proudly dishing up slices of peach pie, sticking out her lower lip to blow tendrils of hair out of her eyes when her hands were wet and soapy with dishwater.

Soon sensual memories replaced visual—her arms around his neck as if she’d never let go, her mouth against his, kissing like she meant it, as if she’d do it again when she wasn’t reacting to a close encounter with an ugly death.

Water sloshed as Garn applied the washrag with vigor. His feet and everything else were as warm as they needed to be. If he lollygagged around much longer, the water would be cold. Not that he couldn’t use a good dose of cold water if he wanted to sleep tonight.

After drying off close to the stove, he pulled on trousers and boots and banked the coals. Emptying the tub and dragging it outside in the cold could wait till morning when he wouldn’t have a head of damp hair.

Garn carried everything he hadn’t bothered to put on to his room, ran a comb through his hair, and gave his teeth a quick brush in the dark. He sat on the bedside chair, ready to tug his boots off, when the glow of lamplight moving steadily closer along the hall brought him to his feet.

An ethereal vision of Edie appeared in the doorway. The light she carried turned her white gown translucent, her body a seductive, shadowy silhouette within. Her face appeared almost as pale as the gown, emphasizing dark eyes shining with unshed tears.

Garn’s pulse quickened. His groin tightened.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “The wind is moaning like a lost soul, and I can’t sleep. Every time I close my eyes I see him coming at me again. I made it stop today by keeping busy, and I could do it again, but then I’d keep you awake and—”

“Eddie.”

“I keep thinking what if I rode up on him like that months ago when I was alone.”

“Alone and on your mare you wouldn’t have gone in so fast, and he probably wasn’t there then anyway. Hanneman only started pushing his cattle onto AT range last fall. It would take a while for them to spread that far.”

“I tell myself that, but it doesn’t help. I try to concentrate on how it really was—that’s bad enough—but I can’t stop the rest. I need...” Her throat rippled with a hard swallow. “I want...” She lifted a hand toward him. “Please. Help me through the night.”

His heart stopped for a moment before taking off faster than ever. “If you mean that, come here.”

She walked into the room and burrowed into his neck. He held her for a minute, chin on top of silky hair, feeling breasts soft against his chest, bones fragile under his hands. Her scent was of the soap they had both used, but under that was something feminine and better, her own essence.

He eased the lamp from her hand and put it on the bedside table. “Get in bed before you freeze.”

She slid under the covers, and he drank in the sight of her there, hair a dark cloud on the pillow, face pale but calm now.

He wanted to see her, watch her face, but asked, “Light?”

“Out?”

A man stupid enough to ask was stuck with the answer. Garn blew out the lamp.

EDIE LISTENED INTENTLY as Garn took off what little he had on. The old wooden bedside chair squeaked as he sat. She shouldn’t have said that about the light. The short time she’d had to drink in the sight of his bare arms, chest, and back wasn’t enough.

Tendons, veins, and ropey muscles corded his arms. When he had turned to blow out the light, smooth skin glided over muscles, spine, and shoulder blades in a way that made her fingers curl with the desire to touch.

Now that it was too late, she wanted the light back, wanted longer to take in the sight of him. With the room this chilly he wasn’t going to throw off the bed covers, look at her, and see her ribs, still blue and purple at the core of the bruising.

Maybe the injury there had started out worse than her face, although it hadn't seemed so at the time. More likely the tight wrappings the first days slowed healing, and her corset didn't help.

Whatever the cause, if Garn saw how bad it still looked, he'd be on about her ribs again for days, and if he saw the red-streaked purple blotch on her calf...

Eddie started slightly as a boot thudded on the floor.

Better to do without the light. Tonight she wanted the comfort and warmth he would bring, not a cold-eyed assessment of her injuries.

The other boot dropped, and her heart accelerated as the chair squeaked again when he stood.

Maybe he *would* throw off the covers. If his temperature came close to matching hers, the room would be an oven soon. Only her feet resisted. After the time she had spent standing by the door of her room working up the courage to come here, walking down the hall barefoot, and hiding in his arms, her feet remained frozen.

Her breath caught at the faint sound of buttons popping out through tough cloth. She licked her upper lip.

A man who grabbed shoulders and kissed without warning as a way of venting his own emotions would not be a tender lover. She didn't care. He could use her any way he wanted so long as she could use him as a barrier against memories of the past and fear of the future.

Garn's trousers hit the chair seat with a soft whoosh. He slid into bed beside her, bringing an instant's draft of the room's cold air with him before the covers cocooned them and his heat merged with hers.

He nibbled behind her ear. A fuzzy vision of the night he put her to bed in the hotel rose in her mind, of the way he undressed her, tucked her in, kissed her forehead and stroked her hair. Of gentle fingers prying her eyelids open and applying drops.

"No light and you're keeping the gown on? Are you serious about this, or do you want me to sit by the bed and hold your hand?"

That sounded more like his true self, the one who provoked Hal to further violence at the café—although he did push her away from him first—left her with a doctor who disliked her—although there was that gold coin—and walked out on her at the hotel when she argued with him—although he did make a devil's bargain for the bank's letter.

"Yes, I'm serious, but you said get into bed, and I did." Eddie squirmed until she maneuvered the nightgown out from under her bottom, pulled it off, and shoved it in a wad under the pillow. Unfortunately, her feet brushed Garn's legs more than once in the process.

His hands roamed over her, not in a caress, but assessing. "At least it's only your feet. Give them here."

Oh, so this wasn't going to be either like the night he put her to bed or today's wild kiss but business-like, and how could she give him her feet without losing the covers in the cold room and without even the slight protection of her nightgown?

She gasped as a large, callused hand curved behind her knee, pulled the leg up and locked it between muscled thighs hotter than any brick from the oven. Garn lifted her other foot, cupped both hands around it, and massaged.

"Ohh." Edie stopped worrying about being bent almost in two. Hands on a foot shouldn't have this effect. Her feet warmed. She had only been warm until now. This was heat. Heat that raced upward, leaving her breathless. She wiggled the toes of the foot clamped between his thighs, worked the foot higher.

He switched her feet and massaged the one that had been between his legs. "Be careful with the toenails there, Mrs. Thorne."

Being careful was the last thing on her mind. She ran her fingertips lightly along his collarbones, through the small patch of hair that spread from one nipple to the other.

"You have too many scars."

"Not that many. I was in a war."

"How many of these are from the war?"

"The one under my right arm."

She hadn't even found that one yet. Wide and jagged, it ran for four of five inches.

"What made that?" she said, tracing the scar with her fingertips.

"Shrapnel."

She fingered the two on his chest, both round, puckered bullet wounds.

Garn let her feet go and pulled her against his chest. Edie unfolded and pressed against him. He kissed her, not the way he had before, not as she expected, but gently, exploring the contours of her mouth with his lips and tongue. His fingers slid into her hair, his palm cupped her skull, and thumb stroked her cheek.

Pure joy shivered through her. She closed her eyes, and he kissed her eyelids.

Her fingers tangled in the damp hair at the back of his neck as he trailed soft kisses behind her ear, under her jaw, and down her neck. He cupped a breast, swirled his tongue around the erect nipple, and held it gently in his teeth as he inhaled cold air, exhaled warm.

The sensation sparked through every part of her. She gasped and arched. "Please!"

"Please no?"

"Yes, that's..." Words eluded her, became a jumble in her mind when his mouth moved to the other breast, one hand lingering on the first.

He explored her back and found the special place at the base of her spine. It had been so long. She'd forgotten how good this could be. If it had ever been this good....

Eddie let go of memories of the day, of lonely months, and all the past. All her being rejoiced in the sensations of the moment, in Garn Coburn, his strength and heat, his mouth and breath leaving fiery trails everywhere he touched.

Her skin rippled as his lips moved across her belly. She cried out as long fingers did magical things at her core and white hot heat exploded up her spine and across every nerve.

Garn stilled, cradling her in his arms. Her pleasure had peaked, her heart began to slow. His heart raced under her palm. His chest rocked her, his breathing still fast and strong.

“You?” she managed to whisper when her wits returned.

“When you’re ready.”

Ready? It would be a miracle if she could manage to so much as lift her head by morning.

He kissed her temple, the corner of her eye. If he kept that up.... He didn’t. He kissed her mouth, a kiss like the one in the gully this morning, like he could devour her and would. The musky scent of male arousal filled her senses. Desire returned.

Her hands moved restlessly over smooth, hot skin covering the muscle, tendon, and bone that gave him such strength. So strong, so safe, so....

Her thoughts tumbled and ricocheted, nothing but fragments of desire and want as Garn pressed her under him and moved between her thighs. She welcomed the hard length, wrapped her legs around his and her arms around his back.

Her hips caught his rhythm and matched it. Each thrust brought answering contractions to her inner muscles. Eddie moaned as pleasure dissolved her, shuddered through her.

For a long moment all she knew was another cataclysm arching her back, racing from her core to every part. Her fingers curled into Garn’s back, and she cried out.

Floating deep in the aftermath, she mewled with surprise when Garn withdrew. So this was what women whispered about, a way to try to avoid unwanted consequences of what they’d just done.

Understanding brought more heat to her cheeks and made Eddie glad for the darkness after all. She was a respectable widow no more. Consequences with her needed to be avoided. How different would things be between them now?

Tomorrow would be soon enough to discover that answer and to worry about it. Right now.... “Thank you,” she said as Garn settled back beside her.

“In these situations, all thanks are supposed to run from me to you.”

“I don’t care.” She hesitated. “Do you feel thankful?”

Silence. Why did she keep saying things to him that all but invited insult or hurt?

“Honored,” he said finally.

“Oh, is Coburn an Irish name? That’s blarney, that is.”

“There you go again, trying to get me to shoot you.”

“I don’t want to go back to my room.”

“Good. You’d just freeze your feet again. Go to sleep.”

Eddie yawned, nestled down close, and did just that. No nightmares plagued her.

Chapter 15

THE NEXT MORNING GARN STOMPED into his boots and headed for the barn with a spring in his step. Several inches of new snow glittered under bright sun, turning everything in sight clean and new, which was pretty much how Garn felt.

For the first time he understood the glazed-eyed, dumbstruck expression one or the other of his sisters' husbands sometimes brought to the breakfast table. An hour or so with a woman now and then had always been enough. Waking with Edie curled beside him, soft and warm, had been a novel experience. And good. The pleasure of it had kept him lingering there long past sunrise.

Better yet, when he first started to get up, Edie murmured a protest and reached for him. When her fingers traced feathery circles at the base of his spine and climbed slowly to the back of his neck, all thought of hungry horses fled.

Whatever Edie planned, he was going to keep her with him every night. Garn's steps slowed. Stepping from the pristine white outdoors into the shadowy barn, his mood changed to match. Every night for the three weeks left. Less really.

He closed the barn door with a bang, climbed to the loft, and pitched down hay to mangers so hard the horses snorted and backed away.

"That's it for you," Garn muttered to the draft horses as he sent down no more than a single forkful for each. "There isn't enough up here to keep babying you, so you can rustle your own grub out on the range till it's time to work again."

Back on the ground, Garn doled out one more measure of oats to the big horses. He could buy more grain in town. Edie needed to talk to the packing house agent there anyway.

He ought to tell her she wasn't going to Denver, wasn't going to teach school again or find herself another golden boy. She was going to come with him, marry him.

Except she'd think what he wanted was her money. Like a fool he'd told her about saving money for land, needing it.

If he told her to put the money aside for herself, what could she do with it? Living in a remote mountain valley didn't provide a lot of shopping opportunities. A woman used to living in a house with four bedrooms, a parlor filled with furniture from back East, and bookshelves with more books than could be found in all of Wilrose wouldn't be happy in a two-room cabin, not even if he showed her the way he had built it with adding on in mind.

She'd hate it, come to hate him, and if she dug in and told him to go to hell in the same tone she'd used on Sheriff Hal....

Eddie's mare stopped chewing and lifted her head. She listened to something outside a moment with ears pricked before returning to her hay. Garn made it to the door in time to see Jim Hanneman disappearing into the house, rifle in hand.

Sprinting across the yard, sliding in the snow, Garn yanked open the door and strode inside without stopping to stomp the snow off his boots. He pulled off the thong on his revolver as he went, only slowing when Eddie spoke, sounding calm and untroubled.

"I hear Mr. Coburn returning from the barn now. He'll be glad to see you too. You saved us riding to your place to talk to you this morning."

"It's him I need to talk to." Hanneman stood stiffly to one side of the doorway, rifle still in hand. At least the barrel pointed at the floor.

"So talk," Garn said, trying to slow his breathing so Hanneman wouldn't know he'd run to the house.

"Now that we're all here," Eddie said, "let's sit down and talk over a cup of coffee. I'm sure Mr. Hanneman wants to know what happened yesterday."

"I know what happened. Your hired gun filled one of my good bulls full of lead is what happened, and I'm here to tell him what's going to happen to him if he does it again."

Hanneman started to raise the rifle, but Garn had his revolver out and centered on the rancher's chest before he could bring the rifle to bear. "How about I tell you what's going to happen if we run across another one of your damn Longhorns?"

"Stop that, both of you." Eddie sounded remarkably like the schoolmarm she'd once been. "Mr. Hanneman, you put that rifle up, and Garn, you holster that revolver right now."

Garn didn't move. Hanneman's nostrils flared, his mouth a tight line.

"Please," Eddie said. "What happened to the bull was my fault, Mr. Hanneman. Sit down, have a cup of coffee, and I'll tell you why Mr. Coburn had to shoot your bull, and I'll pay you what it was worth."

"A plugged nickel," Garn muttered.

"Why don't you go back outside and bring in some coal oil to throw on the fire?" Eddie said, anger cracking through the teacher facade.

Hanneman leaned his rifle in the corner. "I ain't taking meat price for him. Maybe he wasn't one of those fancy short things of yours, but we only leave the good ones for seed stock."

Garn holstered his gun and waited until Edie finished pouring coffee, then made a show of holding her chair for her. Hanneman sat and folded his arms across his chest. He and Edie both stared up at Garn until he gave in and sat too.

Edie launched into the tale of yesterday's event. The only thing that would have made it more dramatic was if she had a fork to wave, but she did pretty well with her hands.

By the time she finished, Hanneman had picked up his coffee and taken a swallow. "The carcass ain't in a gully on AT land."

"I dragged it out of there last night," Garn said. "The early calves are enough temptation for varmints. We don't need to set out lures."

Hanneman grunted. "That's why women shouldn't be riding around playing cowhand," he said to Edie. "Hire another man, and stay to home where you belong."

"Tell her how no man was ever gored or lost a horse punching cows, why don't you?" Garn said.

"That's not what I said—"

"Would either of you like a slice of peach pie with that coffee?" Edie asked.

Hanneman's chair scraped back. "I've et. Thanks for the coffee." He picked up the rifle and walked out, the front door slamming behind him.

"Does that mean he changed his mind about payment for the bull?" Edie said.

"It does to me."

"You did not help the situation, you know."

"If he were younger, I'd help him to a bloody nose."

"At least that's an improvement over shooting him," Edie said. "I suppose what with my slip in using your given name and the bunkhouse looking desolate, he's confirmed his low opinion of me."

"It's me he has the low opinion of, and he rode off consumed with envy."

She laughed, and Garn's dark mood vanished. Enjoy this while you have it, he told himself. Worry about the tomorrows when they come.

SIXTEEN DAYS LEFT. Thinking about it stole Edie's appetite. She bit into the biscuit and bacon sandwich in her hand and chewed without enthusiasm.

"Suppose we head for town in the morning," Garn said, pulling the coffee pot off the campfire and topping up her cup and his.

Eddie didn't want to go to town tomorrow or ever, didn't want to lose time for hunting cattle, and even more didn't want to lose time with Garn without prying, disapproving eyes watching. She'd been putting him off about the trip for days and finally conceded with a sigh. "All right. Tomorrow."

Worse than the trip to town was Garn's insistence they pack and be off the ranch days before the deadline. He was right that they needed to allow for bad weather or some other unforeseen difficulty cropping up, but she couldn't even talk about it past the lump it brought to her throat.

The two of them would drive her steers to town first. Garn would say goodbye to her there and come back for the cows with men he would hire for the drive to his ranch.

Her heart ached at the thought, and it would break when it happened.

What would he say if she asked to go west with him? *Sorry, no permanent ties. Rules, plans.* What if she offered him whatever the steers brought to buy land? Beef prices had been high last year. If they still were say, four cents a pound live weight, the seventy-four steers they had right now must average about nine hundred pounds. She could buy him quite a few of the ten sections he wanted.

The last bit of biscuit stuck in her throat. She washed it down with coffee and stared into the fire. He'd take an offer like that as an insult, and he'd walk away angry. He'd see it as an attempt to buy him, and it would be an attempt to buy her way into his life.

Once he had his land, he would marry. His attitude toward her hadn't changed overtly with intimacy, but he wouldn't marry some widow who had begged him to take her to bed, who could swear like a muleskinner, and who herded cattle in trousers.

Garn swallowed a mouthful of his own sandwich hurriedly. "Did you hear that?" He tipped his head, listening intently.

Their noon camp was at the junction of two gullies near the mouth of the canyon where the cows grazed. Eddie heard the bawl of an unhappy cow, but the direction from which it came seemed wrong.

"Maybe a cow's in trouble and we need to go look," she said.

"No, that's the sound of driven cattle. You stay here."

"If someone's stealing my cattle, I am not staying here." Eddie jumped to her feet just as Rick Hanneman rode into sight.

Garn swore. "If you offer him coffee, I'll kick the pot over."

"He's much nicer than his father, and his manners are better," Eddie said, calling out a welcome.

Rick stopped a polite distance from their fire and tipped his hat. "You'd be hard to find down here except for the trail you've cut. How's the roundup going?"

“A hundred and forty-six today,” Edie said proudly. “When Garn first said we’d end up with a hundred and fifty, I thought it was pie in the sky, but we have two weeks and two days left.” She slid a glance toward Garn. “Ten or eleven working days maybe.”

“Make that one ninety-seven,” Rick said as sturdy, white-faced, red-bodied cattle appeared behind him.

Garn all but picked Edie up and carried her toward the horses. “Up,” he said, yanking the cinch on Mister tight.

Edie mounted and helped Rick and Garn turn the flow of cattle into the canyon as two cowhands trailing behind urged them on. Cows, one with a calf, steers, and a massive bull mixed with the cows and calves already there. Before long the entire herd had settled down to graze.

“The coffee’s still on our fire,” Edie said to Rick. “Why don’t you and your men come have a cup with us and tell us how this came about?” She avoided looking at Garn as she said it.

“Johnny and Red need to get back to Rafter or they’ll have to listen to Dad bellow at them the rest of today and most of tomorrow,” Rick said, “but I’ll take you up on the offer. If Dad ever stopped bellowing at me, I’d have to get Doc Wallace out here to see what was wrong with him.”

The hands took the hint, tipped their hats to Edie, and rode off at a lope.

Back at the fire, Rick dug a cup out of his saddlebags. Edie poured for him and topped up her own cup and Garn’s. “Thank you for rounding up so much AT stock. It’s a wonderful surprise. It must have taken you days.”

“All I did was put out word to the hands.”

“And how does your father feel about that?” Garn said.

Rick stared into his coffee cup. “He thinks you know what JJ got up to with the sheriff.”

“JJ all but painted a sign on himself the day we came to Rafter.”

Rick nodded. “He admitted it that night. He never wanted Mrs. Thorne hurt, that’s on the sheriff, but he did want her off the ranch without a chance to take the cattle. It shamed Dad, and he’s been feeling bad ever since. Then hearing what happened with our bull.... He didn’t give the orders, but he didn’t argue with me when I told him what I thought we should do.”

“Thank him for me,” Edie said.

“I’ll do that.”

Rick didn’t have either Drew’s smooth good looks or Garn’s fierce appeal, but his craggy features and quiet manner had their own charm. In Edie’s opinion, Barbara Manning ought to count herself lucky.

“Looks like you have a fair lot of early calves,” Rick said. “They won’t take them at the stockyards, but the butcher in town might give you a few dollars for a couple.”

Edie’s heart plummeted at the thought. “The she-stuff is Mr. Coburn’s, calves and all,” she said.

Rick's cup stopped inches from his mouth and hung there for a single second before he absorbed the surprise, took a swallow, and swiveled slightly to face Garn. "You figure to sell them for seed stock?"

"I have my own place about a hundred miles west. I'm driving them there."

Eddie could almost see Rick's mind working. Garn's face remained an impassive mask.

"Dad's too cheap to pay for stock to upgrade the way Mr. Thorne did," Rick said finally. "I would if I could, but when I start with the AT, I won't have the cash. Would you be willing to make a trade for the bull calves?"

Eddie's hopes soared. Now if only Garn's dislike for the Hannemans didn't make him refuse without listening.

"What kind of trade?"

"How about two Rafter hands working for you starting tomorrow and staying with you all the way to your place?"

"Do you have so many milch cows at Rafter you can raise a bunch of calves?"

"We can manage three or four, and some of the small ranchers might see the advantage to helping out."

Garn threw the last of his coffee in the fire. "How are your hands going to feel about that? For that matter how is your father going to feel?"

"He won't like it. He'll tell me I'm foolish, but he won't interfere. As for hands, I'll ask for volunteers so you only get willing men. Every one of our hands knows his job."

Garn rose and held out his hand. "It's a deal."

Rick shook and gave Eddie one last respectful nod.

"He's a nice man," Eddie said, watching him ride off.

"There has to be at least one in the worst of families."

"If only he wanted the heifers too."

"The heifers are coming with me."

No, they weren't. Those babies couldn't keep up for ten miles, much less a hundred. He'd have to kill them the way the Texas drovers did on the long drives, but if he wanted to pretend he could take them, she would pretend to believe him.

"The bull is going with you too, and if we find the one I didn't have the nerve to go after, that one too. I want you to have them."

Garn's brows furrowed. "I'm already going to owe you when we settle up for expenses because I'll take the horses and wagon. Maybe I'm as cheap as Hanneman, but the price of purebred bulls like that is too rich for my blood."

Eddie threw her coffee into the fire. "Did I say anything about selling them to you? I said I want you to have them. Selling them for beef would be a sin, and you know it."

“But you were going to do it.”

“I thought I had no choice.”

Garn contemplated her with narrowed eyes. “Hanneman will pay, maybe not what they’re worth, but better than meat prices. Maybe the son is the one who tucked that whole lot away somewhere out of sight on Rafter, but the old man had to know about it.”

The same suspicion had run through Edie’s mind. “I tried to get him to buy some of our stock when Drew was determined to sell everything, and he turned me down. So did every other rancher I talked to.”

Garn’s expression did change. “That surprises me.”

Surprised him that she did it, or surprised him that the ranchers all turned her down? Edie didn’t ask. “It was what Drew and I argued about that earned me the justified reputation as a shrew.”

She fiddled with her empty coffee cup. Why she kept spilling every embarrassing secret to Garn eluded her, but here she was doing it again.

“It was at the last roundup, and I thought we were off where no one would hear us, but when we started shouting, everyone did. He even sold that season’s calves that were barely weaned—all that good stock his father spent years breeding. I wanted him to leave that year’s heifers and the bulls.”

The memory had her blurting one of her muleskinner curses. “For all the good the money from selling them did, he could have given them to the other ranchers.”

Garn smiled in the way that made her stomach drop. “As it turns out he did leave a pretty decent lot of heifers and a couple of bulls that you’re giving to a small rancher.”

“Not giving. You’re earning them.”

“Earning what that herd is worth in thirty days is about as likely for someone like me as surviving a lightning strike. Figure what the bulls are worth, and we’ll work it out some way.”

“Thank you.”

“I told you before, in situations like this, the thanks run the other way.”

Edie laughed and got to her feet. “Half of what Rick brought are my steers. Let’s cut them out and drive them down to the south canyon.”

Chapter 16

GARN YANKED THE SECOND of the three double bunks in the AT bunkhouse across the rough plank floor.

“Thank you,” Edie sang out, busy sweeping the exposed dust, dirt, cigarette and cigar butts, mouse droppings, and bits of things Garn didn’t want to examine closely into the pile at the edge of the room.

“You can put it back now.”

Garn gripped a bed post and pulled. A man really had to be in love to indulge a woman in this sort of nonsense. At the thought, he froze in place.

“Are you all right?” Edie asked anxiously. “You didn’t hurt your back, did you?”

The scarf tied over her hair and smudges of dirt on her face made her look like someone’s maid, the kind of maid who kept losing jobs because the male householders couldn’t keep their hands off her.

“My back’s fine.” The bed legs screeched across the floor as he positioned the bunk back where it started. “Even if Hanneman keeps his word and two men show up tomorrow, they could sleep here for ten days or so without you scrubbing the place,” Garn said, his voice sharper than he intended.

“I told you I could do this without your help.”

“So you’re worried about my back, but you could shuffle the bunks yourself.”

“Why are you so cranky? You didn’t even have to ride back here with me. You could have stayed out and hunted cows until it was too dark to see them and left this to me.”

No, he couldn’t. Even if she could drag the beds around herself, what if something that bit had taken up residence here while the place sat empty? No snake would be awake this time of year, but a raccoon or big rat....

“At least this time of year you can’t put out flowers for them,” Garn muttered.

Eddie put one finger to her lips and looked around at the unpainted wood walls, her gaze coming to rest on the two windows flanking the door. “No, but it wouldn’t be much trouble to hem up some curtains.”

Garn let go of the third and last set of bunks and whipped his head toward her. “You are not...”

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. Garn reached her in two strides and gathered her in.

“Oh, don’t. I’m filthy. Don’t—”

He ignored her protests and kissed her thoroughly. She kissed back with enthusiasm, one hand staying at the back of his neck when he raised his head.

“I really do appreciate your help,” she said, “and you can’t tell me you ever slept anywhere as awful as this was when we started.”

“Yes, I can. Bunkhouses are always pigsties, and I worked for two different outfits down in Texas. You get cockroaches down there big enough to scare off the mice.”

Eddie wrinkled her nose. “So you tried mavericking and quit, and you tried working for ranchers and quit, but hiring out to fight for someone like Ellman suits you.”

“I didn’t quit on the mavericking until after we drove a herd to Kansas. I had to split with two partners, but it was good money and it was what got me started buying land. You’re right, though. I’d rather fight for men like Ellman than herd cows. It pays better.”

“But the chances of getting killed are much higher.”

“Maybe. I rode shotgun for Wells Fargo for a while, and the fellow I switched off with is dead now. Gunned down in a robbery. Both my partners on the trail herd are gone. Stampede took one and herd-cutters killed the other.”

“You have three bullet scars.”

“None of them amounted to much.”

She patted his cheek instead of pursuing her argument. “Move the last beds for me, and I can finish sweeping up. After that I am going to at least wash the windows.”

“Eddie.”

“I am. You don’t have to watch. Go pick through the books in the house or something.”

He’d carry the water for her, and he knew it. Garn’s mind shied away from why.

LATE THE NEXT MORNING, Quint Inman and Stick Upshaw joined Eddie and Garn in the cow hunt. The men resembled many of the hands Eddie had known in her years on the AT. Neither was stick-like in any way. They were short, wiry men, dark from the sun, and walked with a rolling gait.

After polite greetings, the men went to work without further discussion. By noon Edie had a sense of the difference two more hands would make.

“We originally thought a hundred fifty head was an ambitious goal,” Edie said, pouring water into the coffee pot from her canteen. “At this rate we may get to three hundred.”

Quint spit a stream of tobacco to one side and gave her a gap-toothed grin. “If there’s that many of them short-legged critters down here, we’ll get them.”

Garn finished pounding coffee beans with the haft of his knife, met Edie’s eyes, and winked. Her breath caught. No matter how much help Quint and Stick provided, she wished they’d never come. The fewer the days left, the faster they sped by. She wanted every minute alone with Garn.

As if he knew and shared her desire, Garn said, “We need supplies from town, and Mrs. Thorne doesn’t want to ride in. Since we’re already doing better than expected, would you two be willing to go?”

“You bet!” Stick said. “Why if we left now, we could be back by this time tomorrow.”

“Forget it,” Quint said, frowning. “He don’t mean go in, spend the night in a saloon, and come back tomorrow dragging your tail. If we leave in the morning we can make it there and back in a day.”

“Actually,” Garn said, “we need more than supplies. You’ll need to find the packing house agent—he has another job in town too, doesn’t he? You need to tell him to expect Mrs. Thorne’s steers, and I need a wire sent. If you have to wait for an answer, you may have to stay over.”

The two cowhands exchanged a glance, maybe wondering as Edie was why both of them needed to go, and like her not objecting because they liked the idea.

“Yes, sir,” Quint said. “We’ll set out first thing tomorrow and get that done for you.”

When they returned to the saddle, Edie hung back with Garn. “You know I’m happy to have another day with just the two of us, and I don’t want to go to town, but do you think it’s all right to send them off with enough money for supplies like that?”

“You think they’re going to take money from me and run?”

His mouth might be curving up in a smile, but the strong lines of his face still warned of a man no cowhand would cross unless very foolish or very drunk.

“I suppose not, and I suppose this telegram you want them to send and wait for an answer to can’t be terribly private.”

“Nope. I figure before you go negotiating price on your herd, it wouldn’t hurt to know prices in Greeley.”

She never would have thought of such a thing, but then she no longer spent time worrying about cattle and prices. Garn gave no sign of wanting her to stay with him. What she worried

about was finding a way to make him want her. Or how he'd react if she swallowed her pride and begged.

Chapter 17

GARN PUSHED COW NUMBER 136 into the valley with the others.

“She’s going to have a calf with her by morning, isn’t she?” Edie said, her face crumpled with sadness.

“Looks like it.” Maybe he ought to tell her what he planned for the calves Hanneman didn’t take and any born on the drive west.

Except if it didn’t work out, she’d be more unhappy than ever. If Todd had been unable to find a suitable wagon for sale, she’d hear about the failure in town before she left on the train.

Garn fought a hollow feeling close to pain. The last of their time together was slipping away like water through his fingers, like Edie was slipping away. Every day the wall of reserve around her seemed more formidable.

“I’m glad we’re taking the steers in first,” Edie said, her voice flat. “Now that you have Quint and Stick you don’t need me to come back to help with your cows.”

He didn’t need her help with cattle. He needed her to make any of it worthwhile. Instead of going to investigate that heap of rags out by the livery, he should have stuck to the rule, minded his own business, and turned and walked away.

No, he shouldn’t have. The thought of her dealing with her situation on her own made him wish he could go back and shoot Searson as dead as the Longhorn bull.

Carrying her off to his valley had been a pipe dream. She’d once mentioned falling in love with the AT, but a ranch only hours from a good-sized town was different than one more than a day away from a crossroads boasting a single general store. The second biggest ranch in the county was different than one a tenth the size. A dark man who earned his living with a gun was very different than a golden boy.

She still came to him eagerly in the night, but that was for comfort, pleasure, not the kind of want that gnawed at him day and night. She no longer tried to tempt him to linger with her in the

mornings, no longer touched him now and then during the day as if she couldn't resist, no longer met his eyes with mischief and joy in hers.

"Do you really think we need to start out so soon?" Edie asked, sounding wistful. "Spring seems to have finally arrived."

"Day after tomorrow. You know how fast spring storms can blow in and how bad they can be. After all this, we're not taking chances on running out of time. Quint and Stick can help me pull the wagon close to the house in the morning and get everything loaded. Are you sure you don't want any of the furniture?"

"What would I do with it? Anything I rent in Denver will be furnished."

"You can afford to buy a house there."

She shrugged and didn't answer.

That's probably what she'd do if he asked her to give up the dream of Denver and come with him. He should ask anyway. Better to know for sure than to wonder the rest of his life. Not yet. Once she refused, everything between them would sour.

Garn pushed his horse into a jog, determined to find cow number 137 or steer number 129 before dark.

EDIE DROPPED ANOTHER BOOK whose title she couldn't read through the blur of tears in her eyes into the crate at her feet.

How could any woman be so stupid as to fall in love with a man who wanted a bunch of cows but not her? If only she had a full complement of feminine wiles and had started using them the day she met him. If only she hadn't let a single frightening experience drive her to behave as if she were the loosest of loose women.

Ten times a day she tried to get the words out. *I love you. Let me come with you. I'll do everything I can to make your life better.* How would that feel? Living with him here didn't seem sordid. How different would it be to ride off with him, acting as a wife while not being one?

Quint and Stick already knew. The Hannemans knew. That Jack person would know. What was Jack like? Where did he live?

I won't fuss when you go to work for men like Ellman. Could she keep that promise, hide the fear that would haunt her from the moment Garn left until he returned?

Edie grimaced and threw another unidentified book into the crate.

From outside came the sound of the men pulling the empty wagon into position for loading near the front door. They'd be in here soon, ready to carry out everything she had packed. Which wasn't much. Even after retrieving the things left at the hotel, there would be room in the wagon for twice as many supplies as they needed for a hundred-mile drive.

At least Rick had shown up with three of the small ranchers and taken the bull calves yesterday. The sound of the bawling cows calling for their stolen babies had driven Edie to distraction, let her stop going round and round in her mind over what to do, what to say, whether to say anything.

Boots sounded on the porch. Edie dropped a last few books into the crate and ran for the bedroom. Her bedroom. She slammed the door behind her and leaned against it. By day the memories that haunted this room held no power, unlike the room she shared with Garn.

“There are still empty crates out here, and you haven’t filled many,” Garn called through the door. “You must have more to pack.”

Edie closed her eyes and leaned her head back. “I do. I’ll be finished soon. I promise.”

Two of those crates held sawdust to protect fragile things. Pa Thorne and Drew both would rather have Ma Thorne’s good dishes go with Edie than stay with a Hanneman bride. She’d pack those dishes as soon as the men left—and more books if that’s what it took to fill all the crates the men had brought back from town with the supplies and telegram.

“We’re going to drive the steers up close to the house. It means riding night herd on them, but it will give us more time tomorrow.”

Night herd. Garn would take a turn along with Quint and Stick, of course, and wouldn’t even spend all of their last night here with her. All that was left was tomorrow night at the hotel.

“I’ll keep working here and see you for supper,” Edie said.

The sound of boots faded. The front door opened, closed. Edie slid down to the floor, wrapped her arms around her knees, and stared into space. Soon she’d get up and fill those crates except for what she’d need in the morning.

When he started to say goodbye in town she would ask him. Hearing no or excuses would be better than never knowing for sure what he would have said.

Chapter 18

LESS THAN AN HOUR AFTER SUNRISE, Edie mounted Sunny, took her position on the left flank of her herd of a hundred forty-four steers, and helped start them toward the ranch road. Quint, who had drawn the short straw and the job of driving the wagon, waved as he set off ahead of them all.

Edie let Garn and Stick turn the cattle onto the town road without her. She pulled up on the small rise that gave a last view of the ranch. The morning sun tinted the white of the house and faded wood of the outbuildings a soft rose hue, making the kind of picture artists memorialized.

She had loved and lost her husband here, loved and lost her son. Pa Thorne had been a father to a girl who had never known her own, a good father, also loved, lost, and mourned.

The happiness she'd known here had been worth the pain and grief that followed. If she could live her years on the AT over, she would, but the time and the people were gone. All she could do now was keep the old love in her heart and reach for more. And she vowed to do that.

Edie touched her spurs to Sunny and rode down the hill. She didn't look back.

The trip to town driving cattle took twice as long as traveling by wagon. Quint waited for them on horseback a mile from town and helped settle the herd on the greening spring grass there.

"I put the horses up and parked the wagon behind the livery," he said. "Found old Schweigger in town and told him we were coming. He's on his way."

"Good. After he has his look, Mrs. Thorne will see what he's offering. We'll hold the herd here until she's done."

Edie fingered the telegram in her pocket. Garn would take over, do the negotiating, and she didn't care. He'd get a better price than she could anyway.

Otis Schweigger appeared in the distance, bouncing in the saddle as his horse came on at a steady lope.

"Have you got the wire?" Garn asked.

Eddie pulled it out and waved it at him.

“You want me to stay with you?”

Surprised, Eddie studied his face, but he had the cold mask on today. She’d seen more of that in the past few days than since that first night in the café. “No, thank you.”

He rode off, approaching the herd at an easy walk. Eddie waited for the packing house agent, not sure how this business was done but determined not to show it.

Schweigger worked on commission for a Kansas City packing house and except for a busy couple of months at spring and fall roundup times, made his living from his leather shop.

He rode like a shopkeeper. Maybe round men like that couldn’t sit deep in a saddle, but he could wipe the condescension off his red face. Eddie’s chin rose.

“Afternoon, Miz Thorne,” he said, drawing up beside her. “I guess I don’t need to get closer to see what you’ve got here. They look the same as what your husband sold me a year, year and a half ago.”

“He sold a mixed herd. These are all steers.”

“So I see. So your man said. Hundred forty-four steers. Of course, we’ll get an accurate count when we run them into the pens.”

“Of course.”

“Prices haven’t recovered from that last panic, you know. I can’t do better than three and a half cents, figure what you’ve got averages say eight hundred pounds.”

“I really believe they’d average nine hundred. Maybe we should run them over scales,” Eddie said. “You can do that, can’t you?”

Instead of answering, Schweigger made a show of riding closer and peering at the herd. “They do look pretty good for this time of year. All right, I’ll give you nine.”

“Good, now about the price.” Eddie pulled out the telegram that said prices in Greeley were running as high as four and a half cents a pound live weight and handed it over.

“What’s this?” Schweigger read it, looked at her, crumbled the paper in his hand and let it fall. “That’s Greeley. Expenses are much higher shipping from a small branch line. Your husband knew that.”

Drew had been so eager to sell he had probably taken the first offer. “I don’t see why shipping would be more from here. We’re miles closer to Kansas City. If you can’t do better than three and a half, I’m afraid we can’t do business.”

“From what I hear, you have no choice.”

“You shouldn’t believe gossip, Mr. Schweigger. The reason my partner queried Greeley prices is because he thinks we should sell there. He’s driving his half of the herd right past there on the way to his ranch.”

“Your partner.”

“Mr. Garn Coburn.”

The agent’s mouth tightened. “One of Ellman’s gunmen.”

“He was.”

Schweigger giggled his horse and reined around to face her. “Four cents.”

“Four and four-tenths.”

“Four ten.”

Ten minutes later, Edie rode out to Garn, having trouble not racing her horse and hollering. “Four and a quarter,” she said, grinning from ear to ear.

He gave her the smile she craved. “No tough old cattleman could do better.”

“I used your name,” she confessed.

“Good for you. Use all weapons available.”

“Is that a rule?”

“It is, and it’s one I haven’t broken yet. Let’s get these critters moving.”

Tomorrow. He was staying to help her get her things on the train. There would be time to tell him how she felt and convince him to take her with him in the morning.

STILL GLOWING FROM HER SUCCESS, Edie helped push the herd into the stockyard pens, collected a check for more money than she dreamed of during the long, lonely days of gathering cattle on her own, and rode to the livery with the men.

Todd, looking much less ornery than usual, met them in the yard. “I got her done,” he said to Garn. “Come take a look.”

Got what done?

Todd took off for the back of the barn as fast as arthritic old limbs could go. Edie followed beside Garn, expecting to see something in the dark depths, but the men kept going into the back yard where half a dozen wagons, buggies, and carts sat.

Todd led them to a long wagon, a freight wagon modified with wide rails set mere inches apart that added three feet to the height of the side walls and tailgate. A tarpaulin stretched over the rails. Peeking inside, Edie saw only a deep bed of straw.

“Cost you a pretty penny, it did,” Todd said, slapping the side. “Adding the rails wasn’t enough. It needed a new front axle and two wheels. Marty would never have sold it otherwise. I got you a pretty good team and a fella to drive for you too.”

“It’s better than I hoped for,” Garn said, pulling bills from his pocket. “How much do I owe you?”

Todd named a sum that in Edie's opinion should buy a brand new wagon, prize-winning horses, and patent leather harness. She couldn't stand it. "You said you wanted my wagon and horses."

"I do," Garn said. "Yours is for equipment and grub. This is the calf wagon."

"Calf wagon?"

"I figure since the calves can't hike a hundred miles they can ride."

"But they need their mothers. They need milk."

"They can spend nights with their mothers. We'll load them up in the morning as they tire, and if they have to have a dinner break, so be it. We're not racing anywhere."

She wanted to hug him, kiss him—hit him. "Quint and Stick arranged this for you just like they sent the telegram, didn't they? You know what I've been thinking. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I wasn't sure Todd could find anything like this for sale or get it fixed up in time. I didn't want to tell you and have it not work out."

Garn finished dealing with Todd and gave Quint and Stick each ten dollars. "You two are on your own for tonight. Head back in the morning with the calf wagon and drive the cattle up near the house same as we did yesterday. I'm going to stay here and help Mrs. Thorne, but I'll be back before dark with her wagon and supplies."

"Are we coming back through town?" Stick asked.

"No reason to. We'll drive straight west."

The triumph of her successful negotiation with Schweigger and the relief of Garn's plans for the calves faded. Edie's stomach tightened with nerves, and she recited what she'd say to Garn for the thousandth time in her mind. Tomorrow morning. No more stalling, she needed to find her courage long before the noon train.

"What do you say we get a couple of rooms at the hotel, clean up, and have supper at the café," Garn said. "You can set that check on the table where Ada will see it and watch her turn green."

"She wouldn't turn green. She'd pour coffee on it."

Arm in arm, they made the same walk from the livery to town as the night he had lured her out of hopelessness over a month ago. The town had healed after that night too. Everything destroyed had been replaced, damage repaired. Wilrose looked better than ever with fresh paint on buildings and new windows reflecting spring sunshine.

Edie's eyes were on the pharmacy's new sign when Garn stopped so suddenly he jerked her to a halt. Denny Reston stood halfway in the space between two buildings where he'd hidden, gun drawn and pointed at Garn. Denny's eyes were wild, his voice shrill with nerves and anger. "You're under arrest."

To Edie's horror, Garn followed his stupid rule about lawmen, raised one hand, pushed her into the recessed doorway of the pharmacy, and raised the other. Then he took two long, slow sidesteps away from her.

Denny pivoted, following Garn, the gun shaking in his hand. Edie could see the cocked hammer, Denny's finger on the trigger.

"Don't you move," he ordered.

"Haven't we done this before?" Garn said. "Don't tell me Mr. Ellman and his friends changed their story."

"They will. You did it, and everyone knows it. Hal's never going to walk right again."

"Last time you said he'd never walk again at all. He must be improving."

Denny cursed Garn in ways Edie had never heard before. "I can't take care of my wife and baby on a deputy's pay." The gun waved wildly from side to side.

"Then get a job that pays better. The gravy train has stopped for good."

Talk about pouring coal oil on a fire. Fear closed Edie's throat. Intent on each other, neither man noticed people along the street standing and staring, pointing, or ducking into stores or Marshal Banford and one of his deputies running toward them.

Too far. The marshal was too far. He would never get here before Denny lost the last vestige of control and pulled the trigger. And what could he do anyway?

Edie sidled a little closer to Denny. A little closer. Garn tore his eyes from Denny, tried to stop her with a scowl and slight shake of his head. Edie ignored him, took a final step, shot her hand out, and grabbed the gun, wedging a finger into the gap between hammer and firing pin as Denny pulled the trigger.

Pain shot through her finger as the hammer dropped. She fell on top of Denny with scream, dragged down by her trapped finger when Garn plowed a fist into Denny's face and knocked him backward.

Banford and the deputy arrived panting seconds after Garn freed Edie from the gun, hit Denny again, and lifted her to her feet. She whimpered as much at the sight her finger pointing off at a right angle from the proper direction as over the pain radiating through her whole hand.

Banford hauled Denny to his feet and draped him over the deputy's shoulder. "Get him back to the office."

Denny mumbled more threats as the deputy bore him off.

"I should charge you with assaulting a peace officer," Banford said to Garn.

Garn emptied Denny's gun and handed it to the marshal. "But you won't."

"I won't if you're out of town by midnight."

"Noon tomorrow. Lock him up and keep him out of my way till then. That's the second time he's pointed a gun at me and waved it around all too close to Mrs. Thorne. I don't care if he's

wearing three badges. If I see him again, I'm going to put a bullet right in his brisket and take my chances with a jury."

Banford grimaced. "Don't push your luck."

"By the time Dr. Wallace fixes Mrs. Thorne up, the day will be gone, and we need to get supplies in the morning."

"All right, noon tomorrow. Don't ever show your face in Wilrose again."

As soon as Banford was out of hearing, Garn turned on Edie, furious. "What is the matter with you? Are you still trying to get someone to shoot you? Every time someone draws a gun, you throw yourself in front of it."

"I wasn't in front of it. I blocked the hammer to stop him from shooting you is all, and he tried! He did. He pulled the trigger."

"The way he was waving that gun around, he'd have missed by a foot."

"He wasn't waving it that much, and he was only a few feet away. No wonder you're covered with bullet scars."

"Three. Only three, and none of them serious."

"One in the back and two on your chest. No wonder you have to have rules to stay alive. You have no sense."

"At least I only get shot when someone's aiming at me. I don't go volunteering for a bullet meant for someone else like you keep doing."

"Not someone, you. I never had to do it until I fell in love with a man who needs a keeper." Edie gasped at the sound of her own words.

Anger drained from Garn's face and posture as they stood there staring at each other. One corner of his mouth finally quirked up. "You love me."

"Yes." Edie crossed her arms over her breasts defensively, careful of her hand.

"And you're willing to come with me, live on a ranch a tenth the size of the AT in a two-room cabin"

"Yes, and I won't complain when you go off for a job like Ellman's."

"The he—heck you won't. You'd follow me and throw yourself in the line of fire again. No."

Edie rocked back on her heels. That was it then. At least she knew the answer.

Garn crossed his arms, mirroring her posture. "If you want to come with me, you have to marry me and put up with me year round."

"Marry you," she whispered.

"I couldn't show you off to my sisters otherwise." He paused before adding, "And I love you too."

Edie threw herself at him, forgetting the pain in her finger as she hugged him and showered his face with kisses.

“Are you sure?” she said, stopping for breath.

“Sure we need to find a preacher with time to spare before you change your mind.” He held her hand by the wrist and examined it. “After you see Dr. Wallace. Just getting the glove off that is going to take surgery.”

Eddie leaned against him, light-headed with relief and joy, and unwilling to have it spoiled. “I don’t need to see Dr. Wallace. You can splint my finger.”

“I probably couldn’t get it back in the joint even if you were limp because you passed out from the pain. You’re not going to make me threaten you to get you in there, are you?”

Eddie considered. “I’m not sure. Maybe I’d like it if you threw me over your shoulder and carried me in.”

“I’d rather oblige in a different setting.”

Good.

“Where does this Jack fellow live?”

“In his own cabin on a quarter-section he filed on.”

Very good.

“You really aren’t going to take any more fighting jobs?”

“How could I? I have land and cattle that need tending. And I’m going to have a wife who needs me to keep her out of trouble.”

Excellent.

His wife was coming to him with enough money to buy most of the land he still wanted too, but that discussion could wait a while. A good while.

“Why didn’t you ever say anything before?” Garn asked as they started toward the doctor’s. “You could have saved me a lot of sleepless hours.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“If I asked, you could say no, and I didn’t realize you’d like being carried off.”

“You didn’t ask. You gave me an ultimatum.”

“If you want me on my knees, you’re going to be disappointed.”

“A gentleman only goes down on one knee to propose.”

“That’s all right then. Since I’m a despicable man instead of a gentleman, you had no expectations anyway.”

“I apologized for that.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Are you sure? I meant to. I should have. Not apologized but taken it back completely. I jumped to conclusions, and I was wrong. You’re a good man in your own way.”

“That’s doing it too brown, but you love me anyway.”

“I do. How could any woman not love a man who came up with a calf wagon?”

Garn laughed, and Edie floated on the sound and her own happiness.

Garn Coburn's Rules:

- Never mind any business but your own.
- Never fight except for money.
- Never spend a cent you could save.
- Never tangle with lawmen if you can avoid it.
- Never do anything that could put you in jail.
- Never bet unless it's a sure thing.
- Never take a job you have doubts you can handle.
- Never stick with a job you made a mistake taking.
- Never let a threat or a fight rattle you.
- Never get involved with a respectable woman.
- Always let family believe the best by never telling them the worst.
- Never tie up your gun hand.
- Never give in without trying a bluff.
- Never drink enough to affect judgment or speed.
- Always sit with your back to a wall.
- Never draw a gun unless you're willing to use it.
- Always use all weapons available in a fight.
- Never count on anyone except yourself.



About the Author

Ellen O'Connell lives in Douglas County, Colorado. She raised, trained, and showed National Champion Morgan horses for over twenty years as Serendipity Morgans. She still keeps a Morgan mare, Serendipity B Wichin, although she now concentrates on rally, carting, and drafting competition with her dogs.

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