



The Sheriff and the Outlaw

Author: *Theresa Oliver*

Category: Romance, Western, Adult

Description: Duty and desire clash in the sultry summer heat when fire ignites two unsuspecting hearts....

All she wants is a safe haven, security, and to escape her past. All he wants is to protect his children and town from danger. Sparks fly as they find more than they bargained for in the untamed west.

On the run, Josey Denning seeks shelter and protection away from a wild outlaw gang determined to find her. Seeking solace and safety out of view, the last thing she wants is for the law to find her.

Daxton Clark is the sheriff in the western town of Whiskey River. It's quaint and quiet, and he's determined to keep it that way. When a notorious, bloodthirsty gang comes to town threatening their security, he's sworn to protect his family and the town from evil forces lurking in the shadows.

When he discovers a beautiful woman, dehydrated and exhausted, sleeping in his barn he's immediately drawn to her. But will he be able to protect her from the evil forces determined to see her dead? Or will his heart need protection from her?

Determination and daring take the lead as danger storms the banks of Whiskey River, leaving its inhabitants to wonder if the safe secure town they built together will ever be the same again in *The Sheriff and the Outlaw*.

*NOTE: This book was previously published by Theresa Oliver Books as *The Sheriff and the Outlaw* (Whiskey River Brides, #5.5).

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Chapter 1

Josey

Laramie, Wyoming

June 1871

“I mean it!” yelled Josey Slater, her hands shaking, trying to hold the six-gun revolver steady. Her blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders, tears streaming down her face. “Stop or I’ll shoot!”

A sinister laugh resonated from the man’s chest, contorting it into something she didn’t recognize, something evil. “You won’t shoot.” Logan, her husband, slurred his words as he stepped closer, lust filling his eyes.

She cocked the hammer, ready. “Wanna bet?” Her hands were shaking but she willed herself to hold the gun steady. She no longer had just herself to think about. If she lowered the weapon, he would surely kill her and the baby. He didn’t know she was pregnant. But even if he did, he would still come after her. Nothing had stopped him before. Not when he was drunk. Why would now be any different?

“Come on, Josey.” Logan took another step, his light brown curls wet with sweat, reeking of beer.

Once, she had thought Logan Slater attractive. They had met when she was sixteen and she had thought him the most handsome man she had ever seen. So, when he

asked her to go for an evening stroll, she had said yes without question. During the course of their courtship, he had been a perfect gentleman. Although rumors flew around town that he was an outlaw and part of a gang, she was mesmerized by his charm and didn't believe the gossip. So, when he proposed, she had quickly accepted. They married in a small church and had set up housekeeping just outside of Laramie. Only then did he start showing his true colors.

"You don't want to do this." Logan took a slow step closer, leering, his eyes wild.

"Like hell I don't!" Josey took a step back, willing her hands to stop shaking long enough to keep him away from her, resolve filling every part of her body.

Logan laughed so hard that tears came to his eyes. He staggered back a step. "Hell, you don't even know how to use that thing!"

Her eyes narrowed. "Oh? I don't?" She moved the barrel slightly to the right and fired, hitting a vase on a table across the room, just missing his head. "Take a step closer and you'll find out what I can and can't do." She took another step away from him. "Stay back! I'm not going to let you hurt me ever again!"

Quicker than she would have thought possible, he whipped out his gun, pointed it at her forehead, and cocked the hammer. "Honey, you're my wife," he stated, suddenly serious, appearing to be stone sober... when a moment before he had been plastered drunk. "And I can do anything I want with you."

Sudden calm rushed over her as she shook her head. "No, Logan. Not this time."

After they were married, he started coming home drunk, abusing and beating her. At first, it was only when he had been drinking. Then it started happening when he was sober, too.

His eyes never wavered. “You’re my property, Josey, to do with as I please.”

“No, Logan.” Her voice steadied as a rush of calm came over her, resolve prominent in her eyes. “From this day forward, no man will ever do to me what you have... not even you.”

They faced off for what seemed like an eternity, but in reality, it was only a few seconds. Finally, he un-cocked his weapon, held it up in surrender, and donned the charming look that had won her over when they first started courting. “Okay, Josey. You win. See? I’m putting down my weapon.” He took another step closer, still holding the gun, even though he said otherwise.

Josey sneered. “That look used to work on me, but not anymore. Get out, Logan, and don’t come back.”

Rage suddenly contorted his handsome features into something very ugly. “You would throw me out of my own house? Who the hell do you think you are? Who do you think paid for the roof over your head?” He laughed without humor. “It sure as hell wasn’t you!”

Josey took aim. “Yeah, you bought this rundown old shack, all right... with stolen money! You and your gang!”

Logan smiled, taking another step closer, backing her up against the wall. “Come on, woman. I just want a little lovin’. No need to make all this fuss.”

A tear rolled down her cheek as she held the gun straight out, steadying it with both hands. If he got any closer and pulled the gun out of her hands, he’d kill her this time. She knew it. No, she had to protect the baby as well as herself.

Josey had just found out that she was pregnant earlier that day, and it changed her

life. It was one thing to be alone, but now she had someone else to think about. There was no way that she was going to raise a child in this environment. Logan had to go... one way or another.

“Never again, Logan. You’re never going to touch me with disrespect again.”

That was when she saw the resolve in his eyes. Logan’s lips contorted into a snarl as he leaped toward her and wrestled her to the floor. His mouth was open as he tried to kiss her, reaching for the gun trapped between their bodies. She willed herself not to let go of it or she was dead. Now, it was either him or her... and this time, it wasn’t going to be her.

With all her strength, she pointed the gun upward between them, the weight of his body crushing her, and pulled the trigger. A deafening bang filled her ears and moisture pooled onto her chest. His blood.

Surprise filled Logan’s eyes as he looked at her one last time and then fell limp across her body.

With shaking hands, she pushed him off quickly and his eyes were already fixed. As fast as she could, she ran out the door into the cool, June night air without looking back. The weapon was the only thing she took with her. She would need it for self-defense. When his brother, Austin, and the rest of the Slater Gang found out what she had done, they would come for her. Killing him in self-defense meant nothing to them. And as mean as they were, they wouldn’t kill her right away. No, Austin would probably let his slimy, greasy men have their way with her first. Then he’d probably hang her, use her for target practice, or both. She had to get away from Laramie as quickly as she could.... while she still had the chance... for her and the baby.

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Chapter 2

Daxton

Whiskey River, Wyoming

Sheriff Daxton Clark sat up abruptly in his bed out of a sound sleep. Sweat poured down his bare muscular chest, breathing heavily as he looked around the room. Disoriented, he slowly began to recognize his surroundings... his bedroom... the room he used to share with his wife, Priscilla.

Trying to catch his breath, he ran his fingers through his dark brown, wavy hair in the dark room, illuminated only by the moonlight streaming in through the window. He had been dreaming of her again. The dream was always the same. She was leaving with another man, leaving him and their two children behind.

In reality, she had asked Mrs. Jenkins to watch the little ones for a while and had left. Andrew and Lillian were small then, only four and two. Mrs. Jenkins said that Priscilla had kissed them both goodbye, told them to be good boys and girls, and then left, never to be heard from again.

Daxton had gone home to an empty house with just a note on the table, saying that she could no longer take it, she never wanted to be a mother, and that the children were with Mrs. Jenkins. She had said that she was going to start a new life... with another man.

He waited for her to come back, but after a few years, he went to Laramie and filed

for divorce, knowing that she wasn't coming back, not sure what he would do if she ever did.

But in Daxton's dream, she was always telling him goodbye with sorrow in her eyes, touched his cheek, and then headed toward a buckboard... driven by a faceless man.

He screamed after her, begging her not to leave, but she never turned around. She just stepped into the buckboard, and they drove away. Although he chased after her in his dream, he could never catch her and then she finally disappeared into the setting sun.

Now in the dark room, he rose from the bed, concentrating on steadying his breathing, when his bedroom door opened.

"Pa, are you all right?" Andrew asked, now eleven, cautiously peering into the room. "I heard you screaming again...."

Daxton smiled. Although his wife had left, at least she had left him the children. He didn't know what he would have done if she had taken them with her. Of course, he would have fought her for them... no matter what it took.

Daxton scrubbed a hand over his face. "I'm fine, son." He stood, slipped on a cotton shirt, and ruffled his son's dark brown hair. "Go on back to bed and try to get some sleep. It's not morning yet."

Andrew's eyebrows pulled together, worry prominent in his deep green eyes, his mother's eyes. "Are you sure, Pa? I can make some coffee—"

"No, I'm fine, son," Daxton cut him off, not wanting to alarm his son. "Go on back to bed."

Andrew nodded and hesitantly did as his father had instructed, slowly closing the

door behind him.

Daxton headed into the dark living room, cool in the night air. It was early June, and the cold days of winter and spring were now behind them. When morning came and the sun rose high overhead, the thermometer outside the house would register in the 70s, only to become warmer in July, August, and September. Then it wouldn't start to cool down again until October. But as hot as it had been in the afternoons, Daxton knew it would only get worse as the months wore on. They were in for one hot summer.

Daxton let out a deep breath, knowing he wasn't going back to sleep any time soon. So, he guessed he should start the day early.

He headed into the kitchen, lit the stove, and put some coffee on to boil. While he was waiting, he walked out onto the front porch, not bothering to slip on his boots, and sat at the top of the stairs as thoughts of Priscilla filled his mind.

They had married in Arizona and had a good life there in the dry arid desert, when a man approached him and said that he was Calder Williams, the mayor of Whiskey River, a small town in Wyoming. He said the town needed a good sheriff and had offered Daxton the job.

At the time, Daxton had been a deputy in Arizona. Although he enjoyed his job, he didn't make much money. So, when Calder Williams offered him the job as sheriff and more money than he was currently making, he jumped at the chance. He packed up his family, and together, he, Priscilla, and the children moved to Whiskey River.

Priscilla had liked Whiskey River at first, but then became disenchanted when the cold winters came. From there, things started slowly getting worse. He came home from work one day and Priscilla and the children were crying. He had lifted Lillian into his arms, took Andrew by the hand, and had led them into the kitchen and fed

them, while Priscilla had broken down in tears, telling him that she didn't want to be a mother, that it was just too hard for her.

At first, he told her to give it time and that she would feel better soon, but it never happened. Then one day, he packed her up along with the children and went to Laramie to see a doctor before Doc Morgan came to Whiskey River.

At first, Priscilla wouldn't open up to the doctor, but eventually, she told him everything, that she wasn't cut out to be a mother. The doctor had listened attentively, gave her a bottle of tonic for the nerves, and sent her home, telling them that she was just a "bit agitated" and needed to rest.

The "tonic" turned out to be glorified whiskey. Daxton came home from work a few days later to the children screaming bloody murder, with Andrew trying to wake her while she was passed out drunk on the sofa. Daxton took care of the children, calmed them, fed them, and put them to bed again. Then, he fixed her a bath and dropped her in the water, clothes and all. She squealed and started wailing that she wasn't cut out to be a mother again.

Daxton wasn't sure, but he thought that Andrew still remembered trying to wake his mother.

Unable to take any more, Daxton started taking the children to Mrs. Jenkins to babysit during the day while he was at work. At least this way, the children would be looked after properly.

Mrs. Jenkins never said a word or asked why, nor did she tell another living soul. She just said that she was happy to help out.

After that, Priscilla started to get better. The house was clean when he came home with the children, she was bathed and dressed, and dinner was ready. Daxton thought

that maybe she just needed a little time.

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Then one day out of the blue, Priscilla said that she would keep the children with her and Daxton was elated, thinking that maybe things would go back to normal again. But on that day, she had spent the day with the children, and then dropped them off at Mrs. Jenkins, never to be heard from again.

Daxton realized that she had kept the children home that day so she could spend one last day with them.

After she left, Daxton was devastated at first. Mrs. Jenkins continued to keep the children for him during the day while he was at work, but when they were older, Daxton let them stay by themselves at the house. Andrew walked with his sister to school and then took it upon himself to learn how to cook. As the children grew older, they pitched in and took care of the house and each other. And, sometimes, they even took care of him, too.

Daxton asked Andrew once if he missed his mother and the boy grew angry, telling him that he didn't want to talk about her. It was then that Daxton regretted not divorcing Priscilla before things got so bad. But divorce was unheard of. When one married, you married for life... for better or for worse.

The scent of coffee wafted toward him through the open door, bringing him back to the present. He had left it open to let the cool air in, knowing the house would warm up soon enough, along with the day. Daxton rose from the porch and went into the kitchen, poured himself a cup of coffee, and started making breakfast for the children.

Lillian came out of her bedroom, rubbing her eyes, still dressed in her nightgown, her long, auburn hair a disheveled mess. "Pa? Is it time to get up yet? I'll make

breakfast.”

“No, darlin’,” Daxton cooed, going down on one knee beside her. “Go on back to sleep. I’ll make breakfast this morning.”

Lillian smiled. “Thanks, Pa.” Then she turned around and went back to bed.

Daxton sighed. Watching her walk away like that pulled at his heart. He felt guilty for having to leave the children alone to care for themselves so much. One day he had asked Andrew if he would rather have Mrs. Jenkins come over to look after them, but his son was quick to tell him that he was old enough to care for the house and to look after his sister.

Yes, his children were growing up way too fast.

During the winter months, Daxton took his children to school on his way to work at the sheriff’s office, and then picked them up afterward on bad days. On pretty days, they walked home or to his office. When he came home, they were fed, their homework completed, dinner was always ready, and they never complained.

His children were very special. Daxton knew he was a lucky man.

He went down to the cool cellar, picked out some ground sausage, and walked back up the stairs and into the kitchen. The children liked biscuits with sausage gravy. And since he was up so early, he thought he’d surprise them.

The new deputy he had hired a few days before, James Hardin, was young and eager.

Lately, Colton Hill had his hands full with the ranch and his twins, so Daxton thought it was time to hire a new deputy. James was new to town and had seemed trustworthy enough, so Daxton decided to give him a chance.

In the few days since Daxton had hired him, James got to the office before him and was already making his rounds, checking on the town—no matter how early Daxton came in. He had proven himself trustworthy.

So, Daxton wasn't worried if he went in a little later, knowing that the office—and the town—would be well cared for when he arrived. The town was in good hands with James Hardin.

After the sausage was brown, Daxton added the other ingredients, making the sausage gravy, removed the biscuits from the oven, and set it all on the table. Then, he set the table with his best porcelain dishes. The set had been Priscilla's—the only material thing of value that she had left behind.

Lillian came out of the bedroom, fully dressed. Her hair was combed, pulled up, and tied with a blue ribbon that matched her dress. "Pa, may I help?"

Daxton smiled as he finished up, feeling guilty for her not having a mother to look after her and teach her the ways of women. But he had vowed long ago to do his best. "No, sugar. Just sit down." He gave her a wink. "Let me take care of you for a change."

She smiled, sitting in her place at the table.

"Why are you up so early?" Daxton asked, finishing up.

Lillian shrugged. "I woke up and couldn't go back to sleep."

A pang of guilt grabbed his chest. She had probably heard him scream and it woke her and Andrew. Now, she would be awake for the rest of the day. "Later on, I want you to lie down and take a nap, okay? You need your rest."

She nodded, smiling, her cheeks rosy.

Andrew came out of his room a moment later yawning, fully dressed.

Daxton shook his head. “What are you still doing up?”

Andrew sat in his place at the table. “Couldn’t go back to sleep.” Then he smiled. “Besides, how can I sleep smelling the biscuits and gravy?”

Daxton laughed as he took his place at the head of the table and folded his hands. “I guess you’re right.” The children folded their hands, too. In their family, it had become customary for the youngest to say the blessing. “Lillian? Want to say the blessing?”

She nodded and then said a beautiful blessing over the meal.

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“Let’s eat!” Daxton announced when she finished.

They spent the next hour having breakfast together. No matter how busy he was, Daxton had always tried to have meals with the children, especially breakfast. He usually worked long hours in the evening, so breakfast had become their designated family time. This was the time when Daxton was most content. He had given up finding another woman to love a long time ago, but he had his children and that was enough.

“Thanks, Pa. That was good,” Andrew gushed, wiping the corners of his mouth. “I’ll do the dishes.” He started gathering his dishes, but Daxton stopped him.

“Son, it’s summertime.” He took the plate from his hand. “You need to get out and enjoy yourself. Why don’t you and Lillian go fishing?”

Andrew frowned, leaning back in his chair. “She always has me bait her hook for her.”

“Na, uh!” Lillian rose from her seat and planted her hands on the table, leaning toward her brother. “Not when we use dough balls!”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Daxton announced, bringing their bickering to a stop.

Lillian started gathering her dishes, stacking them a bit too hard. “That’s okay. I’d like to go help Mrs. Hill today anyway. She’s going to teach me how to sew.” Then she froze and glanced over at her father. “After I finish my chores, of course.”

Daxton smiled. “Why don’t you both leave your chores and have fun today. I’ll do them before I go in.”

“Really, Pa?” Lillian and Andrew asked in unison.

Their father laughed. “Of course! Besides, I have time.” Daxton took one last sip of his coffee and set the cup in the sink. He looked outside, and the sun was just coming up. “Andrew, if you go to Whiskey River now, the fish might still be biting.”

Andrew hurried to place his dishes in the sink. “Thanks, Pa! Maybe Shawn can go, too!” Then he ran out the back door. Shawn O’Malley and Andrew had become fast friends ever since Shawn and his family moved to town.

“Make sure not to wake his family!” Daxton called after him as he stepped outside, watching his son go.

Andrew waved, already almost to the barn. “Don’t worry! I won’t!”

Daxton laughed as he headed back into the house and closed the door. Lillian was already in the kitchen, doing the dishes. “Lillian, go on and have some fun! Go... play with your dolls.”

Lillian scoffed. “Really, Pa? I set all of my dolls on the shelf last year.”

Daxton’s eyebrows pulled together in concern, pain filling his heart. “Really? But you’re only nine.”

“Yes.” She rinsed a dish, obviously trying to look grown up. “And I’m a woman now so I need to learn how to do ‘lady things’.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” Daxton pulled the plate from her hand. He sighed as he looked

into his daughter's big, brown eyes. "Lillian, enjoy your childhood while you can. You only have a few more years left before you're an adult." He offered her a towel. "Believe me, you'll be an adult a whole lot longer than you'll be a child, God willing. So, enjoy it."

She wiped her hands on the towel, folded it, and laid it across the counter, just like a lady would. Watching her, Daxton realized that she was growing up way too fast. "I'll tell you what. Go play in your room for a bit while I do this and then I'll drive you over to see Mrs. Hill on my way to work. Okay?"

Lillian's eyes lit up. "Really, Pa?"

He nodded, enjoying his daughter's enthusiasm. He guessed that her days of playing with dolls and crawling into his lap were over. What she needed now was a woman to teach her the fine points of being a lady. "Yes, I'm sure. Now, go! I'll call you when I'm ready."

A broad smile spread across her face. "Thanks, Pa!" She raced into the bedroom and shut the door behind her.

Daxton pumped the water into metal buckets and placed them on the stovetop to heat. After the dishes were done and the kitchen clean, he announced, "Lillian! Ready to go?"

"Yes, Pa!" she called from the other room. "I'll be right there!"

Unable to resist, Daxton crept over to her bedroom door, which was ajar, and peeked in. Lillian was sitting on the floor, playing with her doll, talking to it. Not wanting to invade her privacy, he backed quickly away and tiptoed back to the kitchen.

She walked out a moment later, smoothing her hands daintily over her dress.

“Ready?” Daxton asked casually. Lillian nodded, trying to look like a lady. “Aren’t you taking a sewing kit with you?”

She shrugged. “I don’t have one.”

“Well, there’s your mother’s sewing kit,” he replied, broaching the subject carefully. “I guess it now belongs to you.”

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She let out a deep breath and shook her head. “Let me think about it.”

Daxton gave her a weak smile as he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “Come on. I have to get to the office before James drives everyone crazy checking on them.” The young deputy was taking his job to heart so much that it was comical, walking through the town, peeking his head into the shops, nearly driving the shopkeepers crazy. But then again, Daxton thought they were happy that the young man was taking his job so seriously.

Daxton patted his daughter’s shoulder. “Wait here and I’ll hitch up the team.”

“Okay, Pa,” she answered, trying to sound grown up. “But if you don’t mind, I’d rather wait on the porch.”

Daxton shrugged. “Whatever you want.” He started toward the door and then glanced over at her over his shoulder. “Just promise me one thing.”

Lillian raised her eyebrows. “What, Pa?”

“Just promise me that you won’t grow up too fast,” Daxton teased.

“Oh, Pa!” she said as she followed him out the door, pulling it closed behind her.

Daxton skipped down the wooden stairs and headed toward the barn. Within minutes, he had the team hitched to the buckboard and pulled it around to the front of the house. “Ready?” he asked his daughter who was swinging on the porch swing.

She skipped down the steps and was on the seat beside her father a moment later.
“Yes, Pa.”

“Then, let’s go.” When they were settled, he made a clicking sound with his tongue and the team lurched forward, headed toward Colton and Ella’s ranch.

It was a beautiful morning in the forest. The sun was coming up in the east, sending shoots of golden light across the spruce, oak, maple, and redwood and a number of other trees, now full and green. Summer in Whiskey River was truly breathtaking. Even though he had lived there for a number of years, he never grew tired of the ever-changing landscape.

“You know, if you like sewing, I’ll take you to the General Store in town and I’ll get you a new sewing box.” Daxton shrugged. “One of your own. Then, you can pick out what you want to put in it. I think it’s time you have your own sewing things.” He thought that the reason why she hadn’t taken her mother’s sewing box was because she felt that wasn’t hers. Lillian was so young when her mother left that he doubted she remembered her.

Lillian bit her lower lip and then released it. “Well, Mrs. Hill told me that she might have a wooden box that we can fix up for a sewing kit. But could we go to the store later so I can get what I need?”

A broad smile spread across Daxton’s face. “Yes, of course.” He gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

Lillian raised her eyebrows. “You won’t be mad?”

Daxton shook his head. “No, not at all. It’s really nice of Mrs. Hill to help you.”

Lillian let out a deep breath. “She’s a very nice lady.”

“Yes, she is.” Since Lillian didn’t have a mother figure in her life, Daxton was glad that Ella had taken his daughter under her wing.

He sighed, worried about both of his children growing up without a mother, especially his son. Daxton was glad it was summer. At least he would have a little break. During the school months, Andrew seemed to continually be in trouble at school, becoming more and more unruly. Mrs. Nash had tried to work with him, but he needed more. They were big shoes that a teacher couldn't possibly be expected to fill.

“Well, here we are!” Daxton happily announced, pulling the team to a stop in front of Colton and Ella’s house. “Would you like me to pick you up this afternoon?”

Lillian shook her head, suddenly infused with energy as she gave her father a kiss on the cheek. “No, Pa! I’ll walk home. It’s not far.”

“Well!” Daxton said, surprised by his daughter’s excitement. “I’ll see you tonight, then. Have fun!”

Lillian jumped down out of the buckboard and waved to her father. “Thanks, Pa! See you then!”

Daxton watched as she walked up the steps, wondering where her childhood was going. She seemed to be growing up much too fast... along with his son. And he didn’t want to miss it.

Ella opened the door, gave Lillian a hug, and waved to him. Daxton nodded his thanks.

Guilt filled his chest as he turned the team around and headed toward Whiskey River. He worked too much, and his children were growing up too fast. But he had no

choice; he needed this job. He was the sheriff, and he was good at it. He didn't know anything else.

As an alternative, Daxton knew that he could always farm. He had the land, but the money in farming wasn't always steady. He had seen plenty of his farmer friends who had suffered in the winter when drought or other catastrophes hindered the harvest. Daxton couldn't go through that. He wanted—no, needed—a steady income for his children.

And his children were troopers about it, never appeared to mind him having to work long hours. Daxton loved his work, but he loved his children more. It was funny the things people had to do, and the sacrifices one had to make, in order to make a living to support their families.

Within minutes, he pulled up in front of the livery stable.

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“Hello there, sheriff!” Dirk Price smiled, wiping his hands on a rag as he walked out of the stable. “A nice Friday, huh?”

Daxton pulled the brake on the buckboard and wrapped the reins across the front bar. “It’s lovely but getting a bit hot already.”

Dirk reached for the reins. “Well, at least it’s still cool in the morning and at night... for now.”

“You want me to unhitch the team?” Daxton took off his cowboy hat and ran his fingers through his dark brown hair, then slid it back into place.

“No, need.” Dirk smiled as he climbed into the buckboard. “It’s the least I can do for all you’ve done for me.”

Daxton chuckled. “Hey, what are neighbors for?”

“Thanks.” Daxton knew how lucky he was to live in such a wonderful town, and he intended to keep it that way.

“Don’t worry about Betsy and Bees, I’ll take good care of them.” Dirk sat on the bench, reins in hand, and took off the brake.

Daxton nodded. “Thanks, Dirk. I’ll see you later tonight.”

Dirk nodded and then clicked his tongue. The team jerked forward, and he took them around to the back of the barn. Dirk let Daxton park his rig in the back out of the way

and he cared for his horses while he was at work. Daxton chuckled to himself. Betsy and Bees. His children had named them years ago and the names stuck.

Within minutes, he walked down the wooden walkway, nodding to the bank owner as he passed.

“Sheriff.” Dallas King smiled. “You and the kids coming to the ranch this weekend?”

Dallas had made a complete turnaround since he married Megan, a lovely girl from Ireland. Not only was she beautiful, but she was strong enough to handle Dallas, which he needed. And look out when she was mad! Whoo wee, did she have a temper! She probably needed it to keep Dallas in line. “Not sure if we’ll make it out or not, but we’ll try.”

Dallas smiled. “Well, we hope to see you there.”

“Thanks for the invitation, though.”

“You bet.” Dallas tipped his hat and then headed back into the bank.

A bell rang when Daxton walked into his office. He installed it after Colton Hill—his friend and a sometimes deputy—almost shot Dallas when he barged in unexpectedly one time.

“Afternoon, sheriff!” James chirped, a bit too eager.

Daxton nodded as he sat down at his desk. “James.” He looked over at the jail cell and no one was there. “Haven’t arrested anyone yet?”

James’s eyes opened wide. “No, not yet, but it’s still early.”

Daxton laughed. "It was a joke."

"Oh, yeah. Right." He walked over to the wall where all the Wanted posters were kept. "The post rider delivered the new Wanted posters on his way to the post office this morning. I took the liberty of hanging them up."

Daxton clasped his shoulder. "Good work, James. You'll make a fine sheriff one day."

James blushed. "Thanks, sheriff."

Daxton perused the Wanted posters and stopped when he came to two men. One was obviously younger and handsome, with light brown, wavy hair. The other was older, rugged looking, with a mean look in his eyes. "The Slater Boys."

James let out a deep breath as he looked over Daxton's shoulder. "Yep. It says here that they're brothers."

Daxton crossed the room to his desk and started shuffling papers. "Yes, but don't let the younger one's appearance fool you. They're both meaner than snakes. Every lawman in this county has been after them for years."

James leaned closer to the poster. "It says here that they're both wanted for murder and armed robbery."

Daxton sat back and looked out the window, taking in the bright, golden sunshine. It was welcome after the long winter. Looking outside now during the summer, it was hard to believe that in six more months it would all be covered in snow again.

The sheriff crossed the room to the door and looked out. "They did more than that, I'm sure." He glanced over at James. "Well, I'm going for a walk to check on the

town and take in the morning sunshine before it gets too hot. Stay here and keep an eye on the office.”

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“Yes, sir!” James was a bit too quick to answer and way too chipper.

Daxton smirked. “And don’t go arresting anyone without good cause before I get back.”

An eager smile spread across James’s face. “Don’t worry. I won’t.”

Daxton rolled his eyes as he stepped onto the porch and strolled along the covered wooden walkway headed toward the General Store. He tipped his hat as two women passed. “Ladies.”

One of the ladies inclined her head, batting her eyes. “Sheriff.” Although some would consider Daxton one of the most eligible bachelors in town, none of the ladies had struck his fancy. No, he was content with just his children to love.

Daxton let out a deep breath as he crossed the street to the hotel, the only restaurant in Whiskey River.

“Afternoon, sheriff,” Harrison Curry, the owner, called to him, smiling as he passed.

“Afternoon, Harrison.” Daxton enjoyed living in this small town. It was quiet, peaceful, and family oriented, and he intended to keep it that way.

As the day wore on and night fell, Daxton was thankful that it had been a quiet day. That evening, Daxton sat in the rocking chair on the front porch outside the Sheriff’s Office beside James, rocking back and forth, watching the sun set. “James, go home. There’s nothing going on today.”

James smirked, motioning across the dirt street to the hotel. “Well, sheriff, I don’t have far to go.”

Daxton chuckled. “You should really think about getting your own place. It’s probably costing you a fortune, living in the hotel.”

“Nah, Mr. Curry gives me a good rate.” James folded his arms across his chest, leaning back. “Besides. I’m single and have no one to go home to.” James had moved to Whiskey River not long before and was still establishing himself within the community.

Daxton rose to his feet and clasped his hand on James’s shoulder. “Well then, if you’re not going home, I am.” A smile lit his lips. “Don’t stay too late and be sure to lock up when you leave.”

“I will, Sheriff!” James’s smile lit up his face. “You can count on me.”

Daxton rolled his eyes. He couldn’t wait until James settled down a bit. As he headed toward the stables to get Betsey and Bees, the sun began to set in the distance, casting a golden glow over the town. He was glad that they were having a quiet summer. He just hoped it stayed that way.

Chapter 3

Josey

Josey fell to her knees for the hundredth time, but quickly rose to her feet and resumed running, but at a slower pace this time. Although it was cool at night, she was glad that it wasn’t winter. But she would rather freeze to death in the snow than endure what she was sure Austin had in store for her if he caught her. To him, it would matter not that she had killed his brother in self-defense. No, she had to keep

going before he found her. She had more than herself to think about now.

Josey had been running at night and hiding during the day over the last few days, but she thought her legs were about to fall off. Suddenly, her stomach lurched, and she spilled its contents behind a nearby bush. She had to rest, before she lost the baby. Despite how she felt about its father, she wanted this baby more than anything.

Along the way, Josey had spotted a pair of men's jeans, a flannel shirt, and men's undershirt hanging on a clothesline. Leave it to a man not to take his clothes in from the line before the sun fell. She hid in the bushes and, when she was sure no one was watching, she snuck over and grabbed the jeans and shirt. There was also an old straw hat resting on a rain barrel sitting nearby. She thought that the owner wouldn't miss the clothes since he had left them outside, so she "borrowed" them and headed back into the forest.

She quickly darted behind a tree and changed her clothes, hiding her blood-stained dress behind a bush, out of view. Josey gathered her wavy blonde hair into her hands, twisted it up, and tucked it under the hat.

Although she had never worn men's clothes before, she was surprised that, although they were a bit baggy, they fit her well enough for her to pass for a man if anyone saw her.

She slipped on the undershirt and then the flannel shirt, leaving it open and untucked. Josey looked down to assess the affect. She looked hideous, but it would have to do. If it kept her hidden and the baby safe, she was willing to dress like a man for the rest of her life.

What was she going to do? How was she going to raise her baby alone? With Austin hot on her trail, there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide... and nowhere she could raise her baby in peace.

At that moment, she vowed to do what she must in order to protect her child. For now, she pushed the thought from her mind. First, she needed to stay alive.

She popped open the chamber of the revolver. There were four bullets left. She would have to make them count... unless she got more bullets somewhere. But without money, that was an impossibility. Josey closed the chamber, shoved it into the back of her jeans, pulled the hat down low, and headed out. Although she ate what she could along the way, it wasn't enough. Exhausted and hungry, she sighed, knowing she would have to find shelter and food soon.

Although Josey had been sleeping during the day, it was broken sleep. Now, she stumbled through the forest, trying to stay awake as the thought of Logan falling limp over her, his fixed eyes staring into hers, ran through her mind. Her stomach lurched again, and she bent over behind a tree, but the only thing that came up was yellow bile. She stood up and wiped her mouth on the sleeve of her shirt, suddenly thirsty. She needed to find water.

Yes, Logan's brother and his friends were sure to find her if she didn't find somewhere to hide soon. She was sure they wouldn't involve the law. No, they would take care of what they saw as justice in their own way. Josey just needed to put as much distance between the shack and herself as she could. Her eyes began to close, but she shook herself awake, knowing that if she closed her eyes now, Austin would surely find her. If that happened, she wouldn't live to see morning.

You can't stop running, she thought to herself. Not now, not ever.

Josey couldn't believe that she really had shot Logan. The last time he came after her, she swore that she wouldn't let him—or any man—hurt her again. That's when she started planning.

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When Logan was away, she had taught herself how to use a gun and how to use a lasso, too, just in case. Yes, the next time he came for her, she swore that she would be ready. But when it happened, the reality was much different than she had expected. Josey had never wanted him to die, but at least now he'd never come after her again. And if she ended up hanging for her crime, then so be it. At least Logan wouldn't have the chance to hurt her again. She just hoped that the law would wait until after the baby was born before they hung her. The baby deserved better, if not her.

All of a sudden, the ground started swirling under her as she dragged her feet through the lichen on the forest floor. Josey knew she was making too much noise, attracting too much attention, but she was just so tired. She needed a decent night's sleep. Not the broken sleep that she had been enduring.

When she looked up, in the distance were flickering lights. At first, Josey was so tired and delirious that she thought they were stars. But then she realized they were too close to the ground to be stars. As she got closer, she realized they were candles, flickering from the windows of a house. When she drew near, they were shining from the windows of a house with a wrap-around wooden front porch. If only she could go inside and warm herself, but she didn't dare knock on the door. Who was to say that she wouldn't literally stumble into someone worse than Logan, worse than Austin, or the worst man she could possibly imagine, perhaps the devil himself? No, after being married to Logan, she was through with men and had no intention of getting involved with another. Not now, not ever.

Josey was about to move on, but she knew that if she didn't stop soon, she would fall where she stood. And she had the baby to think about. She had to stay alive. She

needed to find shelter and to hide before Austin Slater found her. She had heard of the despicable things he had done and could only imagine what he would do to her if he found her. Josey looked to the left where a red barn stood. Did she dare? It would be the best shelter she had since she started running. It was far enough away from the house that she might be able to sleep and get out unnoticed before first light. When she woke, she would decide what to do then.

No, she couldn't... could she? But she was so tired....

Just then, a stick fell from a tree and landed beside her, causing her to jump. She placed a hand to her heart, trying to steady herself. Her stomach lurched again, and she began to shiver.

I'm too jumpy, too tired, she thought, catching herself from stumbling again. Maybe some sleep would do me some good.

Although she knew she was breaking her own rule of sleeping during the day and traveling at night, she just couldn't help herself. She looked toward the house to make sure no one was coming, and let out a deep breath, relenting.

"Okay, but I'll only sleep for a little while. Then I'll be on my way again come first light," she reasoned, talking herself into it, willing herself to believe it.

Josey looked once more at the house and jumped when the flickering candles suddenly went out and the house fell into darkness. Summoning all her courage, a burst of energy coursed through her veins as she ran toward the barn and through the door, which was cracked open. After pulling the door closed, relief swept over her. She looked around and in the back of the barn was a pile of loose straw. Josey never thought she would be so happy to see a pile of straw in her life.

She crawled into the straw, laid on her side with her back to the wall, and covered

herself the best she could, hiding, leaving only her eyes uncovered. Any other time, she would have been afraid that she may disturb a stray family of field mice or something worse, but at that moment, she was too tired to care. She watched the barn door, listening to the wind whistle through the cracks between the boards. Hunger grabbed her, but she needed sleep more. Josey ran a hand over her stomach, thinking of the baby as her eyes began to close. She just hoped that Austin didn't find her before she woke.

"Hold it right there," a strong male voice resonated through the barn, waking her, sending chills down Josey's spine. He took a step closer.

Josey opened her eyes, and the faint rays of morning sunlight shone into the barn, sending a man into silhouette. Oh, no! She had slept too long and now he found her. But when she looked closer, it wasn't Austin. Instead, it was a man with dark brown, wavy hair... holding a gun.

As slowly and silently as she could manage, she reached behind her, took her gun out of her jeans, and gripped the cold handle, steadying herself.

The man looked around, but not directly at her. He knew someone was in there, but he didn't know exactly where. He hadn't seen her... yet. Maybe if she stayed perfectly still....

"I know you're in here," he announced loudly.

The man took a step closer. "Listen, mister. I don't know who you are or what you're doing in my barn, but unless you want a belly full of lead, you'd better make yourself known... now!"

Josey froze, unsure of what to do next. Her body suddenly grew cold as her heart raced.

The man took another step closer, looking around, his gun raised. “I’m going to give you to the count of three and you’d better show yourself or I’ll start shooting. It’s your choice.”

Josey didn’t move.

“One!”

She couldn’t breathe.

“Two!”

Quicker than she would have thought possible, she stood and aimed her gun at him, her hands shaking, thinking only of the baby. “Don’t take another step closer or I’ll shoot! I swear I will!” Tears streamed down her cheeks as her hat fell off, and her long blonde hair fell over her shoulders.

The man stared at her in obvious disbelief. “Don’t be afraid. I won’t shoot.” Then he released the hammer of his gun and held it up. “Lower your weapon.”

“And let you do God knows what to me?” She cocked her gun, her hands shaking as tears came to her eyes. “I don’t think so.”

He raised an eyebrow but made no other move. “You’d shoot an unarmed man?”

She motioned with her head toward the gun in his hand. “And what do you call that?”

He slid it into the back of his jeans and held up his hands again. “Better?”

Josey looked in his eyes and, for some reason, she knew this man was different. He didn’t have the wild look in his eyes that Logan had when he drank, or the wild look

that Austin always had. No, Josey sensed that this man wouldn't hurt her. But she shook her head to clear her mind. She couldn't afford to get soft, not now. "You're confusing me! Just let me go and no one will get hurt."

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The man looked at her with kind eyes, taking a step closer. “Give me the gun, miss.”

Josey pointed the weapon at him, willing her hands to stop shaking. “Stay back!”

The man stopped. “I promise I won’t hurt you—”

“Really? And what good are the promises of men?”

He looked at her, unfazed. “I don’t know what you’ve been through in the past, but not all men out there will hurt you....” He took a step closer. “You can trust me.”

“Stop!” she yelled as tears coursed down her cheeks. “Stop!” He took another step closer, but the steam was going out of her. She was just so tired.... “Stop!”

“Shh,” he cooed as he stepped closer, stopping in front of her.

“Stop....” She lowered her weapon, letting her arm fall to her side, her body shaking as sobs wracked her body.

The man caught her with one arm and took the gun out of her hand with the other.

Out of reflex, she leaned into him and sobbed on his shoulder, letting his strong arms support her.

“Shh....” he whispered into her hair. “You’re safe now. I promise I won’t hurt you.”

Her legs started to shake. Josey would have collapsed onto the straw out of relief that

it was over—one way or another—but his strong, muscular arms supported her, keeping her from falling.

The man tucked her gun into the back of his jeans along with his and, in one fluid motion, scooped her into his arms. She felt her body being carried somewhere... up the stairs and into the house... a bedroom. The man kicked the door closed behind him.

“No, don’t!” she yelled, but the fight was out of her. If she was going to die, she just hoped it was quick at the hands of this man and not Austin Slater.

“Shh....” he stage-whispered. “Please, keep your voice down. I said I won’t hurt you and I meant it. You’re safe here. I promise.” He stood her on her feet just long enough to pull down the quilt and sheets, and then sat her down on the edge of the bed. She tried to protest, but he murmured soft words to her as he bent down and took her shoes off, laid her down on the bed, covered her over with a warm quilt, and then tucked her in. “I’ll be right back.” Then he disappeared out the door.

Although she had slept through the night, she was still so tired. Violent shivers ran over her body, so she pulled the blankets around her face, snuggling into the soft down feather bed. She was almost asleep but jumped when the door opened.

“Shh....” a voice cooed.

She looked up and it was the same kind man.

“For now, I want you to stay in here.” The man sat down on the edge of the bed beside her., but she shrank away. “Don’t worry. I locked the door so no one will bother you. You’re safe.”

She nodded, understanding, and relaxed a bit.

“Here.” He handed her a glass of water. “Drink this.”

She raised up, feeling weak, but drank the whole glass, thirstier than she thought.

He placed his hand on her forehead. “You’re burning up. I’ll go fetch Doc Morgan—”

“No.” She placed her hand on his arm, shaking her head. “No doctors. I just need to rest.”

He watched her for a moment and then nodded. Then he left the room again and, what seemed to be a moment later, a warm washcloth was on her forehead.

“I’m so cold—”

“You have a fever. Rest and I’ll get you another blanket. You need to sweat it out.”

She nodded and closed her eyes. A moment later, the weight of another blanket fell over her, and warmth finally caressed her body. Josey ran a hand over her stomach under the blanket. She just hoped that she didn’t lose the baby because of this. No, she would rest now. She had to... for the sake of the baby.

“Thank you.”

There was a pat on her shoulder. “Get some sleep.”

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As she drifted off to sleep, she wondered where she was... and who this wonderful man was that would care for a complete stranger without question.

Chapter 4

Daxton

Daxton watched her sleep, settling into a chair in the corner of the room. His eyes traveled over her features. Even though her face was dirty, and her hair was filled with straw and leaves, she was still beautiful.

He studied her face, wondering who she was running from and why. Then he noticed the bruise on her cheek and the bruises on her arms. Daxton sighed, knowing that she was probably running away from an abusive husband or lover.

Daxton heard the clanking of dishes in the kitchen and realized that the children were up. He glanced over at the sleeping woman, having no intention of letting her near his children until he talked to her first.

As quietly as he could manage, he slipped from the room, closing the door behind him.

“Morning, Pa,” Lillian called from the kitchen. “I’m making pancakes. Want some?”

Daxton nodded, walking in. “I’m going over to see Colton Hill this morning. Would you like to visit Ella again today?”

Lillian's eyes lit up. "Would you mind? We're making clothes for her children."

A smile lit his lips. "No, not at all. I have a few things to do around here, so you go ahead. I'll take you over in just a bit." Daxton knew it was a good idea for the children to be out of the house away from the woman until he could get to the bottom of her situation. If he needed to, he'd gladly swear out a warrant for the arrest of the man who had harmed her.

"Don't worry." Lillian placed a pancake on a plate. The skillet sizzled as she added more batter. "I'll do my chores before we leave."

Daxton shook his head, proud of his daughter. "No, I'll take you over and then I'll come back to do the chores. It's summertime. Enjoy yourself. I'll take care of the house."

Her eyebrows rose, clearly excited. "You don't mind?"

Daxton smiled. "You've been taking care of the house long enough. Now, it's my turn." Guilt grabbed his chest, realizing how much he had been leaving to the children lately. "Besides, I need to clean out the barn." He had only one milking cow and a few horses. He had planned to get Andrew a horse soon, since he was getting older now, but hadn't gotten around to it yet. But what they had was enough to care for themselves without having to hire someone to help him.

Andrew came in, pulling his suspenders up over his shoulders. "What's going on?"

Daxton waited for a minute, wondering if he knew about the woman. "What do you mean?"

Andrew took the plate of pancakes to the table, helping out without being asked. "I heard that Lillian is going over to visit Mrs. Hill again today." He shrugged. "I was

just wondering what was going on.”

Daxton set a glass jar filled with maple syrup on the table along with the place settings. As exhausted as she was, he knew the woman would sleep for a while. “You going fishing today?”

Andrew’s eyebrows rose almost into his hairline, confused. “I just went fishing yesterday—”

“And you didn’t catch any fish.” Daxton smiled. “I was hoping to have fish for dinner tonight.”

A broad smile spread across Andrew’s lips. “You don’t mind?”

Daxton laughed, enjoying his son’s surprise. “I think you two’ve been holding down the fort here long enough. Go have some fun. I’ll take care of the house and the barn this week.”

Andrew’s eyes narrowed. “Are you sure? The barn—”

“Can surely survive a week without you.” Daxton motioned toward the kitchen chairs. “You’re both children. I want you to enjoy your childhood while you still can. You’ll be grown up soon enough.”

“I don’t mind.” Lillian pulled the skillet off the stove and plopped the last pancake onto the stack sitting on the table. “I like taking care of the house.”

“Well, this week, you’re going to be children.” Once his children were seated, Daxton sat down at his place at the head of the table. “I insist.”

“Thanks, Pa,” Andrew reached for a pancake, but his father stopped him.

“Not before we say grace.”

The children folded their hands at the edge of the table, bowed their heads, and waited.

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Daxton said a beautiful blessing over the meal and then ended with, “Dig in!” He stabbed a pancake and plopped it onto his plate. “Lillian, this looks delicious. Where did you learn how to cook like this?”

She scoffed. “Pa, I’ve been cooking for a while now.”

He narrowed his eyes, realizing how much he had come to depend upon them. They were children and here he had been depending upon them as if they were adults. Well, things are going to change. He popped a bite of pancake into his mouth. “Andrew, what have you been using for bait?”

Andrew shrugged. “Worms.”

“Why don’t you try fly-fishing?” Daxton asked, stacking the dishes after the meal. “It’s the best way to get cutthroat and rainbow trout.”

Andrew’s eyebrows raised. “Thanks, Pa. I’ll try it,” he replied, finishing up the last of the pancake on his plate. “Wanna go?”

Daxton shook his head as guilt filled his chest. It had been a while since he had gone fishing with his son, and it was long overdue. “Maybe later. I have a lot of things to catch up on around the house first.”

Lillian took a dainty bite of her pancake. “Aren’t you going in to work today?”

“No.” Daxton sighed. “While we’re over at the Hill’s place, I’m going to ask Colton if he can take over for me as sheriff this week.”

Lillian's eyebrows rose in concern. "Why?"

Daxton chuckled. "Because I want to catch up around the house and spend time here with you, for starters." Then he turned toward his son. "I'll tell you what. Let me take a day or two to catch up around here and then we'll go fly-fishing together. How does that sound?" Daxton didn't want to go far and leave the woman unattended for too long, if he could help it. But he welcomed the opportunity to spend some time with his son, too. It had been too long.

When he was finished eating, Andrew rose from the table and set his plate in the sink. Then he reached for one of the metal buckets sitting in the corner, but his father stopped him.

"You go ahead." He nodded toward Lillian. "Both of you enjoy yourself today. I'll clean up when I come back from taking Lillian over to the Hill Ranch."

Andrew's face beamed with excitement. "Thanks, Pa!" Then he quickly grabbed his cane pole and headed out the back door, headed toward Whiskey River. Daxton made a mental note to get him a decent fishing pole soon.

"If you see a bear, get out of there!" Daxton called after his son and then glanced over at his daughter.

A broad smile spread across her face as she pumped water into one of the buckets. "I'll be ready in a moment—"

"I said, I'll take care of the dishes when I return. Now, grab your things and I'll take you over to see Mrs. Hill."

"Oh, she wants me to call her Ella now," Lillian corrected, trying to sound very grown up. "But I'm not sure I feel comfortable with it yet."

“Well, then. Call her what you feel comfortable with.” Daxton took his hat off the peg by the door and slid it on. “Come on. Grab your things and let’s go.”

“Pa? Guess what?” Lillian asked, clearly excited. “Mrs. Hill helped me fix up a sewing kit yesterday!”

“That’s wonderful.” He didn’t say anything about her mother’s sewing kit. After she was so quiet the day before when he had broached the subject, he had no intention of bringing it up again anytime soon. He guessed that she would bring it up again when she was ready. She was probably still angry with her mother for leaving, even though she probably didn’t even remember her. But Daxton hoped that one day Lillian, and Andrew, would come to forgive her.

“Get ready and I’ll be right back.” Daxton headed toward his bedroom, when Lillian stopped him.

“Pa, is everything all right?” Lillian asked, carrying her sewing box to the door.

He smiled. “Yes, of course. I just forgot my wallet. Go on out and I’ll be right there.”

Lillian returned the smile and then headed out onto the front porch to wait. Daxton knew that she loved taking in the fresh morning air on pretty, summer days.

When she was outside, Daxton poured another glass of water and slowly opened the door to his bedroom. Inside, the woman was still sleeping, so he walked in and set the glass of water by the bed. Her face was angelic, but troubled as she slept. Daxton wondered what her story was, where she came from, and what she had endured to bring her to his barn.

Daxton let out a deep breath. One thing was sure: He wasn’t going to get any answers until she woke. But right now, what she needed was rest. He felt her forehead and she

was still burning up with fever. Daxton rinsed out the washrag in the basin and placed it back on her forehead. She didn't even stir. A crease formed between his eyes. If her condition didn't improve soon, he was going for Doc Morgan, whether she wanted him to or not.

But there was nothing more he could do at the moment and his daughter was waiting. So, he walked out and quietly closed the door behind him. Then he headed out to the barn, hitched up the team to the buckboard, and drove it around front. Lillian was sitting prim and proper on the front porch with her sewing box on her lap, trying to be so grown up, even though she was just nine years old. Guilt grabbed his chest again, knowing that his daughter's childhood was quickly slipping away before she could have a chance to experience it.

"What took you so long, Pa?" Lillian daintily stood and skipped down the stairs to the buckboard, carrying her sewing box.

"I had to do something first." It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the complete truth, either. But Daxton wasn't going to tell the children about the woman. Not yet.

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“So, how are the clothes coming along?” Daxton asked, taking in the scenery of green, lush grasses, green forest, rolling hills, and white-capped mountains in the distance. As white as the landscape had been in the winter, in summer, green stretched out as far as the eye could see. It really was a beautiful sight.

“Oh, Pa! Ella... I mean Mrs. Hill... taught me how to sew seams and hems...” Lillian launched into a monologue about sewing, needing no more prompting. He nodded and “uh-hummed” at the right places, but his mind was on the woman lying in his bedroom at his home. The woman was so vulnerable that she hardly seemed dangerous. But in his experience as a lawman, that wasn’t always the case.

A short while later, they pulled up in front of the Hill Ranch. Ella walked out onto the front porch with a baby on each hip.

“Well, well! Lillian, I wasn’t expecting you today, but I’m so glad you’re here!” A broad smile spread across her face. “Would you mind taking one of the babies for me?”

Lillian beamed, glancing over at her father with hopeful eyes.

“Go ahead.” Daxton chuckled, enjoying his daughter’s enthusiasm.

“Yes, Mrs. Hill,” Lillian replied as she jumped down out of the buckboard, leaving her sewing kit on the bench seat beside her father. “I’d be glad to.”

“Please, call me Ella.” She smiled as she adjusted the babies on her hips. “Which one would you like?”

A broad smile spread across Lillian's lips. "Come here." Her eyes sparkled as she held up her hands to Hannah, who happily went to her, smiling and cooing.

"Is Colton around?" Daxton wrapped the reins around the front bar of the buckboard and hopped down, carrying his daughter's sewing kit. He set it on a small table on the front porch, knowing nothing would happen to it there.

Ella motioned with her head toward the barn, adjusting the other baby, Blake, on her hip. "Colton's out back, working with the men."

"Mind if I talk to him?" Daxton's eyebrows lifted.

Ella smiled as she shook her head. "No, not at all." Then she turned to the girl. "Lillian, why don't you go inside. I'll be there in a minute."

"Yes, ma'am," she replied and then headed inside, carrying the baby and taking the sewing kit with her.

Ella turned her attention to Daxton. "Is something wrong?"

He shook his head, smiling. "No, everything's fine," he lied. "I just need to speak with Colton."

Ella gave him a small smile and nodded. "Well, if you ever need to talk—"

"I'll let you know," Daxton finished, his lips curling into a smile. Then he gave her a pat on the shoulder. "Thanks. I truly appreciate it." He started toward the barn but stopped. "Ella, thank you for taking Lillian under your wing like this. It really means a lot."

Ella grinned. "It's my pleasure. She's been a big help to me, too."

“Well, she loves coming to visit.”

Ella inclined her head. “She’s welcome here any time.”

Daxton nodded his thanks and headed toward the back.

Colton saw him approach and walked out of the barn, leaving the other men working behind him. “Hello, sheriff. Want to come in for some lemonade?”

Daxton shook his head. “No, but could I speak with you for a moment?”

Colton’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. He took his hat off and hit it against his leg, causing dust to fly into the air. Then he pulled his long, dark brown hair back in one hand and let it fall down his back out of habit. “What’s wrong, sheriff?”

Daxton sighed. “I need to ask you a favor.”

One corner of Colton’s lips curled into a smile as he waited.

“Could you take over as sheriff for the week?” Daxton asked, placing his hands on his hips.

A crease formed between Colton’s eyes. “Is something wrong?”

Daxton shook his head. “No, I just need some time off. I haven’t taken any time off for as long as I can remember, and you were the first person I thought of that could take over.” He chuckled. “James is a good man, but he’s young and would drive the town crazy before I came back.”

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“You got that right!” Colton burst out laughing, but his smile quickly faded. “I’d be glad to, sheriff.”

Daxton nodded. “Are you sure this won’t be a hardship on you... I mean... with the ranch and the babies, I don’t want to add to your burden.”

Colton gave him a manly slap on the arm. “Not at all, Daxton.” He motioned toward the men working in the corral with the horses, obviously breaking a horse. Suddenly, the horse bucked the man off and the rest of the men laughed. “Life’s been good lately. I have plenty of help here on the ranch now and Ella will be fine with the babies. But if you don’t mind, do you think Lillian would mind coming over to help Ella? We’ll be glad to pay her.”

Daxton chuckled. “Just getting to spend time with Ella and play with the babies is payment enough for her. But I’ll pay her. You’re doing me a favor. And, of course, you’ll receive the sheriff’s pay, as well.”

Colton grinned. “Well, in that case, I’m paying Lillian.”

Daxton laughed. “Thanks, Colton. I truly appreciate it.” Daxton thought for a moment and then asked, “If you need her to, Lillian can stay here for a few days to help out.”

Colton shrugged. “You wouldn’t mind?”

Daxton shook his head. “Not at all. You’d be making my little girl very happy.” He reached out his hand. “Just promise me you’ll take good care of her for me.”

“That goes without saying.” Colton shook his hand. “When would you like me to start?”

Daxton sighed. “James can handle it today, so is tomorrow too soon?”

“James is on duty today alone?” Colton rolled his eyes. “That means I’ll start today. Just let me get cleaned up and I’ll go in.”

Daxton laughed. “I’m sure the town won’t fall down with James on duty alone for one day.”

“Don’t bet on it.” Colton chuckled. “He’ll drive the shop owners crazy. I’m libeled to go in tomorrow and find him lynched. No, I need to protect him from the town as much as the town from him.”

Daxton laughed. “Well, this is true.” James meant well, but he was driving the shop owners crazy. “I’m going to have to have a talk with him about curbing his enthusiasm.”

“You think so?” Colton teased.

Daxton gave Colton a manly slap on the arm and squeezed. “Thanks, Colton. It really means a lot to me.”

Colton’s features suddenly turned serious. “I’m always here for you if you need me, sheriff.”

Daxton nodded. “Thanks, Colton. You’re the best.”

“Speaking of the best...” Colton’s eyes suddenly grew wide. “I’d better hurry into town before James is the one who needs saving.”

Daxton laughed. "I'll bring some things over for Lillian later tonight."

He walked with Colton toward the house and gave him one last wave. Then he pulled the team down the long drive, headed toward home.

On the way back, he couldn't help but think of the strange woman at his house. He found himself hurrying home, telling himself it was just in case she woke and Andrew was in the house alone with her. But it was more than that. She was obviously a strong woman, but also vulnerable. "She's a damsel in distress," he muttered aloud, shaking his head. "I'm always a sucker for a damsel in distress."

No, she was just a woman in need of his help. Any more than that was out of the question.

Deep down, he knew he shouldn't be harboring a woman he didn't know with children in his house. But Lillian would be at the Hill ranch for a few days. Maybe Andrew would like to stay with Shawn for a few days, too, just until he found out more about her. He wanted to know what happened to her. But from the look of her, the bruises on her face and arms, he could only guess. His blood boiled at the thought of any man laying a hand on a woman, wife or not. Daxton knew he would have to be patient with her. But first, he needed to make sure she didn't die from overexposure to the elements. Secretly, he was glad that it was summer and not winter. If it had been winter, she would have frozen to death before she reached his barn, which brought up a whole other round of questions.

How did she come to be in his barn? Obviously, she had been running. Who was she running from? Probably a husband or a man, no doubt. She must have been traveling on foot for who knew how long. But one thing was for sure: Her instincts for survival were strong, which had obviously paid off. He was just glad he had found her before anyone else did.

Daxton pulled the team to a stop in front of his house and jumped down out of the buckboard, eager to see her again, although he wasn't sure why. He told himself it was to make sure that she was still alive. But deep down, it was more than that. She needed his help, and he was determined to give it to her. He just hoped he wasn't making a mistake.

Daxton skipped up the stairs, two at a time, and walked inside. It was getting hot out and the house was a bit stuffy, so he opened both doors and a breeze immediately flowed through the house, cooling it down. He peeked into the bedroom and she was still sleeping, but her hair was drenched in sweat. It was a good sign. He knew she was sweating out the fever. Daxton glanced over to the bedside table and the water glass he had set there was still full. She hadn't woken while he was away.

Daxton sighed and hurried outside to unhitch the team, eager to get back in to care for the woman. He had no idea why he was so concerned about her, but something inside him couldn't help himself. He had always been drawn to those in need.

He also knew he should have told Colton about her, but somehow, he just couldn't. He needed to speak to her first.

After the team was in the back pasture and the buckboard put away, he went back inside, and put on some coffee. Then he walked back into the bedroom, leaving the door open to let the air flow through while the children were away.

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Daxton rewet the washrag on her forehead in the basin, wrung it out and refolded it, and then placed it back on her forehead again. She was sweating profusely and thrashing around in a fitful sleep.

The room was stuffy, so he opened the window, and a cool breeze rushed in. He just hoped she didn't develop pneumonia from it. Then he tucked the quilt in around her and sat down on the chair in the corner. All he could do now was wait.

The afternoon wore on and he replaced the rag on her forehead ever so often, but she never woke. Several times, he almost went after Doc Morgan but decided to wait a bit. Afterall, her fever had broken, but as the day wore on, she still didn't wake.

A little while later, he was about to drift off to sleep when he heard Andrew come in.

"Pa! I caught some fish!" Andrew announced from the back door.

Daxton hurried out of his bedroom, closing the door behind him. "That's wonderful, son. I'll start frying it while you go get cleaned up." Andrew started walking away, but Daxton stopped him. "Andrew, did you have fun with Shawn today?"

Andrew smiled as he laid three huge fish in the sink. "I sure did! He caught four fish, himself! They sure were biting today."

Daxton smiled, proud of his son. "So, the fly-fishing worked?"

"I'd say!" Andrew pumped water into the sink and washed his hands.

Daxton let out a deep breath, hating himself for what he was about to ask. But there was no way that he wanted a strange woman near his children until he found out more about her. “Andrew, would you like to spend a few days with Shawn at his house?”

Andrew jerked his head up. “You mean, spend the night?”

“Yes.” Daxton cringed internally. Here this was the first time he had taken any time off in a while and he was inconspicuously sending his children away. “Would you like that?”

Andrew nodded. “Yes, but why?”

Daxton shrugged. “I just thought you might like to spend a few days with him, is all.”

“Really, Pa?” Andrew’s eyes were as big as saucers. “I’ve never spent the night at a friend’s house before. May I go ask him?”

“Sure! I’ll start frying the fish.” Daxton pulled a cast iron pan from a cabinet, set it on the stove, and scooped in some lard.

A broad grin spread across his face. “Thanks, Pa!” He ran out the door before anything else could be said.

Even though he felt bad about it, Daxton told himself that he was only protecting the children until he had enough time to sort things out with this woman. And the children would be back within a few days. Who knows? By that time, maybe he could get the woman a room at Mrs. Jenkins’s boardinghouse. He made a mental note to speak with her, but not before he spoke to this young woman first. Daxton had no idea what trouble she was mixed up in, or who might be looking for her. The last thing he wanted was to put Mrs. Jenkins in harm’s way.

“Shawn’s parents said yes!” Andrew proudly announced as he ran in through the back door and into his bedroom.

“But not before you eat some of the fish you caught, I hope?” Daxton called after him.

“Oh, Pa!” Andrew ran out of his bedroom, carrying a bundle on the end of a stick. “Can I just take one with me? Shawn’s mother is already frying his up—”

“Say no more.” Daxton wrapped a fish in cheesecloth and handed it to him. “Is that enough or would you like to take two?”

Andrew grinned. “No, I’ll leave the others here for you. I know how much you like it.” He pulled his father in for a hug. “Bye, Pa! I’ll see you in a few days!”

“Be back by Wednesday night!” Daxton called after him as his son ran out the door. It was Monday, after all, and that would give him some time to sort things out. “We’ll go fishing Thursday!”

Daxton sighed as he cleaned the fish and started frying it. Within moments, the fish was popping in the skillet. Soon, the aroma of fresh fish cooking filled the air. Fish don’t keep, so the only time he really was able to have it was in the summertime... and he ate as much as he possibly could while he could.

Every summer, he and Andrew went fishing together in Whiskey River. He had taught his son every aspect of fishing over the years while he was growing up. Fortunately, Andrew shared his love of fishing, and it had become an activity they could do together. But over the last few years, their fishing trips had become few and far between.

While the fish was cooking, he boiled some corn on the cob and sliced some fresh

tomatoes he had purchased from Mr. Carson at the Whiskey River General Store. He always dealt with Mr. Carson when he could. His wife was just too much of a busybody for his taste.

When the meal was ready, he made a plate and carried it into the bedroom, knowing that he would eat later. But he needed to see after the woman first.

“Hello?” As Daxton slowly opened the door, a golden glow filled the room, reflecting the sunset out the window. When he looked over at the woman, she was still sleeping but drenched in sweat.

He entered the room and lit a candle on the dresser, bringing light into the room. Then he sat on the edge of the bed beside her. “Miss?” he asked, his voice merely a whisper. “Are you hungry?”

She didn't wake.

The woman was lying so still that he set down the plate and checked to make sure she was still breathing. As quietly as he could manage, he took the pitcher into the kitchen and refilled it with fresh water. When he entered the bedroom again, she hadn't moved. He placed the pitcher back on the tabletop beside the basin, and then rinsed out and replaced the rag on her forehead. He felt her cheek and she was sweating profusely but she wasn't as hot. Daxton tucked the blankets in around her, and then sat on the chair near the wall and watched her sleep.

When his eyes fell upon the plate of food, he walked over and picked it up, and then headed back over to the chair, not wanting the food to go to waste. He would make her another plate when she woke.

The fish was already cold, but it still tasted good. Daxton hadn't had it since last summer. He let out a deep breath. Regardless of what was happening with this woman, he was looking forward to going fishing with his son this weekend.

When he finished eating, he rose from his seat and took his plate to the kitchen. After doing his dishes, he covered the food and took it down into the cellar, where it would keep longer. He didn't know when she would wake, but he wanted to have food for her just in case. If she had been on the run for a while, hard telling how long it had been since she had eaten a decent meal.

When the kitchen was clean and the food stored away, he went back into the bedroom to check on her. Then he slowly closed the door and went to his daughter's bedroom to prepare a bag for her. Then he spotted the doll setting on the shelf and smiled. He

took it off the shelf and buried it under the clothes at the bottom of the bag, just in case.

In the living room, he looked over at his bedroom door once more. He hated to leave her alone, just in case someone was looking for her, but he couldn't neglect his daughter. Letting out a deep breath, he locked the front door, and then locked the back door as he walked out... something he hadn't done until she had come along. It was reasonably safe here in Whiskey River, so he only locked the doors when it was necessary, and this was one of those times. But one thing was certain: If anyone came for her, he didn't want his children to be a part of it.

Chapter 5

Josey

Josey turned over and opened her eyes. It was dark, except for the dim candlelight flickering in the room. She woke with a start as the events of the last few days rushed into her mind. Logan coming for her... her warning him to stay away... and then shooting him.

"Yah!" Josey sat straight up in the bed in a cold sweat.

"Shh," a kind male voice cooed, gently placing his hands on her shoulders.

"Get away from me!" She pushed him away, terror filling her voice and her eyes.

"Shh," the man repeated. Josey looked at him, trying to focus, but everything was blurry. "You were hiding in my barn, and I found you and brought you in here. Remember?"

Suddenly, everything came back to her... the barn... being tired and hungry...

vomiting everything she had inside her until there was nothing left.

Josey also remembered him.

“I’m so sorry,” she moaned as she lay back down on the pillows. “Let me rest for a bit and I’ll be on my way again.”

The man placed a cool, wet rag on her forehead, and this time, she didn’t stop him. “You’re not going anywhere until you’re feeling better.”

Austin would surely find her if she lingered for too long in one place. She had to get out! Leave! “No, I can’t stay...” Josey croaked, trying to sit up, but she was too weak to sit up for long. Despite her urge to flee, she plopped back down onto the pillow. “I’ll just rest a bit and then I’ll be on my way.” Then, her stomach growled, loud enough for Daxton to hear.

Daxton rose from the bed where he had been sitting beside her. “I’ll be right back with something to eat.”

Food. Yes, she needed food. Maybe food would make the nausea go away. As she lay back on the pillows, she couldn’t understand why she was so nauseous but so hungry at the same time. Despite her best effort to stay awake, she started drifting off to sleep until the door opened.

“It’s me... Daxton... Daxton Clark.” He walked into the room carrying a plate of food and the scent wafted toward her, causing her stomach to churn.

“I think I might throw up...” She tried to sit up and placed a hand over her mouth.

Daxton grabbed a porcelain basin off the table. “Here you go.”

It was too pretty to violate, but she had no choice. She wretched, but nothing came up. When she was sure that she was through, she used the rag and wiped her mouth. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Daxton took the rag from her and smiled. “Feeling better?”

She lay back onto the pillows and shook her head.

“Hungry?” Daxton set the rag aside and then sat on the edge of the bed beside her, holding a plate filled with food.

The scent of fresh fish surrounded her. Heavenly. Josey looked up from the plate and into his eyes, trying to read him. Even though Daxton seemed nice enough, she was leery. “What do you want with me?”

A crease formed between his eyes. “Right now, I want you to rest. Later, you can tell me why you were hiding out in my barn.”

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Josey recoiled, sliding back away from him until her back hit the headboard. “I can’t.”

Daxton reached out to touch her hand, but she pulled back. “Not now. You can tell me when you’re ready.”

Suddenly, the thought of Austin catching up with her came to mind. If he found her here, not only would he kill her, he’d kill Daxton, too. “I have to get out of here.” She pushed up from the bed on shaky arms, but Daxton gently pushed her back.

Daxton shook his head. “Not until you feel better.” He handed her the plate, and she tried to take it but was too weak.

“Wait a minute.” Josey sat up against the pillows the best she could and then reached for the plate again.

Daxton smirked as a kind look came into his eyes. “Here. Let me help you.” After cutting a piece of the fish, he held it up to her lips.

She was about to protest, but it smelled too good. As she took a bite and chewed, the taste of fresh fish filled her mouth. She moaned involuntarily and swallowed. It had been a while since she had had fish, especially rainbow trout. “This is delicious.” She opened her mouth again and he slid another bite into her mouth.

“Thank you,” Daxton replied, cutting another piece for her.

She was not accustomed to anyone caring for her like this. It had been so long—since

she was a child—and here this stranger, who didn't know her at all, was caring more for her than Logan ever had. Tears came to her eyes as she took another bite.

“Hey, now.” Daxton gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “You're safe now. No one's going to hurt you here.”

Tears streamed down her face as her body shook uncontrollably, wracked with sobs. This kind man wouldn't besaying these nice things and treating her so well if he knew what she had done... what she had become.

Daxton set the plate on his lap. “What happened to you?”

Could she tell him? What would he think of her? No, she knew she couldn't tell him or anyone for the sake of her child... not now... not ever.

When he saw that she wasn't going to answer, he looked down at the plate and then back into her eyes. “If you don't want to talk now, you don't have to. But you really need to eat something. It'll make you feel better.”

Without saying another word, she took the plate and began feeding herself.

“I'll be right back—”

She reached out and grabbed his hand. “No! Don't leave me.” It was the strangest feeling. Wanting him to go yet wanting him to stay.

A crease formed between his eyes. “I'm only going to get you some more lemonade. I'll be right back.”

Slowly, Daxton released his hold, and she watched as he walked out. Josey looked over at the window and it was still open. The breeze was cool, feeling good after such

a hot summer day. But if Austin knew she was there... if he found her... no, she couldn't endanger this nice man like this. At that moment, she resolved to eat, get some rest, and then be on her way when she was able.

Josey pulled the plate from the nightstand onto her lap and took another bite. But this time, it went down easier. Her stomach grumbled, wanting more. Not caring how unladylike it was, she picked up the fish with her hands and took big bites. Soon, she licked her fingers, the fish gone.

There was a slight tap on the door, causing her heart to stop. Daxton cracked open the door. "It's just me." Then he walked in, sat down on the edge of the bed again, and held out a glass. "Here's your lemonade."

She nodded and then took a sip. The sweet tartness traveled down her parched throat and through her chest, tasting so good that she guzzled the whole glass without stopping.

One corner of Daxton's lips curled into a smile. "You must have been thirsty." He studied her for a moment and then asked, "How long have you been traveling on foot?"

She bit her lower lip, willing the tears to stay at bay, but they trickled down her face anyway. Tears of exhaustion, tears of relief mixed with grief. Daxton was the first person that she had talked to since she ran. After enduring so much cruelty at the hands of her late husband, it was hard to believe that she could find such kindness in a total stranger. "What day is it?" Her voice broke.

"Monday."

She looked down as a fresh wave of tears forced their way to the surface and spilled over. "A week."

Daxton's lips parted slightly. "Look." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, his eyes sincere. "I don't pretend to know what you've been through, but you're safe now." He looked down at her plate. "Why don't you finish eating and get some rest? We can talk later."

"Okay." If she told him, he wouldn't understand. He would surely throw her out, or worse, call the sheriff and hand her over. Josey wiped the tears from her cheeks, and then eyed the corn on the cob. It looked and smelled delicious, but in her current state, she just couldn't manage it.

"Would you like me to cut it off the cob for you?"

She nodded, unable to speak, willing the tears to stay at bay... at least until she was alone and could let it out.

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Daxton gave her a kind smile. "I'll be right back."

With the plate lying on her lap, she leaned back against the pillows behind her and closed her eyes. But the image of Logan's fixed eyes appeared before her mind again. She gasped. For when she opened her eyes, Daxton was holding a knife.

"Shh," he murmured, unaware of the effect seeing him with a knife had on her. "It's just me."

Josey pushed herself back against the headboard, her body rigid, her eyes wide.

"It's okay. I won't hurt you." He reached for the plate resting on her lap.

Josey slowly handed it to him and watched as he cut the corn off the cob.

Within minutes, he gave the plate back to her, set the knife on the small nightstand next to the bed, and then scooped up a spoonful of corn.

Josie relaxed a bit and shook her head. "No, thank you. I can do it."

But her hands were shaking too hard, and the corn fell off the spoon. Josey guessed it was from shock. She just needed something to drink and rest. So, she set the spoon on the plate and handed it back to him.

"Would you like more fish?" He smirked. "It appears that you liked it."

She gave him a weak smile. "It was good. Maybe later."

Daxton patted her leg as he rose from the bed. "I'll be right back."

Once her was gone, she tried to lean back and relax, but the wind howled through the window and her imagination had her seeing images in the twilight.

When Daxton came back in, he handed her another glass of lemonade. "Here you go."

She let out a sigh of relief and took a sip. It tasted so good that she downed half the glass and handed it back to him, her hands still shaking.

He placed the glass on the nightstand and then gently pushed her shoulders back. "Now, get some rest."

Josey resisted at first, but then relented and relaxed against the pillows, snuggling into the down feathers of the soft mattress. A moment later, her eyes began to close.

She felt Daxton tuck the blankets in around her. When she opened her eyes, he was picking up the plate. "Get some sleep. We'll talk in the morning." He started to walk away, but she stopped him.

"No, don't go." She bit her lower lip, choosing her words carefully. "Could you stay until I fall asleep?"

"Of course." A crease formed between his eyes. "I'll be right back."

Josey nodded, hoping that he understood. She didn't want him in her bed. No, of course not. She just wanted him in the room with her. Somehow, she felt safe with him, although she wasn't sure why. Josey willed herself to keep her eyes open until Daxton returned. Although she knew she shouldn't, there was something about him that she trusted.

Daxton walked back in, carrying two blankets. "I thought you might need this." He covered her with another blanket and tucked it in around her. Then he crossed the room to the window and closed it, leaving it open slightly. Leaving the candle burning, he sat on the chair and covered himself. "Get some rest."

Although Josey's eyes began to close, she willed herself to stay awake for another minute. "You won't leave me, will you?"

A faint smile curled his lips as he shook his head. "No, I won't. I promise." He pulled the blanket up over himself, staying fully dressed. "Get some sleep. I'll still be here when you wake."

She nodded and then settled onto the pillows once more. The soft down of the featherbed felt so good, wrapping around her weary body.

"Daxton?"

"Yes?"

She paused for a moment. "Thank you... for everything."

He gave her a concerned smile. "Get some sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

Josey sighed as her eyes began to close. But she wasn't looking forward to tomorrow. What would he say when he found out that she killed Logan Slater? No, she had to leave when she was able. Daxton could never know.

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Faint rays of golden sunshine streamed through the window the next morning. For a moment, Josey looked around, having no idea where she was. Panicked, she looked over and a man was asleep in the chair, covered with a blanket. And then she remembered. His name was Daxton.

Josey sighed as she leaned back against the pillows, listening to the birds chirp outside. She was still weak but felt much better than she had the night before. It seemed that her fever had diminished, but she was still weak. Trying to be as quiet as she could, she sat up on the edge of the bed. Her head spun, but she picked up the half glass of lemonade and drank it. It went down much smoother this time.

Her head began to spin again, so she laid back onto the pillows and snuggled into the down featherbed.

“Feeling better?” Josey looked over and Daxton was stretching. “Good morning.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Good morning.”

Daxton rose from the chair and folded the blanket. Then he laid it on the top shelf of a small armoire sitting in the corner of the room. “I’ll make us some breakfast.”

“I can help.” Josey tried to get up, but she was still weak. Then, her head began to spin, and she rushed over to the basin on a small round table and unloaded the contents of her stomach. When she was finished, she gripped the edge of the table.

Suddenly, a wet washrag appeared before her eyes.

“I’m so sorry.” She took the rag and wiped her mouth. Then she splashed her face with water from the pitcher and rinsed out her mouth. Josey picked up the basin and was about to dump it outside, but Daxton’s strong arms stopped her.

“Leave it. I’ll take care of it.”

“I can’t let you clean up after me—”

“You can and you will.” Daxton led her back to the bed. She sighed and climbed back in under the blankets, defeated. It was warmer this morning, so she pushed off one of the blankets. “Here. I’ll take it.” He folded the blanket and laid it over the edge of the bed.

“I feel so bad... you waiting on me hand and foot like this.” But Josey couldn’t deny that she needed more rest. Although she had just vomited, she was hungry again. “I’m so sorry.”

Daxton tucked the blanket in around her. “Don’t worry. You’ll feel better soon. You’re just exhausted and need to rest.”

She nodded, giving him a slight smile.

“Now....” Daxton walked over to the window and opened it wide. “Get some rest and I’ll fix us some breakfast.” He stopped at the door. “I’ll bring a plate in when it’s ready.”

Josey shook her head. “No, I can come out to the table.”

“I’ll bring it in.” A small smile lit his lips. “Just relax and I’ll be in to check on you in a bit.”

Unable to argue, she nodded. “Thank you.”

Daxton smiled. “Don’t worry. Just rest.” Then he walked out and pulled the door, but left it open a bit, letting the warm summer breeze blow through.

As she waited, she listened to Daxton clanking the pots and pans in the kitchen and the birds chirping outside the window. She was lucky that it was summer. Had it been winter, she surely would have frozen to death before Daxton had found her.

Daxton.

She was lucky that he found her and not a man like Logan. Or worse yet, a man like Austin. Josey willed herself not to think about it. She needed to build up her strength so she could move on. There was no way that she was going to stay here long and endanger this nice man. He didn’t need to get mixed up in the mess that had become her life. He had done enough.

Josey was nearly asleep when the door opened, and Daxton walked in carrying a plate of food.

“Here you go.” He set the plate on the table. “Ready to eat?”

She nodded. “It smells good.” She reached down and tried to sit up, but Daxton pushed her back down onto the pillows.

“Just relax.” Concern filled his eyes as he walked back to the table to retrieve the plate, and then sat on the edge of the bed beside her again. “The only thing you need to do for the next few days is rest.”

Josey shook her head. “No, I can’t do that to you—”

“Do what?” Daxton shrugged. “Be sick? After what you’ve probably been through, you’re lucky to be alive.”

She nodded and reached for the fork, but he was quicker. Daxton cut the pancake for her and held a piece up to her lips. She took a bite and chewed.

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“So, what’s your name?” Daxton asked casually.

Josey stopped chewing mid-bite and stared at him.

“Oh, come on. At least tell me your name.” He handed her a glass of lemonade and she swallowed, but almost choked.

He was right. The least she could do was to tell him her name, but she wasn’t going to tell him her married name. What would happen if he found out who she was, who she had been married to, and what she did? No, if she wanted a fresh start, then she had to start clean... and leave the past behind. “Josey. Josey Denning.” She gave him her maiden name, her name before she had met Logan, before her life went awry.

One corner of Daxton’s lips curled into a smile. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Josey Denning.” He held up another small piece to her. “Now, how about taking another bite?”

Josey returned the smile. “I can feed myself. I’m feeling better than I did last night.” Or the night before, or the night before that... She sat up against the pillows, reached for the plate, and he slowly handed it to her. It was true. Although she still felt weak, she was beginning to feel better. At that moment, she knew that she might live after all.

Daxton sat back and smiled. “More lemonade?”

She nodded. “Yes, please.” She took another bite and swallowed. “Did you make it? It’s delicious.”

“My daughter...” He stopped short, as if wondering how much to tell her. And she understood. He didn’t know her, after all. “My daughter, Lillian, made it.”

Josey nodded, understanding. “How old is she?”

A crease formed between his eyes. “She’s nine and my son, Andrew, is eleven.”

“Are they here?”

Daxton shook his head. “They’re away for a few days—”

“Until you know who I am.” She nodded, understanding. She handed him back the plate. “I’ll be on my way now. Thank you for caring for me in my time of need.”

Daxton looked at her, confused. “What are you talking about? You’re in no condition to travel... especially on foot.”

She sighed, unable to fight with him in her condition. “I can’t impose—”

“It’s not an imposition.” He handed her back the plate and smiled. “Eat. I’ll be right back with the lemonade.”

She nodded, unable to resist the delicious scent. While he was out, she took a big bite and chewed, relishing the taste of the sweet syrup and pancake. He really was a good cook.

A few minutes later, Daxton returned with the lemonade and handed it to her.

“Thank you.” She downed half of it and set it on the nightstand beside the bed. “Where did you learn to cook like this?”

He shrugged. "I've been single for a while. With two small children, I guess you could say that I learned out of necessity."

She let out a deep breath and went back to eating.

He patted her leg over the quilt. "If you'll be okay for a minute, I'll go do the dishes. You rest until I come back."

Josey looked into his eyes. "Thank you... for your kindness."

"Don't mention it." Daxton gave her a kind smile as he stood. "I'll be right back."

After he was gone, she resumed eating, listening to the birds sing outside. It really was a beautiful day. She had been sleeping during the day and traveling at night. Now, it was nice to be awake during the day and enjoy the sounds of the birds outside, the bright morning sunshine... something Logan would never experience again. Even though he had beat her and did unspeakable things to her, she had robbed him of a future.

Now, she was no better than him.

Josey sat back against the pillows, thinking about what she had done. But then again, she had warned Logan, and she was holding a gun in plain sight. He had come after her again and wouldn't stop. But this time, she had stopped him and now she was probably doomed to hell. But what other choice did she have? She knew she would go through hell and back to keep her baby safe. She didn't want him or her to go through the beatings that she had endured. Worse yet, she didn't want her child to grow up and become like him.

Silent tears streamed down her face as she watched the signs of life outside. She hadn't heard Daxton walk in.

“Are you all right?” He took her empty plate, set it on the nightstand, and handed her the lemonade.

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She took a sip and handed it back to him and swiped her hands across her face.

“Better?”

She nodded, the lump in her throat preventing her from speaking.

Daxton set the glass back on the nightstand and looked into her eyes. “What happened to you?”

Josey bit her lower lip as tears filled her eyes again. How could she tell him? How could she tell anyone?

He waited and then let out a deep breath. “Look. I don’t expect you to tell me. You can just answer yes or no. Okay?”

“Okay,” she croaked. It was the least she could do, since he had been so kind.

Daxton thought for a moment, and then asked, “Did someone hurt you?”

She nodded.

“Is that someone a man?”

“Yes.”

“Has he been hurting you for a while?”

“Yes.” Tears came to her eyes.

Daxton patted her arm. “I know this is hard for you, but this is the last question.”

She bit her lower lip.

“Was he your... husband?”

Tears streamed down her face as she sobbed. Letting out the years of abuse she had endured at his hands.

“Shh,” he whispered, pulling her into his arms. “He’s not going to hurt you again. I can promise you that.”

“But—”

“Shh.” Daxton rubbed her back, letting her cry on his shoulder. “I’ve seen it before. But I can assure you. Not all men are like that.” He pulled back her shoulders and looked into her eyes. “I promise that he won’t hurt you again.”

Tears streamed down her face. “How can you make such a promise? You don’t know—” She was about to tell him that he didn’t know what she had done, that she knew he wouldn’t hurt her again because he was dead.

“I know about men like that.” Daxton handed her a handkerchief. “I know enough.”

She let out a deep breath as she dried her tears. “Thank you.”

After she was calm, he rose from the bed and tucked her in. “Now, get some sleep. You’re safe here. I promise that no one will hurt you.”

She nodded and then watched as he took the plate from the room. Josey curled up on her side. She wasn't worthy of such kindness.

Josey slept throughout the day, but images of Logan coming after her filled her dreams and she woke up screaming in the night.

"Shh...." The bed dipped as Daxton sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her to him. "You're safe. Now, go back to sleep."

When she opened her eyes, it was dark. Only the flickering light of the stars streamed in through the window. "I have to go." She tried to sit up, but he gently pushed her back against the pillows. "Daxton, I can't endanger you like this—"

"I promised you that I'll keep you safe, and I intend to keep that promise." Daxton brushed her hair away from her face but made no other move. "Now, go back to sleep. We'll talk in the morning." But when he rose from the bed, she grabbed his hand.

"Please. Don't leave me," she begged. Although she wasn't sure what she wanted, she just knew that she didn't want him to leave her alone.

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He studied her for a long moment and then let out a deep breath. "Scoot over."

She did as he asked. Daxton took off his shoes and then laid down beside her, fully dressed, on top of the blanket. Then he reached out for her. Josey knew that she shouldn't, but she curled up beside him in the crook of his strong arm, finally feeling safe and secure.

Daxton leaned his head against hers. "Now, get some sleep."

She nodded against his chest. And for the first time in a very long time, she fell into a restful sleep, feeling safe in Daxton's arms. Josey just hoped that she wasn't making a mistake.

Chapter 6

Daxton

Daxton listened to the sound of her breathing beside him. When it became labored, he knew she was asleep. When she had asked him not to leave, his heart went out to her. He sighed. It bewildered him how a man could treat a woman like that. If he had a woman like her, he would cherish her and treat her with the respect she deserved. But he forced the thought from his mind. Even though she was married to a fiend, she was still married, nonetheless.

At that moment, he vowed to help her to get everything sorted out before her husband came for her... if he came for her. Who knows? Her husband may have just let her go, but Daxton seriously doubted that. Men like that were usually possessive.

As the night wore on, he concentrated on listening to her breathing, pushing all other thoughts from his mind. He would help her sort things out when she was feeling better and not so easily upset.

As he lay beside her, Daxton enjoyed the feel of this woman in his arms a bit too much. It had been a while since he had held a woman, protected a woman. But he willed himself not to think of it. After all, she would probably leave when she had the chance, just like Priscilla. But deep down, he knew he couldn't compare her to his ex-wife. This woman just needed comfort and safety. He couldn't allow his old demons to come back. No, this woman needed his help and protection, but nothing more.

He listened to the wind howl through the window. Daxton was about to get up and close it, but he didn't want to disturb her. This was the first restful sleep she had had since he found her. Once she had a good sleep, she would be able to think clearly. Maybe he could help her to find a job and a place to stay in Whiskey River? Maybe he could help her to start over?

Even though she had only been there for a few days, he didn't want to think of her leaving already. And if she stayed at the hotel, who was to say that her husband wouldn't catch up to her and do God knows what to her? But deep down, he knew that Harrison Curry, the hotel and restaurant owner, wouldn't allow it.

Daxton chuckled to himself. Why, he had seen Harrison physically throw a man out of his establishment for less than that. But somehow, Daxton wanted to be the one to protect her.

Then there were his children. Daxton had to think of them first. He couldn't allow any harm to come to Lillian and Andrew at the hands of a madman. If her husband came for Josey at his house and his children were home... well... he didn't even want to think about it. If anyone ever hurt his children, he would kill them first and ask questions later. No, it was good that the children were away for a few days... for their

own safety.

Although Josey's fever was gone, she felt warm in his arms, the weight of her head on his shoulder comforting. He hadn't realized that he had missed this, holding a woman in his arms while she slept. But he quickly pushed the thought aside, knowing that he couldn't let himself start to have feelings for this woman, but he couldn't fight the attraction. After all, she was blonde and beautiful, with curves in all the right places. But he couldn't allow himself to think of her like that. What this woman needed now was protection... and she was married.

A yawn escaped his lips as he listened to the even sound of her breathing. He would think of what to do in the morning. But right now, he couldn't fight the sleep threatening to pull him under. Since he found her, Daxton had been sleeping on the chair. He relaxed onto the feather bed, letting himself enjoy the feel of this woman in his arms as he finally drifted off to sleep, listening to the sound of the wind.

The next morning, he woke to the sound of pots and pans clanking in the kitchen as memories of the night before flooded his mind. His eyes flew open, waking with a start. Josey! Where was she? Had her husband come for her?

When Daxton rushed out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, Josey was lifting a slice of bacon out of one of his cast iron skillets, still wearing the same men's clothes she had on when he had found her. He looked over at the table and it was set, along with a plate piled high with biscuits and a bowl of eggs. The scent of fresh coffee and bacon wafted toward him.

"Oh! There you are," she announced matter-of-factly. "I was about to wake you." She set the plate of bacon down and then sat at the table. "Come here and have some breakfast."

When he looked around, the kitchen was clean. "What are you doing?" As sick as she

was, he couldn't believe that she had made such a recovery in so little time.

She shrugged. "I wanted to pay you back, so I made breakfast and cleaned up a bit." Josey smiled, her eyes kind. "I hope you don't mind."

Reluctantly, he poured them both cups of coffee, set one by her plate, and then sat at the head of the table where she had set a place for him. "So, how are you feeling?"

She nodded. "Better, but I still feel tired." She took a few pieces of bacon and set it on her plate, then passed the bacon to him.

Daxton smiled. "Let's say grace first."

"Oh... yes... of course." She set the plate down, a delicate flush coloring her cheeks as she folded her hands on the edge of the table, and bowed her head, waiting.

Unable to believe what was happening, Daxton said a beautiful blessing over the meal, thanking God for the good food and good company. When he finished, he reached for the bacon. "This looks delicious, but you made enough for an army."

Josey's eyebrows pulled together in concern. "I thought that the children might be here."

Daxton shook his head as he buttered a biscuit. "No, they're away for a few days. But they'll be back tomorrow."

She nodded, understanding. "I don't blame you. I would want to protect my children too."

Daxton smiled, surprised by how insightful she was. "They're always my first concern."

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“I understand.” Josey set down her fork and looked into his eyes. “I promise I’d never hurt them.”

He reached over and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I know, but I had to be sure.”

Josey smiled. “I appreciate you taking such good care of me.... in my time of need.”

Daxton smirked. “Happy to do it.”

Then Daxton’s eyes traveled over the table, taking in all the food. “Well, I think we’d better eat before this goes to waste.”

Josey scooped some eggs onto her plate. “I hope you don’t mind scrambled eggs.” When she was finished, she handed the bowl to him. “I didn’t know how you liked them.”

A smile lit his lips, trying to encourage her to relax. “Scrambled is just fine.” For a moment, he was glad he had sent the children away. He didn’t know how they would have reacted to waking up to a strange woman in the house.

“More coffee?” she asked, having made herself at home, as if she had been living there all along. She certainly knew her way around a kitchen.

He shook his head. “No, I’m fine.”

Josey stood and poured herself more coffee and set it back on the stove to keep warm. “So, what do you have planned today?” She sat back down at the table and resumed

eating.

Daxton couldn't believe how comfortable she appeared to be in his home. "Well, I need to milk the cow and take care of the horses."

Josey gave him a small smile and took a sip of her coffee. Although she was putting on a brave face, he could see that she was fighting back tears.

Daxton let out a deep breath, his eyebrows pulling together in concern. "Josey, you can relax and make yourself at home while you're here. I truly don't mind."

She nodded as she stared at her plate but said nothing.

Reaching over, he softly patted her hand. "Don't worry. No one will hurt you here." He placed a finger under her chin, forcing her to look at him. "As my promise to you, I'll keep you safe."

"Thank you." Josey pushed back from the table and set her plate in the sink, along with her coffee cup. "But I promise to be on my way soon." She reached for the metal buckets setting on the other side of the stove and placed one in the sink.

"You don't have to leave. Not yet." Daxton walked up behind her and gently took the bucket from her hand. "Go get some rest. I'll do this."

She froze. "Later today, I'd like to take a bath, if you don't mind."

"Not at all." He placed his hands on her shoulders as she faced the sink. Not wanting to push her further, he let out a deepbreath. "My ex-wife left a few dresses behind. She was about your size. If you like, you're welcome to them after you bathe."

She turned her head. "You were married?"

“Yes, a long time ago.”

She turned around to face him, sincerity in her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“As I said, it was a long time ago.” Daxton sighed. “Why don’t you go lie down and rest. I’ll let you know when the water’s ready.”

She blinked back tears. “You wouldn’t mind?”

He shook his head as he wiped a tear away from her cheek. “No, it’s fine. I wouldn’t have suggested it otherwise.” He gently pulled her to his chest and let her cry. “Josey, just because you didn’t find kindness in your husband doesn’t mean that you won’t find it in others.”

She nodded against his chest and then pushed away, headed into the bedroom, and closed the door behind her.

Daxton let out a deep breath, trying to understand why he felt so protective of this woman. He shrugged as a smile lit his lips. He always had been a sucker for a damsel in distress.

Needing to get out for a moment, he set the buckets back down on the floor beside the stove, donned his cowboy hat, and walked outside, closing the door behind him. Daxton was sure she’d be safe for a little while. If her husband came for her, Daxton would be ready.

He walked through the chickens, listening to them squawk and fuss. “Yeah, yeah! You’re not hurt.” One bravely strutted over, clucking louder than the rest. “And if you keep that up, you’ll be the next one in the cooking pot come dinner time.”

As if understanding what he had said, the chicken quickly ran back to the rest of her

friends.

“Yes, that’s what I thought.”

He led the milking cow from the barn and began milking her. Before long, several buckets were filled with milk. “Feel better, girl?” Daxton ran his hand along the cow’s side. “I’ll come back to milk you again later.” Daxton didn’t realize how much he had come to depend upon the children until now. He was going to have to change that.

While he was doing his chores, his thoughts kept going back to Josey. He wondered where she came from and how far she had journeyed on foot. She had told him that she had been traveling for a week, so that meant that she could have come as far as from Laramie. But he doubted that she had traveled farther than that. She was a brave woman to run away from her husband like she did. During his time as sheriff, Daxton had seen a few cases of spousal abuse, and it was never pretty. Sometimes, even the children were abused, as well.

Daxton shook his head. In his opinion, women were to be cherished. Why some men got drunk and abused their wives, doing unspeakable things to them, was beyond him. While he and Priscilla were married, he had tried to care for her and had treated her well. Even after the children were born and she became mentally unstable, he still cherished her... right up until she walked out the door with another man. But no matter what she had done, he would never have thought of abusing her or touching her in any manner that wasn’t respectful.

Daxton was glad that Josey had the courage to run away. He just hoped that when her husband came for her, his children didn’t get caught in the crossfire. But somehow, Daxton had the feeling that he wasn’t coming for her. If he was coming for her, he

would have caught up with her while she was on foot. Daxton shuddered at the thought. If he would have caught her, he would have probably killed her. Abusive men didn't want their wives to leave and would rather see them dead first. No, Daxton was glad that, somehow, Josey had found her way to his barn.

At that moment, he vowed to protect her until she was stable enough to stand on her own two feet. If she was interested, he would ask Harrison if he needed another waitress. Or maybe she had some other interest. Perhaps sewing? Maybe Kenzie Baker, the new dress shop owner, needed help. Her business was growing, after all.

But one thing was certain: He needed to talk to her first. He just hoped that she would come to trust him enough to open up to him. Only then could he help her to overcome her past and go on with her life.

After a while, most of the chores were finished and his stomach started to grumble. He knew it was lunch time, and he wanted to check on Josie, so he headed toward the house. But as he drew near, someone passed before the kitchen window, wearing a straw hat.

"Oh, my God!" Daxton ran toward the house, wondering if Josey's husband had tracked her down while he was out. But when Daxton burst in through the door, his son, Andrew, was sitting at the table with Josey, eating a bacon sandwich, wearing a straw hat.

He beamed up at his father, smiling from ear to ear knowingly. "Well, hello, Pa."

"Take the hat off," Daxton said. "You know better than to wear a hat at the table."

Andrew reached up and pulled it off quickly. "Sorry, Pa."

Daxton let out a deep breath. "Where did you get it, anyway?"

Andrew looked over at Josey and smiled. "Josey gave it to me."

Josey was sitting across the table from Andrew, smiling, and then looked up and smiled at Daxton. She was bathed, her golden blonde hair was pulled up into loose curls and pinned into place, and she was wearing a dark blue dress that made her green eyes sparkle. Josey truly was a beautiful woman. "I hope you don't mind. He said he was going fishing again later, so I thought he could use a hat to keep from getting sunburned."

Daxton smiled, breathing a sigh of relief. He was going to get a plate, but Josey already had one out for him. "No, that's quite all right." He looked over at his son. "Sorry. I just didn't know you were home. When I saw someone wearing a hat in the house, it scared me."

Andrew's lips turned up into a crooked grin. "It's okay, Pa." He nodded toward Josey. "So, how did you and Josey meet?"

Daxton laughed. "No, it's not like that. Josey and I met a few days ago. She's just staying here until she gets back on her feet."

Andrew nodded. "Well, I vote that she stays here with us permanently." He nodded to the house, now spick and span. "Look at the house! It looks great! She cleaned everything from top to bottom. It hasn't looked this good in a long time."

Josey blushed as she glanced over at Daxton. "I thought I'd repay the kindness you've shown me. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" Daxton chortled. "No, I don't mind a bit. But I thought you were resting."

She shrugged. "I did, but I'm feeling better now... especially now that I've had a bath."

“Well, make sure you lie down when you get tired.” Daxton looked over at the plate of bacon sandwiches setting in the center of the table when he thought of something. “Say, that’s a good idea. Would you be interested in staying on to look after the children and take care of the house?”

She looked up at him sheepishly. “Like a housekeeper?”

He nodded, smiling. “If you don’t mind. We could use the help, and frankly, I would feel better knowing that someone was with the children while I’m at work. I couldn’t pay you much, but you’d receive free room and board. Also, if you need anything for you or the children, let me know and I’ll get it for you.”

“Thank you for the offer, but may I think about it?”

“Yes, of course.” He gave her a smile. “In the meantime, let’s enjoy this good meal.”

It would be a way for her to be able to stay there without the town gossip’s tongues wagging. If she took the job as his housekeeper, then her living there would be easier to explain. Although he knew she may not stay long, she would be a big help to him while she was there. That’s what he told himself, at least. In reality, he just wanted more time with her. What she may not realize was that, if she worked for him, she wouldn’t ever have to go. But he would discuss it with her later.

He took a bacon sandwich and laid it on his plate. “Andrew, I’m glad you’re home and can help us eat some of this bacon. Josey fixed enough for an army.” Daxton glanced over at her and smiled.

Andrew laughed. “Yes, even Lillian doesn’t fry this much.” He finished chewing the bite in his mouth and swallowed. “I got tired of staying at Shawn’s house. He has a lot of brothers and sisters, and it was just too loud. Even Shawn needs to get away from it sometimes.”

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“You should tell him to come over here sometime.” Daxton took a bite of his bacon and biscuit, and it tasted delicious.

“Really?” Andrew’s eyes widened.

“Yes, of course. It would be good for you to have friends over... as long as you both behave.” Daxton arched an eyebrow.

Andrew blushed. “Of course, Pa.”

Daxton laughed and glanced over at Josey. She was drinking a glass of lemonade and eating a sandwich. “I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but you look beautiful.”

Josey smiled as beautiful shade of pink colored her cheeks. “Thank you.”

“Josey, feel free to make yourself at home while you’re here. What’s ours is yours.” He pushed the stack of sandwiches toward her. “Here. Have another.”

Josey smiled. “Thank you. I think I will.” She lifted another sandwich from the stack and took a bite.

“So, how long are you staying?” Andrew asked between bites.

Josey shrugged. “Until I get on my feet, and then I’ll be on my way.”

Daxton reached over and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “You can stay as long as you like. There’s no rush.” He let go and then looked around at the house. “Besides,

I've never seen the house look so good." Then he looked in her eyes. "Josey, even though I offered you the job, don't feel as if you have to work right now. Just rest and don't push yourself too hard."

Josey smiled. "I'm feeling better now. Also, I want to. I like chipping in, being a part of a real family." She must have realized that she had said too much because she got up from the table, grabbed the pitcher of lemonade, and filled their glasses.

"Hey," Daxton stopped her, grabbing her hand. "I'm glad you feel comfortable here. It's okay."

Josey smiled. "Thank you. I appreciate that." Then she turned to Andrew. "And if you want to get out there while the fish are still biting, then I suggest you get going. I'll pack you a few sandwiches."

Andrew's eyebrows rose, almost into his hairline. "Really, Pa?"

Daxton shrugged. "That's what the lady said."

"Would you and Josey like to go, too?" Andrew asked, clearly excited.

Daxton smiled. "Well, I think I would." Then, he looked over at Josey. "What about you? Would you like to join us?"

She thought for a moment and then nodded. "Yes, I would. It's been a while since I've gone fishing."

Andrew handed her the hat. "Then, you're going to need this. The sun is beating down pretty hard now."

"Absolutely not." Josey took a bite of her sandwich. "I gave it to you, so it's yours."

A broad smile spread across his face. "Thank you."

Daxton took another sandwich. "Well, I think we'd better eat up then, if we want to get out there while the fish are still biting."

Josey grinned, obviously enjoying herself. It looked as if she was finally starting to relax. But Daxton knew it would take a while before she felt completely at home.

Daxton was quickly getting used to her being there. But he pushed the thought aside. After all, she was a married woman. Just his luck. A beautiful damsel in distress comes to his door and she's married. He chuckled to himself. But he quickly pushed the thought out of his mind. The last thing Josey needed right now was a man having designs on courting her. Besides, he didn't need to fall for a woman who was going to leave, just like Priscilla did.

Daxton finished the last of his sandwich and stood. "Well, are you two ready?"

Andrew gobbled up the rest of his sandwich as he jumped from his seat and put his plate in the sink. "I'll get the fishing gear ready!" He ran out the door, already heading toward the barn.

"Slow down there!" Josey yelled after him, smiling, clearly having fun.

Daxton reached for her plate. "Are you finished?"

Josey chewed and swallowed the last bite, shaking her head. "No, I'll get it."

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Daxton took it from her. “Here. I’ll take it.” He let out a deep breath. “Josey, don’t feel as if you have to earn your keep while you’re here. Just be yourself.”

“I know, but you don’t understand. I want to.” She bit her lower lip, thinking. “I haven’t been around a real family in a very long time.”

Daxton gave her a one-armed hug. “I meant it when I said that you could stay as long as you like. Besides, I’m enjoying you being here.” He realized what he was doing and released her, then took a step back.

She smiled up at him. “Thank you. Let me get ready and I’ll be out in a bit.”

“Don’t take too long.” One corner of his lips curled into a smile. “We want to get there while the fish are still biting.”

“They’ll really be biting at sunset,” Josey replied as she headed toward the bedroom.

It amazed Daxton that she liked to fish and wasn’t afraid to get her hands dirty. One thing was certain: Josey Denning was a woman full of surprises.

Chapter 7

Josey

Josie hurried into Daxton’s bedroom to look for a suitable hat, where she had found the few dresses that his ex-wife had left behind. For a moment, she wondered why his wife had left and how long Daxton had been alone with his children. Her heart went

out to him, raising his children—a boy and a girl—alone. It would have been hard enough for a man to raise a son alone, but a girl would have been very hard. After all, who would teach her how to be a woman? As she cleaned the house, she didn't mean to snoop, but she could see that his children had been well cared for and that they were definitely a family.

But a girl needs a mother. If anything happened to her, Josey just hoped that someone would look after her little one and raise him or her as their own. She pushed the thought from her mind, knowing that she wouldn't be there long enough to find out. She had to think of her child, to protect the baby at all costs... even at the expense of her own life.

She looked through the closet and at the top was a wide-brimmed hat that his ex-wife had obviously used while working outside or in the garden. It was brown and didn't really match her outfit, but it didn't matter. She needed to hurry while the fish were still biting.

Josey smiled to herself. It had been a while since she had gone fishing. Her life with Logan hadn't afforded such luxuries. She had spent most of her time cleaning, defending herself, or living in fear, leaving little room for fun. Josie slipped on the hat, in a hurry to go fishing with Daxton and his son. She would deal with everything else later.

When she entered the living room, Daxton had changed his clothes, looking dapper in clean jeans, a medium-blue shirt, and a black vest. The collar was left open at the neck, revealing a few dark chest hairs. And his eyes were filled with interest.

Although he was a wonderful man, she didn't want him to be interested. Josie thought it unlikely, but she didn't want to get mixed up with another abusive man and jump from the frying pan into the fire. But in the few days that she'd known Daxton, he had shown her nothing but kindness and respect. But it was too soon to think of such

things. He was just a nice man who had cared for her in her time of need.

“You look lovely.” Daxton smiled, offering her his hand.

“Thank you.” She smiled, taking it. “You look pretty good yourself.”

He tucked her hand into his arm and led her outside. Just then, Andrew walked out of the barn, carrying three fishing poles and a fishing tackle box.

“What are you using for bait?” Josey asked, walking between Andrew and Daxton.

“I’m not.” He smiled at his father. “I’m fly fishing with artificial lures, like my father taught me.”

Josey grinned, glancing over at Daxton. “It looks like your father has taught you well.”

“Yes, he has,” Andrew agreed.

“Had any luck lately?”

Andrew nodded. “I’ve caught a lot of fish this week.”

Daxton laughed. “And you didn’t bring any home?”

“Hey, I brought you two. You know, you could have gone fishing with me and earned your keep,” Andrew teased, sounding more grown than Josie would have expected.

Daxton laughed. “Hey, watch it, son.”

“Sorry, Pa, but the truth is the truth.” A devilish gleam appeared in his eye as he

teased his father.

Daxton ruffled his hair. “Oh, it is, is it?” He reached over and tickled his sides as Andrew squirmed.

“Hey, now. Not in front of a lady.” Andrew looked over at Josie as a broad grin spread across his face.

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Josey laughed. "I see your father has taught you well in regard to a lot of things." She smiled, watching the path in front of them. It was nice to be respected and treated as a lady. She hadn't known what that felt like in a while. "So, do you ever use live bait?"

Andrew shrugged. "Sometimes." He laughed. "Lillian uses doughballs. She doesn't like to bait the hook."

A grin spread across Josey's face. "I'll have to show her an easy way. But don't knock doughballs. I've caught a lot of fish with them before myself."

Andrew's head snapped up. "You go fishing a lot?"

She shrugged. "I used to, when I was your age. I haven't gone fishing in a while." She smiled at the memory of fishing with her father before he passed away. "Sometimes, I've used a tuft of yarn on the top of a hook to simulate a fly."

Andrew's head snapped up. "And that worked?"

Josey shrugged. "Sure. As long as you cast it to make it look like a fly landing on the water, it works just fine."

Andrew smiled. "We'll have to try it some time."

Daxton let out a deep breath. "My boy here is an avid fisherman. Andrew, you'll have to go fishing more. I love fish and we don't get it often enough."

Andrew shrugged. "When I can. When Pa's working, I don't get to go as much."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Daxton give his son a stern look and shake his head. She didn't push it but wondered what that was all about. She figured that he must have another job in addition to caring for the farm. Obviously, he was a hard worker.

"We're here," Andrew announced. "My favorite fishing spot on Whiskey River."

"It's beautiful." She looked up and the river flowed from the mountains, stretching out over the land in front of them, flowing down past to what she was sure were other towns.

"The rapids aren't bad here and the fish pool over there." Andrew pointed to a spot on the edge that looked like a little pond. "Farther downstream the rapids are too rough."

"Is there a waterfall, too?" Josey asked, intrigued. This was probably the most beautiful place she had ever seen, with the snowcapped mountains, a lovely backdrop against the lush forest in various shades of green with light green grass and fish, brown lichen stretched out along the forest floor as far as they eye could see. This was truly a land of milk and honey.

"Farther upstream," Daxton interjected. "I'll have to take you for a walk to see it some time."

Josey smiled. "I'd like that."

"But right now..." Andrew handed each of them a fishing pole. "The fish won't catch themselves."

Daxton smirked at his son as he took the pole. "You're getting awfully bossy in your young age."

Andrew winked at his father. “I learned from the best.”

Daxton ruffed his hair again. “You’re growing up too fast for me.”

Andrew chuckled as he glanced over at Josey, fixing his hook. “I can’t wait for Lillian to meet Josey. She’s going to love her.”

Josey fixed her hook and then walked over to the riverbank, pretending not to have overheard. She also wanted to give Daxton a moment alone with his son.

Josey cast the hook, brought it back and then cast it again. She waited for a moment and then repeated the process. She looked over her shoulder at Daxton and he and his son were watching. They smiled, and she smiled back. It was funny. Andrew looked so much like his father—both had dark brown hair and the same muscular build—but Andrew’s eyes were green. For a moment, she wondered if he had his mother’s eyes. As handsome as her son was, she knew that his mother must have been a beautiful woman. Lord knows, he had a handsome father.

She brought the line back and then cast it again, repeating the process, and then left it in the water for a bit on the last cast.

As she waited, Josey wondered what had happened between Daxton and his wife. He said “ex,” so that implied that she hadn’t died. The only other alternative was that she had left of her own accord. She let out a deep breath and shook her head. How a woman could ever leave her children was beyond her understanding. Even though she hadn’t known she was pregnant long, Josey would do anything to protect her baby... and she already had.

In the short time that she had been staying with Daxton, she had smiled more than she had in a very long time. Years, perhaps.

Suddenly, there was a tug on the line. “Oh! I got one!” She took the line and slowly started pulling it in.

“Already?” Andrew asked, running up.

“She’s a natural!” Daxton chuckled, standing on her other side.

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“Let’s not count our chickens just yet. I still have to reel it in.”

“You want me to help you?” Andrew asked, clearly excited. A true fisherman indeed.

Josey shook her head, smiling. “No, I have it, but thank you.” Then she began talking to the fish. “Come on, baby. Come on in here.” When it got close to the shore, Andrew jumped in and snatched it up with the net.

“Just look at her, Josey!” Andrew lifted the net so he could get a good look at it. “She’s a beauty!” Then, he looked excitedly at Josey. “You want me to string her for you?”

Josey nodded, enjoying watching his excitement. “Sure, if you like. Just be careful taking out the hook. You don’t want to hurt yourself.”

Andrew scoffed. “Don’t worry. I do this all the time.” Within seconds, he had the fish off the hook and rushed up with the net. “Look at her! She’s so pretty!”

Josey smiled. In the net, the fish shimmered in shades of red, blue, and yellow, and was adorned with black spots. “She’s a rainbow trout. They’re the ones that shimmer like that.”

“Yes, and she’s a beauty.” Andrew pulled Josey in for a quick hug without thinking about it. “Congratulations!” Then he released her and backed away, as if it had been the most natural act in the world. “You caught the first fish of the day!” He ran over to the water’s edge, strung up the fish, and sank it back down into the water to keep it fresh.

“I haven’t seen him this excited in a long time.” Daxton stood by her side, watching his son. “But if he keeps hollering like that, he might just scare off the rest of the fish.”

“It’d be worth it, seeing him react like that.” Josey loved watching him just as much if not more than she had enjoyed catching the fish. “He sure loves fishing.”

Daxton smiled proudly. “That’s my son.”

Josey nodded, understanding. As she watched Andrew, a sense of pride welled up in her chest, as well. She knew that she could come to think of him as her own son... because she already did.

“Well!” Josey yelled to Andrew. “Are you going to play all day or are we going to catch some fish?”

“Coming!” Andrew called out, rushing back to get his pole.

“You made my son very happy today,” Daxton whispered, his breath gently brushing across her ear. She looked up at him and he gazed into her eyes. “Thank you.”

She nodded, enjoying him whispering in her ear a bit too much.

“Well, if we want fish for dinner, I suggest we get cracking.” Daxton looked up at the sky, the spell of the moment broken. “The sun’s not going to stay up for long.”

They spent the afternoon fly-fishing, having fun by the river, until the sun set, sending shoots of red, orange, pink, and purple across the summer sky.

“I think we did okay today.” Andrew grinned as he threw the stringer filled with fish over his shoulder.

Daxton laughed. "I think nine fish is more than okay. We had a good day." He paused for a moment, and then added, "Hey! Why don't I go over and get Lillian, and I'll ask Colton, Ella, and the kids to come over. We'll have a fish fry. We haven't had one in a while."

Josey's eyebrows pulled together in concern. "Well... I..."

Daxton took her pole. "Don't worry. They're going to love you."

Josey gave him a small smile but didn't say more as they walked back to the house. She felt comfortable with Daxton and his family, but any more than that and someone might recognize her before she could tell Daxton, although she didn't know how. Despite Logan's crimes, she had always stayed out of trouble... until now.

Andrew and Daxton chatted animatedly as they headed back to the house. But Josey was lost in thought. What if someone recognized her? What if someone knew that her husband had been Logan Slater, the outlaw? She let out a deep breath. Josey guessed that since she killed him, that made her an outlaw, too. But on the other hand, spending a night with friends sounded good. She just hoped that everything went well.

When they got back to the house, Daxton and Andrew cleaned up, and then Daxton put on his hat, ready to retrieve his daughter. From what Josey understood, Lillian went over to the Hill's to help with their twins. She sensed that Daxton missed his daughter, and she wasn't going to stand in the way of him bringing her home. In fact, she was looking forward to meeting her. But what she was having doubts about was meeting people other than his family.

Over the past few years, most of the people that came over to her and Logan's house were members of Logan's gang. And his family was worse. Or, at least, his brother, Austin, was. Their mother had died when Logan was little, and he had been raised by

his brother and his father. She had never met his father, but from what she knew, he had been the pinnacle of meanness—the devil himself. He died in a bank robbery years ago, leaving Austin to raise Logan alone.

“Andrew?” Daxton asked his son, bringing her from her thoughts. “Would you like to go with me over to the Hill’s ranch?”

“Sure,” Andrew replied, running in with bare feet, adjusting the straps of his overalls.

Daxton motion over his son’s body. “Not like that, you don’t.”

Andrew held his hands out at his sides. “What?”

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Daxton smiled. “Go put on some shoes and brush your hair, at least.” When Andrew walked back to his room, Daxton’s eyebrows pulled together with concern. “I’ll clean the fish when I get back.”

A smile curled her lips as she shook her head. “No, I’ll take care of it. I’ll have the fish cooking by the time you get back.”

Daxton arched an eyebrow, one corner of his lips curling into a smile. “You know how to clean fish?”

She chuckled. “Yes, of course. My papa didn’t raise a weak girl.”

Daxton pulled her to him and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll be right back.” Then his voice turned serious. “Lock the door after we leave, and don’t open it for anyone but me.”

She nodded, knowing that he probably meant to protect her from her husband, not Logan’s brother. But how could she tell him that she had killed her husband in self-defense? Although it hadn’t been her intention, she did it just the same. No, that conversation would have to wait for another day.

“Be careful, Daxton.”

He smiled. “I will. Don’t worry. Remember what I said: Lock the doors.”

“I will.”

A few minutes later, he and Andrew left, leaving her in the house alone. And as promised, she locked the door behind him, along with the backdoor.

Josie sighed, determined to make the best of the evening. She just hoped that nothing happened to ruin it. She placed her hands on her hips and looked down at the fish. “Well, if we’re having company, I guess I’d better get to work.”

Josie found a sharp knife and set to work cleaning all nine fish. When they were ready, she went out to the henhouse, gathered a few eggs and brought them inside. Then she went down into the cellar for some milk and flour. Once the fish was popping in the skillet, she covered it and set to work peeling potatoes that she found in the cellar.

When she was almost finished, there was a knock on the front door. Her heart fell. But she squared her shoulders, wiped her hands on the apron she had found in a kitchen drawer, and headed into the living room.

Bang, bang, bang!

Oh, my God! Please tell me that Austin hasn’t found me!

She walked slowly to the door. A man wearing a cowboy hat stood on the other side.

“Josey, it’s me.”

When she opened the door, Daxton was standing on the other side. She flung her arms around him, elated to see him. Even though it had only been a short while, his time away seemed like an eternity.

Daxton pulled her back with strong hands and looked into her eyes. “Josey, what’s wrong? What happened?”

Behind him stood Andrew, his eyes wide, and beside him stood a little girl wearing a blue dress with a matching ribbon, and a man and woman holding two toddlers.

Josey stepped back, quickly recovering herself. "I'm sorry. I didn't know it was you." She smoothed her hand absentmindedly over her hair and motioned for them to come in. "Please. Do come in."

The couple—a man with long brown hair and a woman with blonde hair pulled up neatly, much the same color as hers—looked at each other and then back at her, their eyes wide.

"Where are my manners?" Daxton asked. "Colton, Ella, this is Josey Denning. Josey, this is Colton and Ella Hill."

Josey gave them a warm smile as she extended her hand but pulled it back when she realized they couldn't shake her hand because her hands had flour on them. "Please, come in. It's truly a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Colton gave her a broad smile and then stepped forward. "The pleasure is ours." Then he turned to Daxton. "Now I know why he took off from work this week. Daxton, I don't blame you. I would have taken off, too."

Giving her a warm smile, Ella stepped in next and pulled her in for a one-armed hug. "It's truly a pleasure to meet you." She gave Daxton a quick smile. "You've been holding out on us!"

"It's a pleasure to meet you, too," Josey replied, reaching out to shake the little girl's hand in Ella's arms as everyone laughed.

"Josey," Daxton said, claiming her attention, holding the shoulders of the girl in front of him. "I'd like you to meet my daughter, Lillian. Lillian, this is Josey Denning."

Lillian took a step forward and then wrapped her arms around Josey, giving her a big hug. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Josey patted her back, biting her lower lip in an effort to hold back the tears. “I can assure you. The pleasure is mine.” Josey dabbed at her eyes. “Well, what do you say we get this shindig rolling?”

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“Sounds good to me,” Colton replied, walking in. “Something smells good.”

“Oh! I guess I’d better get back in the kitchen before it burns!” Josey ran into the kitchen just in time to turn the fish.

Ella followed and sat in a kitchen chair, one of the babies on her lap. “Would you mind if I feed the babies while we talk? I didn’t know we were coming over.”

“No, not at all.” Josey began pulling open kitchen drawers and found a lightweight dishtowel and handed it to Ella. “Here. You can use this... just in case the men come in.”

“Thank you,” Ella replied and then covered her and the baby to breastfeed. “So, how did you and Daxton meet?”

“We met a few days ago.” Josey answered vaguely, a bit nervous. “He’s letting me stay here until I get on my feet.”

Ella nodded. “Where are you from?”

“Laramie.” Josey wasn’t expecting a lot of questions, but she thought that the truth was best... or at least the closest thing to the truth that she could manage at this point. “I won’t be staying long.”

“Oh, I hope that’s not the case.” Ella rocked the baby under the dishtowel. “Daxton seems very taken with you.”

Josey smiled, glancing over at her as she worked in the kitchen. “He does?”

Ella nodded. “Yes, he does. He told us about you when he came over and he spoke very highly of you.”

Josey let out a deep breath. “That’s good to hear.” As the fish cooked, she took it from the frying pan, breaded more, and laid them carefully in the skillet, the grease popping.

“Be careful, there.” Daxton walked in and poured glasses of lemonade. “Josey, Ella, want some?”

“Yes, please,” Ella and Josey said in unison and then both laughed.

“Well, it looks like you two are hitting it off.” Daxton poured the lemonade and handed one to each of them.

“Yes, we were just having a discussion.” Josey glanced over at Ella and smiled as Ella giggled.

“And that means gossip,” Daxton corrected. “That’s my cue!” He set the other glasses of lemonade on a tray and headed back into the living room.

Ella laughed. “He’s not far off the truth.”

Just then, Lillian walked in, carrying a glass. “May I join you?”

“Yes, of course!” Josey pulled out a chair. “You’re a lady, aren’t you?”

A broad smile spread across Lillian’s face as she sat down, obviously glad to be included as a lady.

“But wouldn’t you rather be playing?” Josey asked, placing the lid back over the fish.

Lillian shook her head. “No, I’m a lady and I need to learn how to do more lady things.”

Ella chuckled. “And a lady, you are.” She looked over at Josey. “Do you know that this little lady was a very big help to me over the past few days?”

A broad smile spread across Josey’s face. “Is that right?”

Ella nodded. “Yes, since Colton took over Daxton’s duties this week, I could really use the help.”

A crease formed between Josey’s eyes. “Duties?”

Ella nodded. “Yes, as sheriff. Daxton’s the sheriff of Whiskey River.” She let out a deep breath, not noticing Josey’s posture go ridged. “Of course, Daxton just hired James, but he needed to make sure that he didn’t drive the shop owners crazy. You see, he’s a bit too—” Ella stopped when she looked up and saw the expression on Josey’s face.

Josey was frozen in place, her mouth open, her eyes wide with horror. “He’s the sheriff?”

Ella nodded, a crease forming between her eyes. “Yes. Why? Didn’t you know?”

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Josey shook her head. “No, we just met.”

“Lillian, could you take Hannah for me please and go into the living room for a moment?” Ella asked as she quickly adjusted herself, never taking her eyes off Josey.

“Yes, ma’am.” Lillian walked around the table and held her hands out to Hannah. “You want to come with me?”

Hannah cooed as she happily held out her hands to her. Lillian gave the ladies one last glance over her shoulder and then walked out.

“Josey, are you all right?” Ella asked, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Josey nodded, still dazed, and then remembered the fish. “Oh, no! The fish!”

“It’s okay.” Ella pulled the skillet off the stove. “Josey, what’s wrong?”

She forced a smile, quickly recovering herself. “It’s nothing. I’m fine.”

“It’s not ‘nothing’.” Ella looked into her eyes, but Josey was careful to reveal nothing. “Josey, listen. We’ve all been somewhere. I was a dancehall girl before I married Colton. Now, we’re happily married and have twins.” Ella bit her lower lip, choosing her words carefully. “You don’t have to tell me, but whatever it is, you can tell Daxton. He’s a good man, Josey, understanding, and kind.” She rubbed Josey’s arm. “Give him a chance.”

Josey shook her head. “It’s not like that. He’s just helping me out—”

“Do you care for him?” Ella asked.

“I’m not sure. We just met—”

Ella nodded, understanding. “Well, whatever it is... whatever you’re hiding... you can tell Daxton... and you can tell me, too. The people here in Whiskey River will accept you for who you are now, not for your past.”

Josey stared at her in disbelief. “He’ll never forgive me. I can’t tell him... I can’t tell anyone.” Then she ran outside toward the barn and fell to her knees. “Why? Why did I have to meet Daxton now? Why didn’t Logan not stop when I told him to? Why?” She buried her head in her hands and sobbed, letting out the years that she had spent as a victim at Logan’s hands... letting out the guilt over what she had done... everything.

“Josey?” Daxton’s voice was merely a whisper behind her. “What’s wrong?”

Josey hurried to dry her tears. “Go away.”

The crunching of leaves resonated behind her, louder. “Josey talk to me. What’s wrong? You can tell me anything.”

She turned her head in his direction without looking at him. “Then why didn’t you tell me you were the sheriff?”

The ground crunched again as he took another step closer. “I didn’t think it mattered.”

Josey wheeled on him. “If you didn’t think it mattered, then why didn’t you tell me?”

A crease formed between Daxton’s eyes. “I didn’t want to scare you.” He took

another step closer to her, just an arm's length away.

Josey laughed without humor. "Well, you were right about that."

Daxton let out a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Josey. I just thought that after all you'd been through, you didn't need any more pressure."

"And why did you think it would pressure me?"

Daxton motioned toward the bruises in the shape of a man's hand and cuts on her arms. The bruises had been from Logan, but the cuts she got on the run for a week. "This is why." Daxton closed the gap between them. "Josey, no one here is going to hurt you. And if I have my way about it, no one will ever hurt you again." He pulled her into his arms and let her cry on his shoulder. "You can talk to me. I won't judge you."

As the tears ran down her cheeks and onto Daxton's shirt, she wished she could tell him everything... what she had done. But it was something she didn't think she could ever tell anyone. Not if she wanted any kind of a decent life for her child.

"Josey, come inside," Daxton whispered into her hair. "Please. Everyone's in there waiting." He pulled her back to look in her eyes. "Just promise me that you won't leave without telling me."

Josey thought for a moment. "That's the least I can do for all you've done for me."

Daxton took a step back as if she had just slapped him. "You don't ever have to go, you know. I'll take you to Laramie... help you to get a divorce—"

"I know," Josey cut him off, not wanting to be tempted to stay. She could never endanger him like that. Who was she kidding? She could never have a nice life.

Never again. “But I know you also have to do your job.”

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Daxton's eyebrows pulled together in concern. "Yes, I do. If your husband comes for you, I'll take care of it."

She was about to tell him that her husband was dead, but she couldn't say the words. "Okay." Technically, she wasn't lying to him, just withholding information. But it felt as if she was lying by not telling him the complete truth.

Daxton must have seen that she was giving in a little, because he started talking quickly. "Listen. You don't have to figure everything out right now. Let's just go inside and enjoy the evening without pressure. We don't have to have all the answers right now." A slight smile lit his lips. "Besides, you can't leave right now in the dark..."

He didn't know her very well.

"And the fish will go to waste..." He leaned down and looked into her eyes. "Come here." Daxton pulled her into his arms and rubbed her back. "Josey, you're not alone. You don't have to go through this by yourself."

She nodded against his chest and stepped back, wiping the tears from her eyes. "Thank you, Daxton. You're a good man."

"And you're a good woman."

When she looked away, he placed a finger under her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Yes, Josey, you are. Give yourself a chance. The people of Whiskey River and I will help you... if you let us."

She nodded, placing her hand on his cheek. "I'm so glad I met you, Daxton Clark."

He smiled as he kissed her forehead. "I'm glad I met you, too." Then he pulled back to look into her eyes. "Now, let's go inside and have that fish before it gets cold. It smells delicious."

She chuckled, wiping the tears from her cheeks. "I hope you like it."

Daxton wrapped his arm around her waist. "I'm sure I will."

"It's probably burned by now." Josey sighed. "But at least half of it is okay." She remembered that she had cooked half of the fish before running out the door.

Daxton smirked. "No, Ella took over and cooked the rest."

Josie nodded. "I'll have to thank her. She seems very nice."

"She is... both she and Colton."

"Just in time!" Ella smiled as they walked back in, acting as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

"Thank you, Ella, but I can take over from here." Josey crossed the room and took the skillet from her hand.

Ella gave her a quick, one-armed hug. "I really don't mind helping out." She clapped her hands together. "So, what would you like me to do?"

"Would you mind setting the table?" Josey took the last of the fish out of the skillet and laid them in the pan with the others. "Ella?"

Ella stopped halfway to the cabinet and raised her eyebrows. “Yes?”

“Thank you.”

Ella smiled. “Don’t worry about it.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “We’ve all had our moments.”

Josey gave her a small smile and turned her attention back to preparing the meal. Ella had already fried the potatoes, had set some corn on the cob on the stove to boil, and had even sliced some fresh tomatoes. “Ella, it looks like you’ve thought of everything.”

“Well, not everything.” She held up the empty pitcher of lemonade.

Josey laughed. “Here. I’ll make some more.”

“Daxton has some lemons down in the cellar.” Ella said and then whispered, “I saw them down there when I went down for the tomatoes.”

“Thank you.” Josey felt much better as she walked down the stairs. Whiskey River sure was a unique place. Josey thought that it was probably because in a small town, everyone had to pull together to help each other or they wouldn’t make it.

Someday, Josey knew that she would have to trust them with her secret, but tonight wasn’t the night. She gathered the lemons and headed up the stairs, closing the door behind her.

In the kitchen, Ella was working away and had already set the table.

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“Well! There’s nothing left for me to do, besides making the lemonade.” They both laughed. “Thank you, Ella, for everything.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ella shrugged. “I’m happy to do it.”

Josey smiled, squeezing the lemons. “Here you came over to be entertained. I’d bet you didn’t expect to be the one entertaining.”

Ella smiled. “I like this much better... us working together. It’s much more fun this way, don’t you think?”

Josey smiled, suddenly realizing just how lucky she was, hoping that it didn’t all come crashing down. And when it did, she hoped that Daxton wasn’t the one to get hurt. If things were different, she would like to have Ella as a friend.

“Time to eat!” Josey announced when everything was ready.

Colton was the first one to enter, holding the baby girl’s hand as they walked in. “Well, it’s about time. I was getting hungry smelling all this good food.”

Ella playfully hit him on the arm. “Watch your manners.”

“Why?” Colton glanced over at Josey and smiled. “The sooner she gets to know the real us, the better.”

Lillian walked in carrying the baby boy and gave him to Ella when she reached for him. “Everything smells good, Miss Denning.”

Josey smiled. "Please, call me Josey."

Lillian smiled as she took her seat at the table.

"Wow! Everything smells good, Josey!" Andrew barreled in and plopped down in a chair at the kitchen table.

"Ella helped." Josey gave her a smile and then noticed that Andrew was still wearing the straw hat. "Andrew, take the hat off at the dinner table, please."

Everyone laughed.

"Yes, ma'am." He slinked off pouting into the other room.

Daxton leaned over conspiratorially. "In case you couldn't tell, he really likes the hat you gave him."

Josey chuckled. "I'm glad."

Andrew came back a moment later, frowning. But when Josey smiled at him, he returned the smile, all forgotten and forgiven.

"Let's say the blessing," Josey glanced over at Daxton and bowed her head.

Daxton said a beautiful blessing over the meal, once again thanking God for the good food and good company. When he was finished, he announced, "Dig in!"

Throughout the meal, no one said anything more about Josey running out and the conversation stayed light. As they ate, Josey listened to everyone laugh, have fun, and enjoy each other's company. At that moment, she realized that this was the closest thing to family that she had seen in a very long time and hoped beyond all hope that

one day she would belong. She just hoped that she wouldn't end up being their downfall instead.

Chapter 8

Daxton

"Colton, you and Ella be careful going home now," Daxton said as he and Josey stood on the porch, watching them leave.

"Don't worry. I can't go too fast with the little ones." It was hard to believe, but the babies were already a year old now. Colton grinned. "Ella won't let me."

Ella smacked him playfully on the shoulder.

"Would you like Lillian to go with you to help out?" Daxton asked.

Colton looked over at Ella and she shook her head. "No, thank you. She's been a big enough help already."

Daxton sighed. "Colton, I'll go in tomorrow."

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Colton looked between him and Josey. “Are you sure you don’t need to stay home... at least a few more days?”

“Would you mind?” Daxton asked.

“Pa, I’ll be glad to go with them to help out,” Lillian interjected, stepping out onto the porch.

“Are you sure you want to?” Daxton bent down to look in her eyes. “You don’t miss us too much?”

Lillian huffed. “Pa, it’s only been two days. Besides I’m saving up to buy Christmas presents.”

Daxton chuckled, proud of his daughter. “Well, if you’re sure.”

She smiled. “I am.”

Daxton nodded. “Colton, I’ll go ahead and take off tomorrow then, if you don’t mind. But I’ll be in on Thursday. Is that okay with you?”

Colton gave him a manly slap on the arm. “No problem at all, sheriff. Glad to do it.”

“Actually, James could probably handle it on his own tomorrow—”

“Stop right there.” Colton held up his hand. “Please, no. I’m begging you.”

One corner of Daxton's lips curled into a smile. "Why? What has he done?"

Colton rolled his eyes. "Whathasn't he done?" Colton sighed. "Okay. I wasn't going to tell you this, but he's been driving the shop owners crazier than normal. I had to sit him down and have a talk with him, telling him to just walk by and not keep going into every store. Also, I had to actually tell him to sit in the rocking chair in front of the Sheriff's Office and just keep an eye on the town that way."

"And he didn't?" Daxton asked, amused.

"Hell, no!" Colton turned to Ella and Josey. "Excuse me ladies."

Ella and Josey both giggled, obviously enjoying the show.

Colton turned his attention back to Daxton and let out an exasperated breath. "He sat down for all of about ten minutes and then got up and started pacing again and going back to his usual 'checking in.' It's one thing to be eager about your job, but he's driving everyone crazy."

Daxton chuckled. "Stay home tomorrow and I'll go in."

Colton laughed. "No, I can handle one more day."

"Well, if you're sure...." Normally, Daxton wouldn't be taking off from work like this, but he wanted to make sure that Josey would be all right with the children before going back.

Colton chuckled. "Sheriff, don't ask me again. I just might say yes."

Daxton and the ladies laughed. He bent down and gave his little girl a big hug. "Come back home tomorrow night, all right? I miss you." He was about to say that he

missed his little girl, but he didn't want to embarrass her in front of the other adults.

Lillian nodded. "Yes, Pa."

Colton smiled. "I'll bring her home."

"Don't worry. If I get to missing her too badly, I'll come after her."

"Pa!"

Daxton scooped his little girl up into his arms so that her feet dangled. "You may be growing up, but you're not too grown up for me to do this."

"I love you, Pa."

"I love you, too, baby girl."

Josey followed Ella to their buckboard and took her hand. "Ella, promise you'll come back to visit soon."

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Ella smiled and gently squeezed her hand. “Only if you promise to come visit me, too.”

Then Josey bent down to Lillian now standing behind her beside the wagon. “It was a pleasure to meet you, too. I’ll see you tomorrow night. Okay?”

A broad smile spread across Lillian’s face. “I’ll see you then.” She waved a last goodbye to her father and then climbed up onto the seat of the buckboard. Colton handed her Hannah, while Ella held Blake.

“I’m sorry that I’m chasing her from her home.” Josey folded her arms over her chest, standing beside Daxton.

He looked down, knowing she was talking about Lillian. “You aren’t. She’ll be back tomorrow night.”

“Why did you take off from work this week?” Josey looked up expectantly.

Daxton cocked his head to the side. “I think you know.”

Josey sighed. “You shouldn’t have done that. I mean... after I rested, you could have let me go.”

A crease formed between his eyes. “Not in your condition. The first day you were here, you were so sick I was ready to go get Doc Morgan for you, whether you wanted me to or not.”

She smiled, gently patting his arm. "I'm glad you didn't."

Josey was about to walk inside, but Daxton stopped her. "Josey, if you don't mind, I want you to sleep in my bedroom and I'll sleep on the sofa in the living room. But for tonight, I'll sleep in Lillian's bedroom, since she's not here."

"I can sleep in there—"

"If you like," he conceded. "Usually, Andrew sleeps in the upper loft and then Lillian has the other bedroom downstairs. This way, they both have a room to themselves."

Josey nodded. "A girl needs her own bedroom."

"But when she comes back, you can have my bedroom, and I'll sleep on the couch."

Josey turned away, and raised her chin toward the moonlight, her blonde hair bathed in a blue hue. "I don't want to put you out."

Daxton never wanted to hold a woman so badly in his life, but she was married. Also, he couldn't let himself get involved with this woman. Even if she didn't go back to her husband, who was to say that she wouldn't leave like Priscilla did? No, he couldn't go through that again.

He placed his hands gently on her shoulders. "You're not putting me out at all." Then his lips curled into a smile. "Let's go inside."

She nodded and looked down.

Daxton sighed. "Don't worry. Everything will work out. When you're up to it, I'll take you into town—"

“No, please. I can’t go into town.” She bit her lower lip, looking away.

“Hey.” He placed a finger under her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. “Don’t worry. He won’t hurt you. I’ll make sure of it.”

She turned away. “Let’s go inside.”

Daxton nodded, sensing there was more that she wasn’t telling him, but he decided not to push it. She would tell him in her own time... when she was ready.

He opened the door and stood back. “After you.”

When they walked inside, Andrew had a chess board set up on a small side table in the living room. “Pa, how about a game?”

Daxton smiled as he shook his head. “Maybe later. Let’s play a game of cards.” He turned to Josey. “Would you like to play?”

“Sure.” A broad smile spread across her face. “Would you like to ante or shall I? Do you have any matchsticks? Or we can play just straight Poker, Five Card Stud. Or we can play Spit in the Ocean or Follow the Queen, if you like.”

Andrew’s eyes widened as he looked back and forth between Josey and Daxton. “Sure!”

Daxton laughed. “Maybe later. I was thinking maybe Euchre, but we’d need four people, unless we play two-handed, but then we all wouldn’t be able to play. How about Rummy?”

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Josey looked away crestfallen, as if realizing that she had made a faux pas.

“Pa, can we play Poker please? I’ve been wanting to learn—”

“You don’t know how to play?” Josey looked at him surprised. “Why, I learned how to play Poker as a child. It’s really a lot of fun. We don’t have to play for matchsticks either, if you don’t want to, but every young man should know how to play.”

Daxton laughed. Here he was the sheriff, and he was about to show his young son how to play Poker. He sighed as one corner of his lips curled into a smile. “Okay. We’ll show you how to play regular straight Poker.” But then he pointed a finger at his son. “But I never want to see you in the saloon or playing against your friends for money, got it?”

A broad smile spread across Andrew’s face. “Okay, Pa! But maybe when I’m older?”

Daxton shook his head, giving him a stern look. “Many a man has lost a whole week’s wages or more on one bad hand of Poker.”

Andrew’s smile faded. “Okay.” Then he sat at the table. “How do you play?”

Daxton shuffled the cards, then stretched them out like an accordion and back again.

His son’s eyes widened in obvious disbelief, his mouth forming a perfect O. Daxton had his son’s attention.

“Now,” Daxton began. “First, the dealer deals out five cards to each player. You have

to make sure to control your expression and not give away what you have in your hand. Many a good hand was lost by someone getting excited over being dealt good cards.”

“Poker’s not all about having the winning hand,” Josey interjected. “It’s about strategy... but having good cards doesn’t hurt.” She smiled at Daxton, indicating for him to continue.

As he taught his son the fine points of playing Poker, Daxton noticed that this was the first time that Josey had truly gotten excited over anything since he found her hiding in his barn a few days before. She was so knowledgeable about Poker that he wondered what her previous life had been like. And when he had mentioned playing a game of cards, the first thing she had thought of was Poker, an unusual game for a woman to know. Most women didn’t even want a man near a Poker table, let alone help a man teach his son how to play. And from what he could tell, she was an expert.

“Ha!” she said as she spread her cards across the table. “I won!”

“Yeah, the only reason is because everyone else folded.” Daxton gathered the cards and began to shuffle them, smirking. “I can’t believe you won with that hand.”

“Well, you have to be willing to take a chance.” Josey shrugged. “I had nothing to lose.” Then her smile faded. It was as if she had been about to say something, but then stopped short.

“Pa, can we play again?” Andrew bounced excitedly in his seat.

“Okay, one more hand. But it’s getting late, and you have chores to do in the morning.”

“Oh, Pa!”

Josey shuffled the deck, spreading them out across the table, gathering them again, and then shuffled and spread them out across the table again. Then she took two cards, flipped one end over and then back again. She ran her hand over the deck, gathering the cards, shuffled again, and then stretched them out like an accordion in midair, but caught them. Finally satisfied, she divided the cards into three sections, restacked the sections with one hand, and dealt.

“Wow!” Andrew exclaimed, his eyes wide. “Could you show me how to do that?”

“I’d be glad to.” She smiled, leaning in conspiratorially. “But it takes practice.”

“I’ll practice,” Andrew agreed, nodding vigorously.

Daxton let out a deep breath. “Okay, I think that’s enough Poker for one day. Time for bed.”

“Oh, Pa!”

“No, your father’s right,” Josey interjected, setting the cards in a stack in front of Daxton. “I could show you some other time....” She looked over at Daxton. “That is, if it’s okay with your father.”

Daxton gave her a small smile. “Well, we can talk about that later.” Then he turned back to his son. “But now, it’s time for you to go to bed.”

Andrew raised an eyebrow. “Just one more game?”

Daxton sighed. “Okay, just one more game. But after that, it’s off to bed.”

A broad smile spread across Andrew’s face. “Deal.”

Daxton laughed.

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Andrew pushed the cards over to him. “No, I mean deal... deal the cards.”

Daxton smiled as he picked up the cards. “The game is Five Card Stud, lady and gentleman.” Josey and Andrew laughed as he dealt the cards.

Andrew picked up his cards one by one, but his expression was unreadable as he studied them.

Daxton looked at his cards as Josey studied hers, her expression unreadable, as well. He had three aces and a pair of tens. “Well, son? How about it?”

Andrew laid two cards face down onto the table. “I’ll take two.”

He slid two cards face down to his son across the table. Andrew picked them up and looked at them, his expression, again, unreadable. In the short time that they had been playing, his son’s Poker face was getting better.

One corner of Daxton’s lips curled into a smile. “And for the lady?”

She arched an eyebrow as she laid one card down onto the table face down. “One, please.”

He dealt her a single card. She picked it up and added it to her hand.

“I’ll stick.” Daxton looked over at his son. “Well, what do you say, son?”

“I call.”

Daxton laughed. "You already sound like a gambler. What have I done?"

Andrew laughed. "I can't wait to show Shawn how to play!"

"And Mrs. Nash will have my hide when you both go back to school."

Josey shrugged. "It's a way he can win some money."

"Not from the other children." Daxton smiled. "I can see it now: The sheriff's son, winning all of the other children's pennies." They all laughed. He glanced over at Josey. "What do you say?"

"I call," Josey replied with a straight face. One thing was certain: Josey had a good Poker face.

Daxton smiled. "You're not going to get me this time. I call, too." He spread his cards across the table. "Full house, aces high."

Josey spread out her cards and there was an eight, seven, six, five, and a four of hearts. "A straight flush." She smiled in victory and sat back, but Andrew stopped her.

"Wait." A broad smile spread across Andrew's face as he laid down an ace, king, queen, jack, and a ten. "I believe this is called a Royal Flush."

Daxton and Josey looked at each other and then burst out laughing.

"It's your fault," Daxton teased Josey, gathering the cards. "You're the one who wanted to play Poker."

"Yes, I did." Josey rose from her seat. "I'm sorry."

But Daxton caught her hand as she passed. “Josey, come and sit back down. I was only joking. I meant no offense.”

Josey nodded. “It’s okay. It’s time for bed anyway.” She pulled back her hand. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Daxton smiled. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Josey glanced over at Andrew and smiled. “You play very well.”

A smile lit the boy’s lips. “I had a good teacher.”

Josey’s smile broadened. “But promise me that you won’t take too much of the children’s money.”

Andrew laughed. “I’ll play for matchsticks.”

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“See that you do.” She chuckled as her eyes met Daxton’s. “Good night.”

He smiled, glad to see that she was somewhat herself again. “If you need anything, just let me know.”

She gave him a small smile as she nodded, and then headed off to Lillian’s bedroom, closing the door behind her.

“Well, so, it’s off to bed with you, too. Goodnight, son.” Daxton gathered the cards, placed them in a wooden box, and set it on the mantle above the fireplace.

“I’ll put away the chessboard.” Andrew headed into the living room, but Daxton stopped him.

“Just a minute, son.” Daxton crossed the room to the table where the chess set rested and lit the candle. “Want to play a game before you go to bed?”

Andrew’s face lit up. “Really, Pa?”

Daxton smiled. “Yes.” He sat down in one of the wooden chairs beside the table and motioned toward the other. “Son, I’m sorry that I haven’t had much time to play with you lately.”

Andrew smiled as he sat down. “It’s okay, Pa.” He shrugged. “As the sheriff, you’re a busy man.”

Daxton sighed. “Maybe I should step down and take up farming... or ranching, like

Colton.”

Andrew shook his head. “No, Pa. I’m very proud of you. You keep the town safe. The town needs you.”

“But you and your sister need me more.” And it was true. In taking his duties as sheriff so seriously, he had come to ignore his children. If not ignore, then let them raise themselves. “You’re growing up so fast and I don’t want to miss any of it.”

Andrew reached over and squeezed his father’s hand. “You won’t.” He let his hand go and smiled. “Pa, we’ll still grow up, whether you want us to or not, but you’ve been a good father.”

Daxton smiled, touched beyond words as a lump formed in his throat. “Son, I’m very proud of you, too.”

“So, how about that game?”

Daxton nodded. “Okay. But just one.”

A mischievous smile lit Andrew’s lips. “Don’t worry, Pa. I’ll try not to beat you too badly.”

Daxton scoffed. “That’ll be the day. Son, you may be growing up, but you’re not grown up yet.”

As they played into the night, he was amazed at how skilled his son had become in the game. He was growing up too quickly, both he and Lillian. And Daxton didn’t want to miss one minute of it.

“Check mate!” Andrew announced proudly, bringing the game to an end.

“Good game, son,” Daxton conceded.

Andrew began setting the chessboard back up again. “Another game, Pa?”

Daxton shook his head. “No, but leave it set up so we can play again soon.”

Andrew looked up at his father, surprise coloring his eyes. “Really, Pa?”

Daxton smiled. “Really.” Andrew threw his arms around his father and Daxton stood and pulled him in for a hug. “Now, off to bed. We’ll play again tomorrow.”

Andrew looked at his father and a devilish grin lit his lips. “You mean, when I’ll beat you again.”

Daxton laughed as he kissed the top of his son’s head. “You can try.”

Andrew pulled back. “Hey, I did it once, and I’ll do it again.” Then he ran off up the stairwell but turned around halfway up. “I love you, Pa.”

“I love you, too, son.” Daxton smiled. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Okay, Pa.” With that, Andrew hurried up the stairwell.

“Bright and early!” Daxton called after him.

“Yes, Pa!” Andrew hollered down from the loft.

Daxton smiled to himself as he placed a log in the fireplace and some kindling, and then lit it. Within minutes, orange, red, and yellow tongues lapped hungrily at the log, illuminating the room. Daxton made some coffee and then sat in the rocking chair in front of the fireplace, waiting for it to brew. It was nice being a true family again. Of course, they had always been a family, but today it seemed as if they were a true family, playing together, enjoying each other’s company... something he hadn’t made time for in a while.

As he rose from his seat and poured a cup of coffee, he vowed to change that. He had a wonderful family, and he didn’t want to waste one moment not being with them.

“Eahh!” A blood-curdling scream came from Lillian’s bedroom.

“Josey?” Daxton hurried to grab his gun from its holster hanging from a high peg by the door and then burst into the room. Josey was sitting up in bed, her eyes wide. “Shh.... Josey, it’s me, Daxton.” He sat down on the edge of the bed. “You had a nightmare.”

She looked over at him, trying to catch her breath. When she realized it was him, she flung her arms around him and laid her head on his chest. “Oh... Daxton... I’m so sorry. I was dreaming about....” Her voice trailed off.

Daxton stroked her hair, holding her to him. Reassuring her that she was now safe.

“Shh... I’m here. I’ll protect you.” He couldn’t imagine the horrors that this woman had endured. It must have been a lot to make her run like she did, for her to prefer to live off the land instead of staying with him. How any man could treat his wife like that was beyond his understanding. If he had a woman like her, he would protect and cherish her to his dying breath. But he had to remind himself that she wasn’t his and she would soon be on her way, leaving him and his family behind to pick up the pieces. No, he couldn’t put his family through that. It was hard enough when Priscilla left years ago. Daxton didn’t know if he could go through it again.

When she had settled down, he pulled back and brushed a strand of blonde hair away from her face. “Now, get some sleep. I’ll be right in the next room.” He started to get up, but she caught his hand.

“Please, don’t go. Don’t leave.” She looked at him with pleading eyes.

Daxton looked into her eyes for a long while and then smiled. “Okay. I’ll sleep on the chair—”

“No... please.” She slid over to the edge of the bed, leaving a lot of space on his side. “Please.”

He let out a deep breath and then took off his boots, smoothed the blankets over her, and then laid on top. “Come here.” Daxton extended his strong arm, and she curled up to him just as she had done before and laid her head in the crook of his arm. He couldn’t help but notice how perfectly she fit there beside him... and how much he had missed holding a woman while she slept.

“Thank you.” Josey nuzzled onto his chest.

He turned his head and inhaled the sweet scent of her hair. She had a floral scent... like wildflowers on a soft, spring day. But he forced the thought from his mind.

“Shh....” He nuzzled the top of her head, inhaling her scent and committing it to memory. “Get some sleep.” Soon, she started to relax in his arms. “Josey?”

“Um?”

“You can talk to me about anything,” he whispered, looking down at her. “I hope you know that.”

She nodded as she nuzzled onto his chest.

Daxton ran his fingers over her hair in gentle strokes. “Good night.”

Josey nodded against his chest. “Good night.”

As his eyes began to close, one thought ran through his mind: God help the man if and when he ever came for her.

Chapter 9

Josey

Faint rays of morning sunshine streamed in through the window, alerting Josey to the start of a new day. Daxton was still sleeping, so she quietly slid out of bed, careful not to wake him. When she got to her feet, she stopped, noting his dark brown hair that fell lazily over his forehead just right while he slept, and his muscular physique, strong, but gentle. He was a good man. Who else would have taken in a sick stranger—armed, no less—and cared for her? No man she had ever met would have done such a thing, unless he had an ulterior motive.

She gathered her clothes and rushed into Daxton’s bedroom. His wife had left behind a few nice clothes and a few work dresses, too. Josey could tell that Daxton had taken

good care of her while they were married. How a woman could ever leave such a man was beyond her understanding.

She chose a brown dress from his closet and slipped it on over her corset. Even though it was obviously a work dress, it was much nicer than most of the dresses she had ever owned.

Josey would have made herself some nice dresses, but when she did, Logan accused her of prettying herself up to attract another man. After a while, she just tried not to provoke him... until she decided to change things... to prepare... hoping that one day, she would have a new life.

Josey tried to forget about it as she walked into the kitchen. She was nauseous, needing something in her stomach. She made coffee and then went down into the cellar. To the right were slabs of bacon, smoked ham, salt-cured country ham, and more. She hadn't had country ham in a while, so she cut some off. When she had enough for the family, she also picked up some potatoes and headed back up the stairs. In the kitchen, she found a mixing bowl in the cabinet and got to work.

While the potatoes and country ham were cooking, she quickly made biscuits and slid them into the oven.

"Um, smells great," a male voice said, causing her to jump.

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Josey turned around quickly. Daxton was standing barefoot in the kitchen, wearing jeans and a white shirt, open at the neck. She tried not to notice how nicely the white flattered his tanned skin and how his muscles played under the thin fabric.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Josey gave him a small smile. “No, it’s okay. I just scare easily.” Josey pulled a cup out of the cabinet, poured some coffee, and handed it to him. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how you take it.”

His eyebrows pulled together in concern. “Thank you, but you don’t have to wait on me.”

She shrugged as she turned the country ham in the skillet. “I wanted to.” Then her eyes met his. “It’s the least I could do for all you’ve done for me.”

He smiled as he took the coffee. “Happy to do it.” Then his lips curled into a heartbreaking smile, taking her breath away. “But if you really want to know...” Daxton stepped closer and whispered into her hair. “Black, two sugars.” Then he kissed the top of her head and spooned in two sugars.

It was an innocent gesture, but one that carried the weight of the world. Her heart was pounding as he stepped away to fix his coffee.

“Can I do anything?” Daxton leaned back onto the counter and took a sip of his coffee, causing his arm to flex without intending to.

Josey smiled, shaking her head. “No, just relax. I’ll have it on the table in just a minute.”

“Um... something smells good.” Andrew came into the kitchen. Then he looked around her shoulder and into the skillet. “Country ham? My favorite!”

“Good.” Josey turned a piece of ham in the pan as the scent filled the air. “Coffee?”

Andrew laughed. “I’m only eleven.”

Josey smirked. “Yeah, I guess that’ll have to wait a few years.”

“And do me a favor,” Daxton interjected. “Don’t grow up too fast.”

Andrew smiled as he hugged his father’s shoulders. “I’ll try not to.”

“Andrew, why don’t you go get cleaned up. Breakfast’ll be ready when you come back.” Josey took the last slice of ham out of the skillet and laid it on the plate with the rest.

Andrew reached around her and stole a piece.

“Hey, now!” Josey smiled as she called after him.

“I’ll be right back!” he called out, hurrying into his room.

Daxton laughed. “That’s my boy.” He rose from his seat and gathered some plates and silverware, and then set the table.

“I can do that.” Josey tried to take it from him, but he playfully held it over her head, out of reach. “I’ve got it.”

She accidentally fell into him as she reached for the silverware, but he caught her. Josey looked in his eyes and saw the attraction there. She took a step back and wiped her hands on her apron. "I'm sorry." She turned around and pulled the biscuits out of the oven.

"For what?"

She shrugged.

"Josey, look at me."

She slid the biscuits into a towel-lined bowl, covered them with another hand towel, and then set the empty pan in the sink.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her around. "Josey, I'm sorry. I was only playing."

"It's okay." She took off her apron and then smoothed her dress. "Breakfast is ready."

He smiled encouragingly. "Looks great."

Andrew walked in just as Daxton was finishing setting the table. "Um... smells good!"

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Daxton held out the chair for Josey and she sat. “I agree. Is there anything you can’t cook, Josey?”

She shrugged and relaxed when he took his seat at the head of the table. “I’m not sure. I guess if you kill it and bring it home, I’ll try to cook it.” She was so hungry that she could have eaten breakfast, plate and all, when a wave of nausea came over her. “Excuse me.” She held a hand to her mouth, ran out the back door, and emptied the contents of her stomach behind a tree. When she thought nothing more could come up, she held onto the tree for a moment, hoping the nausea would go away soon.

“Here.” Daxton held a wet rag up to her. “Morning sickness?”

Her heart sank. She was hoping to keep it to herself for a little while longer, but the cat was out of the bag now. Josey nodded and then took the rag and wiped her face and mouth. “How did you know?”

Daxton placed a hand on the small of her back to steady her. “Priscilla, my ex-wife, used to get it when she was pregnant with the children.” He looked out over the farm, obviously seeing images of long ago. “How far along are you?”

She shrugged as she sat down on a nearby stump. “I’m not sure. I’m not showing yet, though. I just found out a few weeks ago.”

Daxton’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “Is it your first pregnancy?”

“Yes, it is.” Josey wiped her mouth and bent over, willing the ground to stop

spinning. “It’s not the best time, but I love this child already and will do anything to protect it. It’s one of the reasons why I left.” She let out a deep breath, trying to steady herself. “Don’t worry. I’ll be gone by nightfall.”

Daxton turned around so quickly that it startled her. “What are you talking about? You can’t leave in your condition—”

“You’ve already done too much for me.” Josey stood. “I can’t ask for more.”

Daxton placed his hands gently on her shoulders. “You’re not asking. I’m offering.” He stooped down beside her and played with a blade of grass, obviously thinking. “Josey, why don’t you plan on staying with me and the children until after the baby’s born? You can decide what you’d like to do then.”

Josey narrowed her eyes at him. “I hate to ask this, but what do you want from me in return?” In her experience, no one was this nice. Not without wanting something from her.

His eyes widened, but he recovered himself quickly. “Nothing. Josey, I just want to help.”

“I’m so sorry. It’s just that—”

“Shh....” Daxton reached out and took her hand. “You don’t have to explain. You haven’t had kindness in your life, and you’re surprised to find it in others.”

She sighed. “A complete stranger is caring for me more than my own husband ever did.” At that moment, Josey saw him in a new light. Not only was Daxton willing to care for her, he was willing to care for a pregnant woman and her baby until the baby was born... and was asking for nothing in return. “Thank you. I can pay you back—”

“No, you won’t.” He smiled. “Just be happy... and take care of that baby.”

Josey smiled. “Oh, I will. You can count on it.”

Andrew opened the back door. “Josey, are you all right?”

She nodded as she took Daxton’s hand that he offered her. “Yes, I’m fine. Thanks, Andrew.”

“Good, because breakfast is getting cold and I’m hungry.”

“Andrew!” Daxton reprimanded.

“Well, it is!”

Josey laughed. “That’s okay. I’m surprised you didn’t go ahead and eat already. We’ll be right in.”

Andrew nodded. “No, I’ll wait.” He thought for a moment and then asked, “Are you sure you’re okay? You don’t look so good.”

Josey smiled as she let Daxton help her up the hill. “I’m fine, sweetie. You go ahead and eat. We’re coming in now.”

“Okay.” Andrew disappeared back into the house, closing the door behind him.

“Daxton...” Josey pulled him to a stop. “Would you mind not telling anyone that I’m pregnant just yet?”

A smile lit his lips. “My lips are sealed. But I think that the truth will come out soon.” He smiled as he looked down at her stomach.

She chuckled. “Of course, I’ll tell everyone eventually. But not just yet.”

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Daxton pulled her to a stop. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. You’re married, after all.”

“Was,” Josey corrected, turning her head away. “Let’s go inside.”

Daxton said nothing as they walked up the slight hill to the house. Being the perfect gentleman that he was, he led her up the steps and opened the door for her.

“Daxton, thank you... for everything.”

A smile lit his lips. “No thanks are necessary, my lady.”

He had only been joking, but she liked the sound of being called his lady. But she couldn’t allow herself to think that way.

When they walked inside, Andrew was still waiting.

Daxton smiled proudly. “Son, you didn’t have to wait for us.”

Josey liked the sound of the word “us” on his lips a bit too much. She could tell that being around his family was much too dangerous... for her heart.

“I wanted to.” Andrew jumped up and then held the chair for Josey as she sat.

Josey patted his cheek. “Thank you.”

Andrew looked in her eyes, pleading. “Now, can we eat?”

Josey laughed. “Ask your father.”

“Yes, of course.” Daxton shook out his napkin and laid it across his lap. Then he bowed his head, folded his hands, and said a wonderful blessing over the meal.

Josey liked this, being in a Christian home, saying the blessing before meals, caring about one another. When she was married to Logan, she spent most of her time by herself. Then he would come in, plop down and eat, and would demand things from her, or would go straight to bed without a word. Those nights were a blessing. Looking back, they hadn’t had many “good times” worth remembering. Their good times had only consisted of their time courting. After they were married, he showed his true colors, and it all went downhill fast.

“Let’s eat,” Daxton announced when he had finished saying the blessing and reached for the biscuits. “Everything looks great.”

Andrew laughed. “And you made enough for an army again.”

Josey smiled as she slid a piece of country ham onto her plate. “I just wanted to make sure that no one goes away hungry.”

“I don’t think there’s any danger in that,” Daxton teased.

Andrew opened a biscuit and placed a piece of country ham inside, making a sandwich. “Umm... this is good. We haven’t had this in a while.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Daxton gently admonished.

Josey ate hers like a sandwich, too. And he was right: It was delicious. Before long, she had devoured it and made herself another. This time, she savored the salty flavor of the ham along with the flaky goodness of the biscuit.

“Wow! You must be hungry.” Andrew reached for a biscuit and made himself another sandwich.

Josey smiled. “I think you are, too. Go ahead and eat. The fish won’t wait, and I’d like to have fish for dinner again tonight.”

His eyes widened. “Can we, Pa?”

Daxton took a sip of his coffee and set it down. “I was thinking that maybe we could go hunting, instead. While it’s summer, we could bag a buck, cure the meat, and have enough to last us all winter. What do you say?”

“Yippee!” Andrew yelled and then stuffed the last of his biscuit into his mouth.

“After we do the chores.” Daxton took a bite of his ham biscuit and swallowed. “The cattle won’t wait to be fed, and we need to milk the cow, too.”

“I know,” Andrew said, still excited. “Can I get started now?”

Daxton laughed. “I’ve never seen you this excited to do your chores before.”

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Andrew shrugged. "I figured that if I get an early start, then we can go hunting sooner."

Daxton finished the last of his biscuit. "I'll help with dishes, and I'll be right out."

"Nonsense," Josey replied. "I'll take care of the house. You two go ahead. The deer won't wait for you."

Daxton smiled appreciatively. "If you're sure."

"I am." Josey took his empty plate. "Now, git. I'd like to have venison for dinner tonight."

Andrew laughed. "A minute ago, you said you wanted fish again."

Josey took Andrew's plate, too, smiling. "Well, I'll cook whatever you bring in the door." Then she leaned in conspiratorially. "Just don't bring home a skunk."

Andrew laughed. "Don't worry. We won't." Andrew started to get up, but his father stopped him.

"What do you say?"

"May I be excused?"

Daxton smiled. "Yes, you may. We don't want to forget our manners."

“Yes, Pa.” Then Andrew headed out the back door.

“He’s a good boy.” Josey stacked the dishes on the table and carried them to the sink.

Daxton caught her hand, sending chills over her body. “Are you sure you don’t need any help?”

Josey chuckled. “Oh, heavens no! You two go enjoy the day and I’ll take care of the house. I might just take a bath while you’re out.”

Daxton’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “I’ll heat the water. I don’t want you lifting the heavy buckets.”

“I can do it—”

“No, I want you to take care of yourself.” Daxton placed his hands on her shoulders as he looked in her eyes. “Please, don’t fight me on this.”

A smile lit Josey’s lips, enjoying someone taking care of her for a change. “If you insist.”

“I do.” Daxton lifted the buckets, filled them with water, and set them on the stove to heat for her bath and dishwater. “When they heat up, let me know and I’ll lift them for you.”

She chuckled. “I can do it, Daxton. Really.”

He shook his head and narrowed his eyes. “Promise me.”

“Okay, I promise.” He headed into the bedroom as she finished stacking the dishes. Then she went into the living room and sat in the rocking chair to wait for the water

to heat. Josey looked over and saw a sewing box sitting on the writing desk in the corner. She opened it and inside were needles, thread in all colors, a thimble, and more.

“It belonged to the children’s mother,” Daxton said behind her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snoop.” Josey hurried to place the lid back on top.

“No, it’s okay.” Daxton walked over to it. “Lillian has taken an interest in sewing lately and I thought she might be able to use something out of it. But Ella made her a sewing box of her own because she was reluctant to use her mother’s.”

Josey nodded, understanding. “What happened to her... your ex-wife... if you don’t mind me asking?”

Daxton sighed. “She left us for another man.”

Josey’s eyes opened wide in surprise as she gasped. “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

Daxton shrugged. “Don’t be.” He looked over his shoulder to make sure Andrew wasn’t within earshot. “Priscilla never wanted to be a mother. When the children came along, she had a hard time coping. I guess it was a blessing when she finally left.”

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“I’m so sorry to hear that.” Josey placed her hand on his shoulder. “Daxton, you’re a good man. You deserved better than that.”

He gave her a slight smile. “Thank you. That’s very kind of you to say.” Just then, the water sounded like it was heating. “Well, it sounds like the water’s ready.” He turned around when he was halfway to the kitchen and nodded at the sewing box. “You can go through that with Lillian when she gets back, if you like.”

Josey nodded, understanding. He had kept his wife’s things that she had left behind for his children, even though she had left them for another man. At that moment, she realized what a good man Daxton really was. She just hoped that she wouldn’t do anything to hurt him, too. It was the last thing that she ever wanted to do.

Chapter 10

Daxton

After Daxton poured some water into the basin, he took the rest to the tub. “Now, don’t empty this when you finish.” Daxton poured the last of the water into the bathtub. “I’ll take care of it when I get back.”

Josey smiled. “If you’re sure, but I’m sure I can—”

“No argument.” Daxton smiled, enjoying having someone around to look after. “If you’re okay, I’d better hurry out to help Andrew. He was so excited about going hunting that there might not be any chores left to do when I get out there.” One corner of his lips curled into a smile. “On second thought....”

“Go.” Josey laughed. “I have this. You two enjoy yourself.”

Daxton slid on his cowboy hat and smiled. “We’ll be back in a while.” Daxton’s expression suddenly turned serious. “Lock the doors and don’t let anyone in.” It was quickly becoming his parting words every time he left the house.

Josey nodded, lost in thought.

Daxton placed his hands on her shoulders. “Hey, are you okay?”

Josey smiled. “I’m fine. Now, go! I’ll take care of everything here. Don’t worry.”

“Just rest—”

“Daxton, Andrew’s waiting,” she cut him off, pushing him playfully toward the backdoor. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

Daxton smirked and then walked out, giving her one last glance over his shoulder. She waved and then closed the door. He walked out to the barn and Andrew was already milking the cow.

“It’s about time you came out here.” Andrew smiled, lifting an eyebrow.

“Hey, now.” Daxton headed over to the feed bin and began scooping it out for the horses. “I just lifted the heavy buckets of water for Josey. That’s all.”

Andrew laughed. “Well, I like her.” He went back to milking the cow as the sound of liquid hitting the metal bucket filled the air. “Where did you two meet?”

Daxton sighed as he filled a bucket with sweet feed. He didn’t want to lie to his son, but he didn’t want to tell him the complete truth, either. “She was sick and needed to

be cared for, so I helped her.”

Andrew nodded.

Daxton was glad that his son was satisfied with the answer.

“Pa,” Andrew said as he milked the cow. “Shawn was talking about a rodeo coming into Laramie. Can we go?”

Daxton shrugged. “Well, I don’t see why not. When is it?”

“This weekend, I think.” Andrew continued milking the cow. “Do you think Josey and Lillian would want to go with us?”

Daxton scooped the feed into the horses’ bins, ready for when they come in from the field. “I don’t know if Josey will want to go, but I’m sure Lillian will.”

“I hope she does.” When the bucket he was working on was filled, Andrew set it aside, and then grabbed another. “I like Josey.”

Daxton smiled. “Now, don’t get too attached to her. I’m not sure how long she’s going to stay.”

“Well, I hope she stays forever.” Andrew began filling the new bucket. “Don’t you like her, Pa?”

Daxton nodded. “Yes, I do.”

“Well, then maybe she’ll stay.”

“Let’s not put the cart before the horse, son.” Daxton knew that she was going to stay until after the baby was born, but he wasn’t sure if she would stay after that. And he couldn’t let himself get close to her and the baby, and then leave. He didn’t want to put himself or his family through that again. No, the first time with Priscilla was enough. “Let’s hurry to do the chores so we can go hunting. Are you sure you still want to go?”

Andrew scoffed. “Of course! I’m almost through milking the cow. Then I’ll weed the garden.”

Daxton smiled. “The garden can wait one more day. I’ll put away the milk and then we can go.”

“Yes!”

Daxton glanced over at his son. “But you’ll have to wear shoes and jeans. We’ll be going into the forest, after all.”

“Oh, Pa!” In the summer, Andrew spent most of his time barefoot. It was hard to get shoes on the boy until the cold weather set in. And even then, it was a struggle.

“You heard me.” Daxton set the empty feed bucket back into the wooden cabinet. “And don’t worry about shoveling out the stalls. I’ll do it this weekend.”

“But we’re going to the rodeo!” Andrew reminded him.

“Maybe.” Daxton lifted the full bucket of milk. “I need to go into work tomorrow and Friday. Then maybe we’ll go Saturday or Sunday after church.”

“But we have the dinner after church.” Andrew finished filling the other bucket and then let the cow go out to pasture. He lifted the pail and followed his father, and they headed toward the house.

“Well, aren’t you the social butterfly!” Daxton smiled as they walked up the slight hill toward the back door of the house.

“Pa!” Andrew lugged the other full milk pail up the hill beside his father, careful not to spill any. “We spent most of the winter inside during the blizzard. It’s nice to be able to get out now.”

Daxton sighed. “I can’t argue with that.” He stopped his son. “Josey, we’re coming in. Are you decent?”

No answer.

Daxton’s heart sank as images of Priscilla leaving ran through his mind all over again. “Josey?”

No answer.

Daxton set down the pail of milk, his heart racing. “Stay here.” He rushed inside, not sure why he was so worked up. After all, it wasn’t as if they had a relationship. But what if her husband had found her? “Josey?” He ran through the living room to the bedroom, when something caught his eye. He stopped dead in his tracks. To the right, Josey was asleep in the rocking chair. He breathed a sigh of relief. The dishes had been washed and put away, and the rest of the house was clean, as well. Daxton opened the back door.

Andrew was waiting, his eyebrows raised almost into his hairline, his eyes wide. “Is everything okay?”

Daxton nodded. “Everything’s fine. Josey just fell asleep in the rocking chair.”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “And that was a reason to think that we were under attack. Dad, sometimes you take your job to extremes.”

Daxton laughed, enjoying his son’s spunk. “Get inside.” He smiled, shaking his head.

Andrew smirked as he lugged the pail of milk inside and set it on the counter. “Pa, you want me to fill the bottles?”

Daxton shook his head. “No, I’ll do it. Go get ready and I’ll be finished when you come out.”

Andrew sighed. “Okay, Pa. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Take your time... and be careful not to wake Josey.” Daxton reached under the sink and pulled out some clean glass bottles, filled them with milk, and then sealed them. Then he took them down into the cool cellar. The milk would last for a few days down there, no matter how hot it got outside.

After everything was put away, Daxton headed into the living room to check on Josey and smiled when he saw that she was still sleeping. Knowing she would be more comfortable in a bed, he carefully bent down and scooped her into his arms. Josey instinctively wrapped her arm around his neck and snuggled onto his chest, causing his heart to stir.

As he laid her on his bed, he had to remind himself that she was married. Then again, she had said that she wasn’t anymore, but she didn’t elaborate on it. No, he put all

thoughts of her staying with them out of his mind. She would be there until after the baby was born, but that would be a while, at least six months.

When he laid her in his bed, she snuggled onto the pillow and curled up on her side, looking very vulnerable and beautiful. Watching her sleep, his heart went out to her. Hard telling what she had been through at the hands of her ex-husband. If she were his, Daxton vowed that he would care for her, treasure her, and treat her with respect as a woman should be treated. As he pulled the quilt over her, Priscilla leaving him came to mind. At that moment, he swore to take care of Josey, but he couldn't let her into his or his children's hearts. He closed the drapes, letting her sleep, and then closed the door gently behind him.

Andrew was standing in the bedroom, ready, with his hands on his hips and a smirk on his lips. "Are you going to marry Josey?"

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“Andrew!” Daxton reached for the two rifles mounted over the fireplace. “I’m just helping her, taking care of her until she gets on her feet.”

“Uh huh.” Andrew gave him a knowing smile.

Daxton sighed. “You, my son, are growing up too fast.” He handed Andrew a rifle. “Let’s go before Lillian comes home.”

Andrew tucked the rifle under his arm and pointed the barrel down, as his father had taught him. Daxton was careful to teach both of his children about gun safety at a young age, and to respect weapons. One couldn’t be too careful.

“Where would you like to go, Pa?” Andrew asked, walking beside his father.

Daxton sighed. “How about our usual hunting spot?” There was a meadow in the center of the forest that he had often taken Andrew to. It was quiet and there weren’t many bears to worry about. Bears usually stayed close to the base of the mountain ranges and in the mountains themselves. But at the meadow, he and Andrew could stay in the tree line and wait for a buck, if they were lucky.

Andrew nodded. “Sounds good.” They walked in silence for a while. When they were deep in the woods, he asked, “Pa, I know you may not marry Josey, but do you think you ever will get married again?”

A crease formed between Daxton’s eyes. “What brought this on?”

Andrew lifted one shoulder, glancing over at his father. “I see the way you are with

Josey... taking care of her... and I was just wondering. You and Josey are good together.”

Daxton gave him a small smile. “Son, don’t get your hopes up about her. She’s going through some things right now and she needs our help.”

“Do you think she might stay, though?”

Daxton sighed. “I’m not sure, son. Again, don’t get your hopes up.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” Andrew lifted an eyebrow. “Do you think you might marry again?”

Daxton shrugged. “Maybe... if I meet the right person. But....” Daxton ruffled his hair. “She will definitely have to love children.”

“Children? Ha!” Andrew looked at his father in disbelief. “I’d be happy if she knows how to play Poker.”

Daxton laughed, remembering their Poker game the night before. “I’d just be happy if she can cook. Speaking of cooking, let’s see if we can bag us a deer.”

Usually, they got one every summer. Venison was good and a nice change from beef, pork, and chicken. He knew they were truly blessed, though. Not everyone had the means to stock up during the summer for the harsh winters. Reverend Caleb Henley sometimes took up special collections and donations at the church so he could bring food to those unable to get out in bad weather.

As sheriff, Daxton had gone with Rev. Henley on many occasions to deliver the food. Usually, it was to the elderly, to the occasional family whose father had been injured, or to a woman raising her children alone because the father had died. But in this part

of the country where women were scarce, it was rare to see women with children alone. Usually, they married out of necessity before the harsh weather hit, if nothing else.

“Pa,” Andrew whispered, nodding toward a thick of trees. At the base was a four-point stag. It was gorgeous with dark brown fur, going up to light brown and then white around the neck.

“Go ahead, son,” Daxton whispered, loud enough only for his son to hear.

Andrew took aim and then pulled back the hammer with a click. The stag immediately lifted its head and perked its ears, sniffing the air. When he caught sight of them, it galloped at full speed across the meadow, headed away. But Andrew tracked it and then fired, bringing it down with one shot.

“Good shot, son! Let’s go get him.” Daxton squeezed his son’s shoulder with pride and they both crossed the meadow to the deer, lying lifeless. “Come on. We’ll take it home and will dress it there.”

Andrew nodded. Although he had been hunting with his father several times before, it was Andrew’s first kill, and Daxton saw that it bothered him.

Daxton knelt on one knee beside his son. “Son, you didn’t kill this deer for sport just to leave it. You killed it for food to feed our family.” He placed his hand on his son’s shoulder. “This deer will sustain us for the winter. Kill with purpose or for protection, not for any other reason. And only shoot what you will eat. Okay, son?”

Andrew nodded. “It doesn’t make it any easier.”

Daxton shook his head. “No, it doesn’t. I hate to say this, but the first time is the hardest. After that, it gets easier. But if you don’t want to do it again, it’s okay. You

don't have to."

Andrew shook his head, tears welling up behind his eyes, obviously unable to speak.

Daxton's eyebrows pulled together in concern. "Son, you know what the Indians do? They thank the animal for giving its life for the good of the tribe. Would you like to do 3?"

Andrew smiled, nodding his head.

"Go ahead."

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Andrew took a knee beside the deer and cleared his throat. “Thank you for giving your life so that we can have food thiswinter. Your spirit will live on in the trees, the forest, and in your herd.”

Daxton patted his son’s back. “That was beautiful, son. Now, what do you say we bring it home?”

A smile spread across his face. “Thanks, Pa.”

Daxton pulled his son in for a hug. “I’m proud of you, son. But if you don’t want to do it again, you don’t have to.”

Andrew nodded. “Okay, Pa.”

Daxton lifted the stag and slung it around his neck. It was heavy, but he managed. “Let’s go home.”

On the way back, Andrew started talking animatedly about it. About the deer running and then tracking it. When they got back, the sun was already starting to dip, sending shoots of orange, pink, and red across the sky.

Daxton walked over to a large wooden table by the barn and laid the deer down. Then he gave his son’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Let’s go inside. I’ll come back out and take care of it in a minute.” Daxton needed to get his sharp hunting knife to dress the deer right away so it wouldn’t go to waste, and he didn’t want Andrew to watch. His son had had enough for one day.

“Okay, Pa.” Andrew ran ahead toward the house and then called over his shoulder. “I can’t wait to tell Josey!”

Daxton smiled as he followed. He didn’t want his family to get too attached to her, but she was already worming her way into their hearts without intending to. And Daxton found that he was looking forward to the idea of having a baby in the house again.

Andrew flung the door open and yelled in. “Josey! Guess what? I got a deer!”

When Daxton walked in, Josey and Lillian were in the living room sewing.

“Pa!” Lillian ran toward him, and he lifted her off her feet, giving her a big bear hug. “I missed you!”

“I missed you, too, baby girl.” Daxton set her on her feet. “When did you get home?”

Lillian tilted her head to the side. “Colton brought me a little while ago.”

“He left already?”

She nodded. “Yes. I think he was eager to get home.” Lillian laughed. “He kept saying that James was driving him crazy.”

Daxton laughed. “I guess it’s time for me to go back in tomorrow.” Then he looked between his daughter and Josey. “Will you be okay without me tomorrow?”

Josey nodded. “Yes, we’ll be fine.”

Lillian scoffed. “Pa, I’ve been taking care of the house on my own for a while now. Of course, we’ll be fine.”

One corner of Daxton's lips curled into a smile. "Well, not entirely on your own, but close enough."

Josey smiled. "Well, now she'll have some help."

Daxton looked at his daughter. "You won't mind?"

Lillian shrugged and then looked over at Josey and smiled. "It'll be nice to have another lady around the house."

Daxton patted her head. "Well, you're not quite a lady yet. Enjoy being a child while you can. You'll be a grown woman soon enough."

Lillian pulled away. "Oh, Pa!"

Daxton laughed. "Well, I'm going to dress the deer. I'll be right back."

"I'll help," Andrew interjected.

Daxton shook his head. "No, son. You've done enough for today. Why don't you go play? You can help me next time."

"No, Pa." Andrew looked with sincerity into his father's eyes. "I'm almost a man now and I'll need to know how to do such things."

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Daxton smiled, proud of his son for wanting to take responsibility. “Son, you’re not a man yet. Besides, I plan on being around for a long time to show you how to do such things.”

“Andrew, why don’t you empty the tub for me?” Josey interjected, obviously wanting to save Andrew. “We’ll need to heat some fresh water. You two need to take baths tonight.”

“But, Josey!” Andrew and Lillian said in unison.

“No buts,” Josey replied, a smile lingering on her lips. “I’m not going to have you two walking around dirty.”

Lillian and Andrew both looked at each other and then laughed.

Daxton gave Josey an appreciative nod and she smiled in return. “I’ll be right back... and no heavy lifting.”

Josey laughed.

“Don’t worry, Pa. I’ll make sure she doesn’t lift anything heavy.” Andrew was already heading off to the utility room to empty the tub.

“Well, it looks as if I have a bodyguard.” Then Josey looked over at Lillian. “Want to help me fix dinner?”

A broad smile spread across her face as she nodded eagerly.

Daxton mouthed a silent “thank you” and then pulled his best dressing knife from the drawer, headed outside, and got to work. It was beautiful outside with the wind gently blowing through the green leaves of the trees along the edge of the lush forest.

Daxton loved summer. Although it was warm and sometimes downright hot during the day, it cooled down at night. They could always go outdoors in the summertime, as well. During the summer was when he spent time fishing with his children and playing games outdoors. In the winter, there was usually too much snow to get out. But they managed to entertain themselves indoors with games. If these past few days hadn’t taught him anything else, it was to spend more time with his family. It was funny that it took a total stranger to bring him to that realization.

Josey was quickly becoming a part of the family, taking care of the house, fixing dinner and cleaning, allowing his children to be children again. Guilt filled his chest as he realized that he had come to depend upon his children a bit too much. After Priscilla left, the children had to grow up quickly. Yes, Mrs. Jenkins had been a great help during that time, but as the children grew, they had to take on more and more responsibility. Now, they were nearly grown, and it all had happened right before his eyes.

But they weren’t grown yet and he was going to enjoy their childhood while it lasted. The rodeo that Andrew had mentioned was coming up this Saturday, so he made a mental note to take Josey and the children. The rodeo was something that they all looked forward to each year. He guessed that some of the local ranchers would probably be competing in it, too.

After he was finished dressing the deer and cut it into steaks and roasts, darkness had nearly fallen. He saved the antlers, and the hide he stretched across a board to dry, using small nails to hold it in place. He burned the rest of the carcass, and then headed inside to take in the meat.

Josey had just finished making dinner and was wiping her hands on a dishtowel when Daxton came in. “Bring it over here and I’ll put it away,” Josey instructed him. She pulled a large flat pan from under the cabinet, already making herself at home in his kitchen.

Daxton smiled as he placed the meat on the pan. “That’s okay. I was going to salt cure it. I’ll take care of it.” He looked over and Lillian was setting the table. “So, what’s for dinner?”

“Josey made chili and soda bread.” Lillian set the last fork and knife beside the plate.

“Soda bread?” Daxton asked, rubbing a coarse salt over the meat, one piece at a time.

Josey smiled as she poured lemonade into glasses, enough for everyone. “Yes, an Indian taught my mother how to make it when she first moved to this territory.” She shrugged. “My mother taught me how to make it.”

Andrew’s eyes widened. “Indians? Real Indians?”

Josey smiled. “Yes, real Indians. There are still tribes in this part of the country. After the Treaty of Laramie in 1869, the Indians moved to the northern territories.”

“Wow! How do you know so much about this?” Andrew plopped down on a seat at the kitchen table, clearly enthralled.

Josey shrugged. “My mother grew up around a lot of Indians, but we’ll talk about it more some other time. Now, go wash up. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.” Josey looked at both of the children.

“Yes ‘um.” Andrew said without argument and rushed up the stairs to his room, while Lillian went to her room to wash up.

Daxton looked at her in amazement. “How did you do that? Usually they put up a fight, especially Andrew.”

Josey chuckled. “I guess I have a way with children.”

Daxton laughed. “I would say so.” He picked up two glasses of lemonade and set them on the table, while Josey brought in the other two.

She sat down and placed a napkin on her lap. “Time to eat!”

The children came running in and sat at their places at the table.

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Daxton chuckled. “You’re going to have to teach me that.”

Josey blushed. “They’re good children.”

Daxton picked up his glass and held it up to her. “Thank you.”

“It looks wonderful,” Lillian gushed, laying a napkin on her lap, the perfect little lady.

“Say grace?” Josey asked, raising her eyebrows to Daxton, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Yes, whether he liked it or not, she was quickly becoming a part of the family.

Daxton bowed his head and said a blessing over the meal, thanking God for the good food and good company. “Amen.”

Josey stood and took the ladle in the pan containing the chili. “Daxton?”

“That’s okay. You can fix the children’s bowl’s first.”

Josey smiled. “Nonsense! The man of the house is always served first.”

“Well, if you insist.” He handed her his bowl and she filled it full.

“Whoa! That’s plenty.” He took the bowl back. “Thank you.”

Then she filled Andrew’s and Lillian’s bowls and then her own, she filled last. Then

she sliced the soda bread and passed it around, letting everyone take a slice. When everyone was settled, she crumbled her soda bread into her chili.

Daxton did the same, stirred it up, and took a bite. The savory tangy flavor filled his mouth. Although it was hot, it tasted delicious. He fanned his mouth and quickly took a sip of his lemonade.

“Be careful. It’s hot,” Josey teased.

“Now you tell me.”

Josey shrugged. “Better late than never.”

Daxton laughed and took another spoonful. But this time, he blew across it first. The savory spicy flavor of chili filled his mouth. “This is delicious.”

Josey bowed her head slightly. “Thank you. My mother taught me how to make chili, too.”

Daxton smiled as he blew across another spoonful. “Your mother sounds like a knowledgeable woman.”

Josey’s eyes filled with sadness, but she gave him a smile. “Yes, she was. She died when I was quite young.”

Daxton’s smile faded. “I’m so sorry.” Obviously, Josey had endured much more suffering and loss in her life than he could imagine.

She lifted her chin and smiled. “Don’t be. She was a wonderful woman.”

He made a mental note to ask her more about it later, after the children go to bed.

“So, I was thinking of taking the children to Laramie this Saturday for the rodeo.” The children cheered and Daxton smiled. “Josey, would you like to go?”

Josey’s smile faded. “No, you go ahead. I’ll stay here and clean the house.”

Daxton chuckled. “Over the past few days that you’ve been here, you’ve cleaned so much that the place is spotless.” He took a bite. “Come with us and take a break. It’ll do you some good.” He glanced over at the children and smiled. “Who knows? Maybe Buffalo Bill Cody will be there.”

“Oh, I hope so!” Lillian chimed. “I’ve heard stories about him!”

“Me, too!” Andrew said, clearly excited. Then he turned to his father. “Do you think Wild Bill Hickock will be there, too?”

Daxton shook his head. “No, I don’t think so, but we’ll have to see. I hear they put on quite a show. It should be even better than last year.”

The children chatted animatedly, but Daxton noticed that Josey didn’t say another word about it.

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“Josey, you have to go!” Lillian trilled. “We’ll have so much fun.”

“Yes, and there’ll be sugar candy!” Andrew added.

Daxton chuckled. “Now, I don’t know about the candy—”

“Please, Pa!” both children chimed at the same time, clearly excited.

Daxton smiled. “We’ll see.” He looked over at Josey and she was just picking at her food, obviously lost in thought. “We can talk about it later. Let’s eat before the food gets cold.” The children resumed eating, so excited that they didn’t notice Josey’s change in demeanor. “Josey, it’s delicious. You’ll have to show me how to make it.”

“There’s no need,” Andrew said between bites. “Josey can always cook it for us.”

She gave him a small smile. “As long as I’m welcome.”

“Of course! You’ll always be welcome!” Lillian reached across the table and gave Josey’s hand a gentle squeeze.

Josey smiled and nodded, and then took another bite of her chili.

“Children, finish eating. You both need to take baths after dinner.” Daxton turned his attention back to eating, not making eye contact with Josey. He swore that he wouldn’t let his children or himself get too attached to her. Maybe it was a good idea to take the children to Laramie for the rodeo alone. “Josey, if I take the children to Laramie Saturday, will you be okay here alone?”

She smiled as she looked up from her chili, but then looked back down again. “Yes, of course. Maybe I’ll do some sewing while you’re away.”

“Let me know if there’s anything you need from Laramie and I’ll get it while we’re there.” Daxton rose abruptly to his feet and then set his empty bowl in the sink. He didn’t want to think of Josey leaving just yet. Then again, she had said that she was no longer married. But he couldn’t allow himself to think that way. To hope. He knew nothing about this woman but what she had told him. The sheriff in him told him not to trust her until he had proof of who she was and who her husband had been. But his gut told him that he could trust her. Daxton just hoped that he was making the right decision by letting her stay there. After all, the lives of his children depended on it.

Chapter 11

Josey

After dinner, Josey stacked the dishes and put some water on to heat.

“Here. I’ll get that.” Daxton took the other bucket from her hand, filled it, and then set it on the top of the stove for the children’s baths and dishwater. His eyebrows pulled together in concern, and he suddenly seemed distant. And Josey herself had grown quiet at dinner after the mention of going to Laramie.

Daxton had probably noticed.

But she couldn’t go to Laramie. No matter what. If Austin Slater or a member of his gang saw her, it could get Daxton and the children killed... as well as herself and the baby. No, Daxton and the children would be safe, as long as she wasn’t seen with them.

As she stacked the dishes, she knew that she should tell Daxton about Logan and Austin, but how could she tell him that she had killed her husband? Would he believe that it was in self-defense? Deep down inside, she wondered if she even deserved to live. After all, she had taken a life, no matter how despicable that life had been. She sighed, thinking. Could God forgive her for what she had done, or would she be condemned to Hell for eternity?

Josey pushed the thought from her mind. What she had to think about right now was her child. She owed it to her baby to live. The child had nothing to do with who his or her father had been... or what her mother had become.

For a split second, she wished that the child had been Daxton's and not Logan's. She could never tell anyone who the real father of the child was, for fear of it getting back to her child later in life. No, this child was no longer Logan's. It was hers and hers alone. And she would do anything to protect it, to give him or her a good life.

"Are you all right?" Daxton asked, taking a dish from her hand.

She nodded. "Just a little tired."

Daxton sighed, but didn't smile. "Why don't you go lie down? I'll take care of the dishes and the children."

"No, I can—"

"Josey, go get some rest," he whispered, his eyes kind as he placed his hand gently over hers.

Normally, she would have insisted that she do the dishes, but she was just so tired... and she also needed time alone to think. She was living in a make-believe world with the family that she had always wanted... but they weren't hers. And it was too

dangerous to her heart to pretend that they were.

“If you insist.” She handed him the dishtowel and headed toward the bedroom.

“Night, Josey,” Lillian said as she passed.

Josey stopped and smiled. “You want me to show you some things tomorrow?”

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Lillian's eyes brightened. "Like what?"

Josey shrugged. "Like how to sew, crochet, or embroidery."

Lillian jumped to her feet. "You know how to do all of that?"

Josey smiled, nodding. "Yes, of course. And I'll be glad to show you, while I'm here." Josey thought for a moment. "Every young lady should know these things."

A smile spread across Lillian's face. "Yes! That would be wonderful."

"Tomorrow, then." Then Josey glanced over at Andrew, who was helping his father clear the table. "Good night, Andrew."

He looked up and smiled. "Night, Josey. I hope you feel better soon."

"Thanks, hon." She walked into Daxton's bedroom and closed the door behind her, grateful to be with this family... no matter how long it may last. She was just glad that she had a taste of a normal family before she had to leave. But she planned to stay until the baby was born. She had promised Daxton. And she planned to make the most of it and to help them out as much as she could... while she was there.

Alone, she sat on the edge of the bed, wondering how she had gotten herself into this mess. She rubbed her stomach that was now starting to protrude ever so slightly. She had always had a flat stomach and no one else would notice the change... not yet. But soon, people would. How was she going to explain her pregnancy to everyone? She could tell them that it was her late husband's and that he had died, which wasn't

entirely a lie. Yes, he had died... but at her hands.

But it had been an accident, after all. She hadn't walked into the room where he was and gunned him down in cold blood. She had warned him to stop, to leave her alone, but he hadn't listened. And she still hadn't shot him, even when he had lunged for her. But in self defense, thinking of the baby's as well as her own well being, was when she had finally pulled the trigger.

God help her. She just hoped that her child never found out who his or her real father was. No, that secret was better kept and taken to the grave. She just hoped it wasn't the later.

After a while, she leaned back against the pillows, but she wasn't able to sleep. She had too much on her mind.

Then she began to think. At the fish fry with Colton and Ella, it had been mentioned that they had hired a young man named James as a deputy. Then she sat bolt upright in the bed as she put two and two together. One of Logan's men was named James. But then she let out a deep breath and settled back down, knowing that the chances of it being the same man were slim to none. She was just being paranoid.

But then again, Austin was cunning, even though he was vicious. That was how he and Logan had eluded the law for so long. Josie wouldn't put it past Austin to plant people in towns in the area on the lookout for her.

She smirked, knowing she was being ridiculous. He didn't have enough men to place one in every town, unless his men scouted the surrounding area, as well.

Josie knew she'd never get any sleep at this rate, letting her imagination get away from her.

As she lay in Daxton's bed, she missed him. Even though she had slept in his arms just over the past two nights, Josie had already gotten used to it. Now, she missed him.

But it wasn't fair to lead him on.

Daxton had cared for her in her hour of need. She owed him more than that. Even though she felt her heart going out to him, she couldn't let herself fall for him. Not until this mess with Logan and Austin was over. But in her heart of hearts, she doubted it ever would be. Josie feared that she would be looking over her shoulder, having to keep moving from town to town for the rest of her life and not get attached to the residents, just to survive.

Unable to sleep, she decided to get a glass of lemonade or maybe a cup of hot tea. When she opened the door, it was dark except for the faint embers glowing in the fireplace. Since it was summer, it was cool and not too cold, so it wasn't as important to keep the fire going all night.

Not wanting to disturb Daxton, she crept into the living room as quietly as she could.

"What are you doing up?" Daxton's voice resonated throughout the room, piercing the silence, causing her to jump.

"Oh! You scared me!" She placed a hand over her heart. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

Daxton sat up and smiled. He was fully clothed, with the exception of his bare feet. And she couldn't help but notice that even his feet were attractive. "Sorry. I couldn't sleep."

He rose from the sofa and placed a log on the fire. The fire rose up again, filling the

room with warmth.

“Neither could I.” She motioned toward the kitchen. “I was about to make myself a glass of lemonade. Would you like some?”

“Would you mind if I make us some coffee instead?” He headed back to the sofa, folded the blanket, and laid it over the arm.

“That’s okay. I’ll make it.” It was the least she could do for all that he had done for her. As she started making the coffee, Daxton’s voice suddenly boomed in her ear.

“You know, you don’t have to feel obligated to me.”

“Oh!” She jumped, chills going down her spine. She hit him playfully on the chest.

“Stop doing that!”

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Daxton chuckled. "I'm sorry. It seems that I've been scaring you a lot tonight."

Letting her heart settle, she scooped the coffee into the metal coffee pot. "It's not you. I must be a little jumpy tonight."

Daxton waited for a moment, as if pondering something, and then asked, "Could we talk?"

Her heart sank. Although she knew it was coming, Josey had been dreading this moment. But at least it would be over with. "Yes, of course." She set the coffee pot on the stove and turned on the fire.

Daxton walked into the dining area and pulled out her chair for her. After she was seated, he sat across from her. Her heart pounded, knowing what was coming, and dreading every moment of it.

"I hope you don't mind, but I need to know what caused you to go on the run." Daxton bit his lower lip and released it. "I know your husband was abusive from the questions I asked when you first arrived. But I need to know if my children are in danger."

Josey nodded. "Fair enough." She took a deep breath, summoning her courage. "When I first met my husband, he was a sweet talker, good looking, and told me all the right things. I heard rumors in town about him and his family, but I didn't believe them. Thought of them as vicious gossip." She shrugged. "I guess the old saying that love is blind is true. I had fallen in love with him, and I didn't believe the rumors."

“Then after we were married, he started beating me and worse. When I said no....” Tears streamed down her cheeks, but she continued, “he would tell me that I was his wife. His property to do with as he saw fit. The last time he came after me, I swore that I’d never let him touch me again.”

“So, you ran,” Daxton interjected, not letting her finish.

She was about to tell him everything. But somehow, she just couldn’t bring herself to say the words. That she had killed him in self-defense. Instead, she nodded.

Josey’s head was down, and her eyes were closed, so she didn’t see when Daxton reached over and gently squeezed her hand. She looked up into his eyes.

“You don’t have to tell me more, but I have to know something.”

Josey’s heart stopped.

“Will he come after my children if he finds you here?”

Josey shook her head. “No, but his brother is vicious, and I know what he’s capable of. But he would only come after me, not your children.”

“But if my children get in the way—”

“Don’t worry,” Josey cut him off as her heart sank. This dream of living with a family and pretending they were hers was over. “I’ll be gone by sunup.” She tried to release his hand, but he held it tighter.

Daxton’s eyebrows shot up almost into his hairline. “What? No! That’s not what I was talking about.” He held her hand, not releasing her. “I just needed to know what I’m up against so I can protect my children.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks as she gazed into his eyes. “Daxton, I don’t want to put your children in harm’s way.”

“I was just going to tell you that I’m not leaving you this weekend. Not until this mess is settled.” He placed his other hand atop hers. “I hate to have to leave you and the children alone tomorrow, but please keep the doors locked and the children inside until I get home. I’m sorry to put you through that, but I needed to know how to protect my children.”

Josey nodded. “I know they’re your first concern.”

“Yes, they are....” Daxton placed a finger under her chin and raised it until her eyes met his. “And so are you. You are my concern now, too. I don’t want anything to happen to you, either.”

Josey nodded. “I appreciate that, but I’ll be moving on—”

“No. Not in your condition.”

She sighed as she looked into his eyes. “Why are you doing this, Daxton? You don’t even know me.” Or what I’ve done.

“I know enough.” Daxton held her hand, not letting her go. “You’ll be safe tomorrow. No one knows you’re here, except for Colton and Ella... and I’d trust them with my life. So, stay in the house and no one will find you.”

Josey nodded. At that moment, she wanted to tell him everything, but she just couldn’t bring herself to. How did she get into this mess? More importantly, how was she going to get out of it? Josey just hoped that Daxton and his children weren’t the ones to pay the price.

Chapter 12

Daxton

Daxton's footsteps resonated against the wooden planks the next day in Whiskey River. It was quiet and James had left, saying that he had to run an errand. Since he hadn't taken any time off, Daxton felt that he needed it. Truth be told, Daxton was happy to have the time alone. There was a lot going on and he needed time to think it through.

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Luckily, Josey had agreed to stay inside with the doors locked and the children inside. But a fat lot of good that would do if someone wanted to break in. It was too hot to keep the windows closed, too. It would be plenty hot enough with the doors closed as it was.

Daxton hated to make his children stay inside on such a pretty day. It was summer, after all, and the only time the children could get out of the house, other than going to school. But it would be a small price to pay for their safety. And it would only be for just one day since it was Friday.

That morning when he woke, Josey had gotten up early and had made another batch of bacon, eggs, and toast. One thing was certain: She sure was a good cook, and she always made enough for an army. Daxton chuckled to himself. If he kept eating like this, he would have to widen the front door of his house to get in. But he wasn't complaining. It had been a while since he had a woman's home cooking. And his house could use a woman's touch.

He was looking forward to this weekend, to taking the children to Laramie for the rodeo. But there was no way that he was going to leave Josey in his house alone. No, he vowed to take her with them. She could use the time away, too.

"Afternoon, Sheriff," said Mr. Carson, owner of the General Store, as he passed. "Glad to have you back."

Daxton nodded, smiling. "Thank you. I just had to get caught up on a few things around the house."

“I heard there’s a woman staying with you.” Mrs. Carson was sweeping the floor, but purposefully stepped closer, using her broom as an excuse to hear some juicy gossip.

Daxton laughed. “Now, Mrs. Carson. Don’t you know better than to believe the town gossips by now?” He didn’t say so, but he included her with them.

“Well! I never!” Mrs. Carson sounded indignant, but then arched an eyebrow. “So, it’s not true, then?”

“I just think you shouldn’t be meddling in other people’s business.” Daxton shrugged, his voice sounding matter of fact. He was never one to give in to Mrs. Carson’s prying.

“Well!” Mrs. Carson stopped sweeping, the ruse forgotten, and turned to her husband. “Why are you just standing there? Are you going to let him talk to me this way?”

Mr. Carson shrugged. “Well, it’s true, isn’t it? You’d think by now you’d learn to stay out of other people’s business.”

“Hmph! I never!” Mrs. Carson took her broom with her, raised her nose into the air, and stormed back into the store.

Daxton tried to keep from laughing. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” Mr. Carson happily replied. “I know I’ll catch hell for it later, but it’ll be worth it.”

Daxton nodded, smiling, and then he turned serious. “May I ask you a question?”

“Yes, of course.” Mr. Carson waited, nodding toward the store. “I’m sorry about her, but she doesn’t have anything else to do but worry about what everyone else is

doing.”

“No, that’s not a problem.” Daxton sighed. “I was just wondering if that was what people were saying. That a woman was staying at my house.”

Mr. Carson’s lips formed a straight line, defeated. “That seems to be the consensus.”

Daxton nodded. “Just to let you know, a woman was in need and has been staying with me. She’s agreed to stay on as a housekeeper for a while.” It wasn’t entirely a lie. After all, he had asked her if she wanted the job.

Mr. Carson smiled. “I figured it was something like that. But of course, it’s none of my business.”

“No, it’s quite all right.” Daxton’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “I just wonder how word spread so quickly.”

Mr. Carson shrugged. “How does any gossip spread?” Then he gave Daxton a manly pat on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. It may be news today, but then something else will happen and it’ll be old news tomorrow.”

Daxton nodded in agreement, but he wasn’t worried about that. He was more worried about word getting back to Josey’s husband. He knew that a confrontation was inevitable, but he was hoping to put it off for as long as he could until Josey was strong enough to face him. She was still vulnerable, and he didn’t want her to relent and go back to the fiend just to keep from stirring trouble. She was already getting stronger, and more time would make her stronger still. But then again, it was just as well that it happened now. If he found out she was pregnant, he might try to force her to go with him against her will.

“Thanks, Mr. Carson,” Daxton replied. “For your honesty.”

Mr. Carson looked at him apologetically. "I'm sorry you had to find out from her." He inclined his head in the direction that his wife had gone.

Daxton smiled. "No, that's all right. I would rather know what the gossips are saying so I can deal with it, no offense."

Mr. Carson laughed. "None taken."

Daxton tipped his hat to him. "Well, have a great day, Mr. Carson." Daxton started to walk away, but the balding older man stopped him.

"Say, where's that deputy of yours today?"

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Daxton turned to face him. “He said he had to run an errand and took the day off. He’s been working so much that I told him to go when he asked.”

“Sherriff.” Mr. Carson stepped closer, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “Be careful with him. There’s something about him that I don’t trust.”

Daxton raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Why’s that?”

Mr. Carson shrugged. “I’m not sure, but I get an uneasy feeling when he comes into the store. He walks around and picks up things, as if appraising how much everything is worth. And he takes notice every time the register rings.”

Daxton narrowed his eyes. “How often does he come in?”

Mr. Carson let out a deep breath. “While you were gone, several times a day.”

“I’ll have a talk with him.” Anger welled up within his chest. He knew that James was getting on the shopkeepers’ nerves, but he had no idea it was this bad. “I’m sorry about that. It won’t happen again. He shouldn’t be coming into your store at all unless he needs something.”

Mr. Carson nodded. “Thanks, Sheriff.”

Daxton walked off, his boots pounding rhythmically against the wooden planks. As he headed down the walkway, nodding to the shopkeepers and passers by, he wondered how the town came upon the gossip of Josey so quickly. Who knows? Andrew may have innocently told Shawn and then he told his mother, and so on.

Daxton sighed. It was bound to come out anyway.

When he finished his rounds, he went back to the Sheriff's Office and sat on one of the rocking chairs out front. He decided that he couldn't walk around the town anymore that day. With James, the shop keepers had had enough of prying eyes.

Daxton had found a piece of wood while he was walking, so he pulled out his pocketknife and began whittling. He used to whittle a lot when he was a child but hadn't done it in years. But now, he thought he'd make something for Josey, although he wasn't sure what.

As he whittled, thinking of her, he looked at the wood and it seemed that it wanted to be a cross. He had a knack for looking at a piece of wood and seeing what was locked inside, what it wanted to be. It sounded crazy, he knew, but each time he completed his vision and listened to the wood, the piece always came out much prettier.

Before long, he had a small, wooden cross. He vowed to sand it and polish it before giving it to Josey, but he was already pleased with his work.

Later that night, Josey had dinner ready when he came home from work. It was nice coming home to a clean house and the children dressed and clean. Although the children had done a good job of keeping the house and taking care of things over the past few years, it was nice to have a woman's touch.

The next morning, he woke before sunrise, so as to get an early start to Laramie. It was the day of the rodeo, and the children were excited. He made a pot of coffee, and it was ready when Josey came out of the bedroom.

"Do I smell coffee?" she asked, smiling.

Daxton handed her a cup. "Yes, you do." He poured one for himself, too. "I thought

we'd get an early start to Laramie."

"Drive carefully," Josey replied, and then took a sip of her coffee.

"Josey, I'd like for you to go to Laramie with us today, too," Daxton gently broached the subject.

Josey shook her head. "No, I'd really rather stay home. There's some things I'd like to catch up on."

Daxton liked the way she had referred to his house as her home, too. In fact, he liked it a bit too much. He lowered his voice. "Josey, I don't want you to be here alone." He didn't want to say it, but in case her husband showed up while he was gone. Even though he knew it wasn't his place, he didn't want Josey to have to face him alone.

She nodded, understanding. "I'll be fine. You go ahead and enjoy yourself with the children and don't worry about me."

"Josey, it would be nice for you to get away with us," he insisted, taking her hands into his own. "And if you're worried about running into him at the rodeo, I'll be there. Actually, I'd feel better if I was there when you see him again."

"I won't see him," Josey said flatly and then headed into the kitchen and started making breakfast.

Daxton walked up behind her and took the skillet carefully from her hands. "Josey, please. Come with us."

"Yes, come with us."

Daxton looked around and Andrew was standing there.

“What’s everyone doing up?” Lillian came out of her room, rubbing her eyes.

“Today’s the rodeo!” Andrew announced. “And Josey’s coming with us!”

Lillian’s eyes widened. “Really?”

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“Now wait a minute,” Josey replied, turning back to the stove. “I never said I was going.”

“Oh Josey, please?” Lillian begged, jumping up and down. Daxton smiled. He hadn’t seen his daughter this excited about anything in a while.

Josey looked over at Daxton with tears in her eyes. “Daxton, don’t do this. Please... let me stay here.” It was then that he noticed she was shaking.

Without thinking, he pulled her into his arms, wanting to take away all the years of pain she had endured at the hands of that man. Holding her, he sensed there was more that she wasn’t telling him. But something inside him told him not to push it farther.

“Okay.” He nodded, taking in the fresh scent of her hair, reminding him of wildflowers. Then he pulled back to look into her eyes. “Then we’ll all stay home.”

The children groaned.

“No, I can’t do that to the children,” Josey was quick to interject, her eyes wide. “Take the children. Seriously. I’ll be fine. Plus, I could use the time to rest.”

He sighed. Although he hated to leave her alone, his children wanted to go to the rodeo in the worst way. That was all they had been talking about over the past few days since he told them.

Daxton sighed. “If you’re sure—”

“Yes, I am,” Josey quickly cut him off and then turned him around and gave him a gentle nudge toward the bedroom. “Now, go get ready while I fix breakfast.”

“Yeah!” Lillian and Andrew cheered in unison.

“Well, if we’re going, then you’d both better get ready, too. Don’t you think?” Daxton smiled, enjoying their excitement.

Josey’s lips curled into a smile as relief spread across her face. At that moment, Daxton realized that it would take a while for her to feel comfortable enough to go out of the house without looking over her shoulder.

The ride to Laramie didn’t seem to take long. Josie had made them some bacon biscuits from their leftover breakfast. He was going to have to talk to her about cooking so much. He smiled to himself. He didn’t care so much about the food being cooked, as them all gaining weight from the amount she was cooking. And at this rate, they would be out of food in the dead of winter. But he wasn’t complaining. On days like today, it was good that she had cooked so much.

“Do you think they’ll have bull riding?” Andrew asked when they neared Laramie, his eyes wide.

“I’m sure they will,” Daxton replied, smiling as he kept his eyes on the road ahead.

“I want to see the cowboys race!” Lillian announced, clapping her hands in delight.

“Actually, they probably won’t be racing as such.” Daxton shrugged. “Maybe just some barrel racing.”

The children talked animatedly about the rodeo when he stopped his rig in front of the livery stable in Laramie a few hours later.

“Hello, sheriff! What can I do you for?” Mr. Townsend, the owner of the livery stable in Laramie, approached Daxton. “So, what brings you out of Whiskey River?” Then he looked over at the children with wide eyes. “You kids here for the rodeo?”

“Yes!” Both Lillian and Andrew screamed as Mr. Townsend laughed.

Daxton had known Mr. Townsend for years. Whenever he came to Laramie on business, Mr. Townsend did a good job of caring for his horses and rig.

“Now, don’t be getting the young ‘uns any more riled up than what they are,” Daxton joked, stepping down off the buckboard. He reached up and helped Lillian down, while Andrew jumped down on his own on the other side. “It’s all they’ve been talking about since I told them were coming a few days ago.”

Mr. Townsend laughed as he handed the reins to one of his men. “Well, I hear tell that they’re puttin’ on a good show over there.” He looked down at the children, a broad grin spreading across his face. “You kids are in for a real treat!”

“Can we go ahead, Pa? I want to see the rodeo clowns!” Andrew asked, his eyes wide. “I promise I’ll look after Lillian.”

Lillian scoffed, indignant. “I don’t need looking after.”

“Oh, yes, you do.” Daxton gave his daughter a stern look. Then he saw the look of anticipation that filled their eyes and relented. “Okay.”

“Yeah!” they both yelled, running off.

“Lillian, stay with your brother!” Daxton called after them. How much trouble could they get into, after all? They were both good children and he’d trust them with his life.

“They’re good kids,” Mr. Townsend said, mimicking what Daxton was already thinking.

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“Thank you. I think so, too.” Daxton watched his children race off, smiling proudly. “How much do I owe you?”

Mr. Townsend smiled. “We’ll settle up when you get back.” Then he leaned in conspiratorially. “But don’t worry. I’ll go easy on ya.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Daxton teased.

But in reality, since Mr. Townsend found out that he was the sheriff of Whiskey River, he hardly ever charged him anything when he came to town on business. And if he did, it wasn’t much to speak of.

Daxton shook his hand. “Much obliged.”

“The pleasure is mine, indeed,” Mr. Townsend replied, shaking his hand. “Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of your rig. They’re in good hands.”

“Well, I guess I’d better go follow my young ‘uns. Make sure they stay out of trouble,” Daxton joked.

The elder man laughed. “Your children? You don’t have to worry a lick about ‘em. As I said, they’re good kids.”

“Thanks, Mr. Townsend. We won’t be too long.” Daxton looked at the sky and over the town. “We’ll be on our way before sundown.”

Mr. Townsend nodded. “If you ever get caught here after sundown, I’m sure Mr.

Frakes at the hotel will give you a good deal on a room.” Mr. Frakes was the owner of the Laramie Hotel, and yes, he would give him a good deal. But Daxton didn’t want to leave Josey alone in the house overnight to fend for herself. She would be worried sick and scared to death. No, he couldn’t do that to her.

Daxton tipped his hat as he walked in the direction that his children had gone, headed toward the rodeo. But the closer he got, the denser the crowd became. Daxton started to worry that he’d never see his children again. If he’d have known there would be this many people here, there was no way he would have let them wander off alone.

“Andrew? Lillian?” Daxton called out over the din of the crowd. But the more he looked, the more panicked he became. His breath quickened as he willed himself not to panic. His children were there... somewhere. Then he turned a corner, and Andrew was standing behind Lillian with his hands on her shoulders. A man was talking to them both. Their eyes were wide with fear. The man towered over them and was scruffy, with an unkept beard, wearing a dusty hat, coat, and cowboy boots, even though it was June.

“Andrew? Lillian?” Daxton asked, without taking his eyes off the man. “Go find us good seats. Go straight there and nowhere else. I’ll be right there.”

“Yes, Pa.” Andrew grabbed Lillian’s hand and pulled her away.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Daxton demanded, his blood boiling. “Scaring innocent children!”

“You’re the sheriff of Whiskey River, right?” The man drawled, moving his coat to the side, revealing a six-shooter in his gun belt.

Daxton glared at him, and then nodded. “Yes, that’s right. What’s it to you?”

The man's beady eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't happen to know a woman by the name of Josey Slater, would you?"

Daxton donned his best Poker face and then slowly shook his head. "Never heard of her. What she look like?"

"Oh, blonde hair, real pretty face, good figure, green eyes, not very tall—"

"Never heard of her." Daxton took a step closer, staring him down. "But from here on out, if you have any more questions, I suggest that you come to me like a man and not harass my children."

The scruffy man stared into his eyes and smirked. "Fair enough."

Then it hit Daxton. This was Austin Slater, the man on the Wanted poster that he just got. He and his brother, Logan, were wanted for murder and about a dozen bank robberies, dead or alive. The Slater Boys. He would have arrested him right then and there, but he had his children to think about. No, he would bide his time and would tell Harland Duffy, the local sheriff, that he saw him.

Daxton turned his head sideways but didn't let on that he recognized him. "So, what do you want with this woman?"

Austin took a step closer, looking directly in his eyes and smirked. "That's personal business."

A chill ran down Daxton's spine. "Well, I suggest you don't start any trouble while you're here. Everyone's here to have a good time."

Austin held up his hands in surrender. "Hey, I'm not looking for any trouble, sheriff." Then a sly grin spread across his face. "But you would tell me if you saw her,

wouldn't you?"

Daxton stared into his eyes. "I wouldn't tell you a damned thing." He looked him up and down, showing no fear. "Now, git out of town! No one here needs your kind."

"My kind?" Austin shrugged. "Well, now. That's not very hospitable of you, sheriff."

Daxton noticed that they were attracting attention.

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“I hope you’re not lying to me.” Austin’s voice was even but his eyes never wavered.

But neither did Daxton’s. “Is that a threat?” He laughed without humor. “You don’t want to threaten a lawman.”

Austin nodded, arching an eyebrow. “And you don’t want to lie to me.” He laughed, too. “You don’t want to know what I do to people who lie to me.”

“And that is a threat.” Daxton held his hand over his gun.

Austin was quick to hold his hands up over his head. “No threat, sheriff. Just having fun.” He looked around and two men were waiting a short distance away, leaning casually against a fence post, smirking. “I’m leaving.” He clicked his tongue. “Until we meet again.” Then he walked away and joined his other men.

Not wanting to turn his back on Austin, he waited until they were gone. Then Daxton hurried through the crowd and up the bleachers, looking around frantically for his children. He sighed in relief when Andrew waved at him. Lillian was sitting right by his side.

Daxton hurried over to his children and pulled them both into his arms. “What happened?”

“Dad, you’re hurting me,” Andrew said against his chest, obviously not wanting to be embarrassed in public. But Lillian clung to him for dear life.

Daxton grabbed his shoulders and shook him once. “What were you thinking?”

“Pa, it wasn’t me!” Andrew’s eyes widened.

“Pa, it wasn’t him!” Lillian mimicked. “We went around a corner and that man stopped us.”

Daxton pulled them both to his chest again. “I know. I’m so sorry. But seeing you with him... just scared me.” After a moment, he released his son and looked into his eyes. “Now, both of you sit down and tell me what happened.”

Andrew did as his father said. “We were headed for the bleachers when this man stopped us and told us he wanted to talk to us.”

Daxton’s heart stopped. “What did he say to you?”

“He asked us about Josey,” Andrew answered.

Daxton clenched his jaw. “What exactly did he ask?”

Andrew shook his head.

“He asked if we knew a Josey Slater,” Lillian supplied.

“Josey Slater?” Daxton asked in disbelief. “What did you tell him?” Daxton’s blood boiled, knowing how close his children had come to being killed.

“We didn’t tell him anything,” Andrew replied. “I wore my Poker face like Josey taught me and said that I didn’t know anyone named Josey.”

“What did you tell them?” Daxton asked Lillian.

Lillian’s eyes were wide. “No, Pa. I didn’t say anything.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Daxton breathed a sigh of relief as he pulled his children to his chest. Then something occurred to him, and he pulled back to look at them. “Why did he ask the two of you and not someone else?”

Andrew glanced over at his sister, and she shook her head.

“Tell me... please.” Daxton looked between them. “You won’t get into trouble. I promise. But I have to know.”

Andrew squared his shoulders, releasing his breath. “James was standing behind him and nodded at us, then he walked away.”

“James?” Daxton’s voice rose about three octaves. He was attracting attention, but he didn’t care. “The James I work with? James Harding? My deputy?”

Andrew nodded, biting his lower lip. “Yes, Pa. He hurried away, but I got a good look at him. It was him.”

“I’m going to kill him.” Daxton clenched his fists at his sides. He stood and looked around the crowd but didn’t see any of them. “The next time I see him, I’m going to kill him.”

After what happened, Daxton didn’t dare leave his children alone, not even for a second. But he knew they couldn’t stay there. Not with a gang in town. He had to alert the local sheriff and then get back to Whiskey River, where he could better protect his family.

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But did his family need protection from Josey? If she was dangerous, then how could he protect his family from her living in his home? Why did the Slaters want her? Somehow, knowing Josey, he found it difficult to believe that his family was in danger from her at all. She had proven herself to be a kind and gentle woman. But could he trust the safety of his children to her? If the Slaters found her... he didn't even want to think about it. For a moment, he wondered why Austin wanted her. Then it hit him. They were looking for a Josey Slater. Suddenly, all of the pieces fell into place.

She was married to his brother, Logan Slater... and he was looking for her.

"Come on, children. We have to go." Daxton stood and let the children go ahead of him. "Both of you. Hold my hand." He was waiting for Andrew to protest, but he didn't say a word.

In this crowd, Daxton didn't want to take a chance with his children's lives. Not another chance. He mentally kicked himself for letting them go ahead of him alone when they first arrived in Laramie.

As they hurried to the sheriff's office, he mentally kicked himself again for letting the wife of an outlaw stay under his roof. But then again, she didn't seem like an outlaw woman. She was vulnerable and seemed so frightened and innocent... unless that was what she had wanted him to believe.

But one thing was clear: He had a lot of questions to ask Josey when they got home... if they got home.

Chapter 13

Josey

While Daxton and the children were away, Josey peeled and cut up potatoes, carrots, and celery. Then she arranged them around a roast and added seasoning. Next, she added water and replaced the lid on an iron Dutch oven—that she found under the counter—and slid it into the oven.

Soon, the heavenly aroma of pot roast filled the house. Josey wanted to surprise Daxton and the children when they arrived. She knew they would be tired and hungry after their trip to Laramie, and she wanted to have something for them to eat when they got home.

Home.

It was a small word that carried the weight of the world. Never had she planned to find a home with Daxton and his children, but the more she stayed, the more attached she became. She knew it was time to leave, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it. At that moment, she knew she loved them.

As she waited for the roast to cook, she cleaned the house, did the laundry on a wash board, and then sat in the rocking chair to rest. She had planned to make enough bread for the week while she had the house to herself but fell asleep and slept a bit longer than expected.

When she woke, it was already after noon. She checked on the roast and it had a little while longer to cook. So, she scrubbed the kitchen table, wiped it dry, and then set out to make biscuits. She was elbow-deep in flour when she heard someone beat on the door.

Bang, bang, bang!

Her heart stopped.

Nothing.

Bang, bang, bang!

“Josey, it’s me! Open up!”

“Daxton?” Why did he sound so harsh? So gruff? Was something wrong with the children. She rushed to the door and flung it open wide. “Daxton? Is something wrong?” Her heart beat wildly as she waited, afraid of what she might hear. What had happened in Laramie? Then her heart sank.

He knew.

Daxton didn’t answer her, but turned to the children, who were watching with wide eyes. “Children, go upstairs and wait in Andrew’s room. I need to speak with Josey... alone.”

“Yes um,” they both said in unison and hurried up the stairs.

“Daxton, you’re scaring me.” Josey took a step closer and reached for his hand, but he pulled away. Her eyebrows pulled together in concern. “What’s wrong?”

Daxton paced with his hands on his hips. Then he took her arm and pulled her toward the door. “Come on.”

Josey hurried to keep up. “Let me go! Daxton, what’s happening?” Pain ripped through her arm as he pulled her toward the barn. “Daxton, let me go! You’re hurting

me!” When they reached the barn, he pushed her roughly inside but left the door open. Josey turned around and Daxton’s face was cast into shadow, the bright sun streaming in behind him casting him into silhouette.

His sudden change in behavior suddenly reminded her of Logan. How could she have been so wrong about Daxton?

“Don’t you ever treat me that way again!” She brushed herself off and straightened her dress and sleeves. She started to storm off, but he stepped in front of her. “Get out of my way!”

“No.”

Josey let out a deep breath as anger quickly replaced her fear. “Daxton, I only feared one man in my life, and now I don’t. But I’m definitely not afraid of you.” She took a step closer to look into his eyes. “Now. Get out of my way. I’ll talk to you when you’re calm.”

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Daxton grabbed her arm, stopping her. "You'll talk to me now."

The only time she had known men to treat her this way was when they were drunk... except for Logan. It had started off to be just when he was drunk, but then graduated to all of the time, any time he chose.

Josey narrowed her eyes, staring Daxton down, refusing to show any fear. "Get. Out. Of. My. Way."

"No, you're not going anywhere until we've talked about this."

Josey's heart sank, fearing the worst. "Talked about what?"

Daxton let out a deep breath, releasing her arm. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" Josey asked in disbelief. She knew she should have just told him everything right then, but she couldn't bring herself to say the words... that she had killed her husband.

"That you were married to Logan Slater, that's what!" Daxton let her arm go, but blocked the entrance to the barn, preventing her exit.

"Calm down. The children will hear you."

"That's why I brought you out here!" Daxton turned around, obviously trying to calm himself. He whirled around a moment later, his eyes wild. "Do you know that his brother came close to killing my children today?"

“What?” Josey asked in disbelief. “How did he know them?”

Daxton bit his lower lip, obviously trying to calm himself. “It appears that my new deputy knows your family.”

“They’re not my family,” Josey replied flatly, anger welling up inside of her. She regretted the day that she ever saw Logan Slater, let alone marry him, and she never wanted to be associated with them again. But she knew that was impossible. During her time with Daxton, she had hoped that her life with Logan would go away. But deep down, she knew that it never would. She would be branded as the wife of an outlaw for the rest of her days.

She tried to walk past Daxton, but he caught her and pushed her back, causing her to stumble. But she caught herself before she fell. She stood straight and smoothed her dress again. “Well. I’m glad I saw this side of you before—”

“Before what?” Daxton demanded, throwing his arms into the air. “Before I married you?” He took a step closer, causing Josey to step back. “Josey, you’re already married!”

Josey shook her head as tears slid down her cheeks. “No, I’m not. Not anymore.”

“Well, that’s rich,” Daxton replied in disbelief. “Logan doesn’t seem to think so! Why else would he have his brother out looking for you?”

He didn’t know. Or at least he didn’t know everything. But how could she tell him? How could she tell anyone that Logan would never come for her... because he was dead! No, she couldn’t tell anyone what she had done, not even Daxton.

She swiped a hand across her face, wiping the angry tears away from her cheek. “Don’t worry. I’ll be gone before nightfall.”

Daxton shook his head. “No. I’m the sheriff and we have to get to the bottom of this. Please, tell me what happened. Why did you run?”

If she told him, Josey knew that she would hang for the murder of her husband. Who would believe the wife of an outlaw? That she had killed him in self-defense? People judged her because of Logan, thinking she was the same as him. Because of him, people branded her an outlaw, too. She now knew that escaping that life, escaping Logan, was impossible... even from the grave. And she couldn’t put Daxton or the children through that. Through the judgement and admonishment she would endure when her past caught up with her... like today.

No, she could never tell anyone. If Daxton found out, he would take her back to Laramie for trial... and she was never going back there again. Why would she? So Austin could have the satisfaction of watching her hang?

No, thank you.

Daxton let out a slow, calming breath. “I need to know how I can protect you... and my family at the same time. But if you’re married to one of them, before or now, then my children are in danger.”

“Then, tell me this!” A fresh wave of tears coursed down her cheeks. “Why is Austin still free? He’s committed murders, bank robberies... you name it and he’s done it... and he’s still free! Why?” she asked, turning the tables on him. “Where was the law when I needed them? When Logan came after me over and over again? Where is the law now?” She swiped a hand angrily across her cheek to wipe away the tears. “I’ve been trying to get away from the Slaters since I married Logan, but it’ll never happen. Because as soon as I get away and try to start a new life, then as sure as I’m standing here, they will find me.” She looked away, biting her lip to calm herself, and then looked back. “I’m sorry to have involved you in all of this. May I just stay until sundown and then I’ll go?”

“No, Josey! I can’t let you do that!”

“Then I’ll go now.”

“No!”

“Why?”

“Because I love you!” Daxton pulled her into his arms and his lips crushed hers, angry at first, but then filled with passion.

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Josey beat against his chest, trying to free herself, but then went limp in his arms, defeated as passion and love rushed through her, a love like nothing she had ever known before. At that moment, she knew there was no one that she would ever want more than Daxton Clark. But it could never be. She allowed herself the luxury of this one kiss, for it would have to sustain her for a lifetime. The dream was gone. Shattered into a million pieces. When she pulled back, tears ran down her face. “Daxton, it could never work out.”

“Shh....” He placed a finger gently to her lips. “Once their gang is put behind bars, you won’t have anything to fear. We could start a new life—”

“Daxton, I can’t.” How could she tell him that she would never want anything more than him? That he had ruined her for all other men? “If knowing you has taught me one thing, it’s knowing that not all men will treat me... disrespectfully. I thank you for that.”

“So, this is it?” Daxton had tears in his eyes, too.

“I don’t know any other way it can be.” This time, when Josey walked past him, Daxton let her go.

Josey walked into the house and the children came slowly down the stairs, their eyes wide, unsure. The last thing she ever wanted for them, or her own child, was an unsteady environment.

Josey went straight into the kitchen. The pot roast would be nothing but charcoal if she let it stay in the oven too long. As it was, it had been cooking for a while, but she

knew that it would be fine. At that moment, Josey could have cared less if the potroast was cooked to perfection, over cooked, burned to a crisp, or anything between. This would be her last meal here. Probably her last decent meal for a while. And even though it was his food, she had cooked it. She had to eat even if she had to choke it down... for the sake of her baby.

Daxton came in and watched her work but said nothing.

“Would you mind if I eat one last meal here?” Josey asked out of courtesy without turning around, unable to look into his eyes.

Then she felt Daxton’s hands on her upper arms. “Have many meals here. Have every meal here for the rest of your life.”

Josey shook her head. “Can’t.” She had to keep her responses brief to hold back the tears. She had already cried in front of him, and she wasn’t going to let it happen again.

“Here. I’ll get that.” Daxton gently moved her aside and then lifted the heavy iron pan from the oven. “When did you do this?”

Josey shrugged. “While you were away. I wanted to surprise you.” Instead, he got a surprise that he didn’t want when he went to Laramie. She was sure he had had enough surprises to last a lifetime... and so had she.

Lillian jumped up and wrapped her arms around Josey’s waist. “Don’t go, Josey. Pa won’t let that bad man hurt you.” Then she looked up at her father with pleading eyes. “Will you, Pa?”

“It’s not that simple,” Josey responded before Daxton could answer. Then she stooped down to look into her eyes. “Sweetie, I would never leave you, if I could help

it.”

“Then don’t,” a voice came from behind her.

Josey turned around and Andrew was standing there.

“Children,” Josey forced a smile through her tears, touched by their kindness. “Let’s make the most of the time we have together.” She ruffled Andrew’s hair to lighten the mood, the way she had seen Daxton do countless times. “I’ll tell you what. Let’s eat and have fun tonight. Let’s not waste time being sad. I want to remember you smiling.”

Daxton took a step closer and whispered, “If you like, Harrison Curry has plenty of rooms at the hotel. He’s strong enough to keep you safe. Or you can stay here, and we’ll figure something out.”

She shook her head, knowing that she couldn’t let him put her—or anyone—before his own children. That much, she understood. In the short time that she had been pregnant, she knew that she would do anything for her child... including giving her own life.

“No, but thank you,” she whispered. “Let’s not do this in front of the children.” She looked over at the children and they were hanging on every word.

“Andrew,” Daxton interjected. “You and your sister set the table for Josey.”

“Yes, Pa,” Andrew replied and then took his sister’s hand, who was watching with wide eyes.

But Lillian quickly pulled away. “I can set the table. You go get washed up.” She glared at Josey, still talking to her brother. “I’ve been doing this for a while now.”

Pain ripped through Josey's chest. She had hurt Lillian and Andrew... and she hadn't intended to hurt anyone... least of all them.

For a moment, she thought of staying. But how could she endanger their lives like that? If Austin found out that Daxton had hidden her, he would kill not only Daxton, but the children, too. No, the only thing for her to do was to leave.

She just hoped that one day, they'd understand.

Josey waited until she was sure Daxton was asleep, taking only just the clothes on her back. Opening the door slightly, she peered into the living room. Daxton was asleep, snoring loudly. He must have been exhausted. She was sure that her leaving hadn't helped matters much. But then again, he hadn't objected. But the last thing she wanted to do was to put Daxton or the children in harm's way.

Josey crept around Daxton and then out the front door, closing it softly behind her, careful not to wake him.

Then, she ran.

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She ran throughout the night following the stars, headed north. As she ran, the horror that had abated while she had been with Daxton was now back with a vengeance. But heading north was her only hope. She didn't dare go toward Laramie. No, she had to put as much distance between her and Austin as she could. She had suspected that the law in Laramie had been turning a blind eye to Austin and Logan's gang for a while. How else could they have lived so close to a town without word getting out? No, the more she thought about it, the more she suspected that the sheriff in Laramie was in his pocket.

Not everyone was as good as Daxton... even law enforcement officers.

Daxton took his job seriously, along with his commitment to uphold the law. Since he had reacted the way he did when he found out that she had been married to Logan, she could imagine how he would react when he found out that she had killed him. Even though it had been in self-defense, it wouldn't matter. Logan was still dead... and she was responsible.

Josey wished she would have trusted Daxton enough to be completely honest with him from the beginning. But she had her unborn child to think about, just as he had his own children.

Tears streamed down her face as she ran. And the farther she went, the more she couldn't get Daxton out of her mind. She had fallen in love with him... and, of course, his children. She hadn't meant to; it just happened. But she and Logan hadn't had a good relationship for a while, if ever. And Josey had always vowed that if she ever got away from him, she would never marry anyone else again.

Then, she met Daxton.

He had been the first man in her life to show her kindness. The first man that she had ever felt comfortable around. The first man who had opened his heart to her... despite what he had been through. And he was the first man to open her heart in a very long time.

Josey ran through the darkness, following the North Star, hoping to find freedom, hoping beyond all hope that this mess would one day be behind her. That one day she could finally be free to live a good, decent life.

She stumbled and fell more than once, skinning her knees under the long skirt of her dress. She wished she could get as lucky as she had before when she found the man's clothing and the straw hat. But a straw hat and men's clothes weren't going to save her. Not now. Not ever. Josey knew she would never know peace again. She would be running for the rest of her life. And if Austin had his way about it, he would never let her go. He would never rest until she was dead.

A sharp pain suddenly shot through her stomach. No! She couldn't lose this baby... even if it was Logan's. She loved this baby and would do anything to protect him or her. Another sharp pain grabbed her. Josey held her stomach as she leaned against a tree. She needed to find a place to rest. Some place safe. A place where Austin couldn't find her.

But she couldn't stay here. She couldn't stop. Not yet.

Josey began walking again, not willing to take a chance with the baby's life. A strange feeling of weakness came over her, and she knew she couldn't go much farther.

A tree branch cracked behind her... and she started running again. She looked behind

her and then she suddenly fell down through the earth, down, down, until she landed with a hard thud on the ground.

“Oh!” she moaned, half delirious from the pain, half delirious from exhaustion.

Josey looked around and it was dark. The only light came from the stars above that shone from a hole high above her. Was she in a cave or a hole in the ground? Whatever it was... wherever she was... it was clear that it was deep and that she wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Josey had thought of calling for help, but she was afraid that Austin would hear her and would find her. For Daxton to find her first would be a miracle, and too much to ask.

She held her stomach and leaned back against the wall of the cavern, watching the stars. At least she was hidden, out of view. As she watched the stars moving across the night sky, she just hoped beyond all hope that everything would work out. But she had no idea how it could.

“God, I don't have a right to ask,” she whispered, looking up at the stars, rubbing her stomach. “But please, show me the way.”

Soon, exhaustion and the darkness overtook her as she closed her eyes, hoping it wasn't for the last time.

Chapter 14

Daxton

Daxton woke with a start early the next morning, hoping that Josey hadn't left. But deep down in his heart, he already knew she was gone.

Try as he might to stay awake, he had fallen asleep. He had been so tired and emotionally drained when he lay down that a tornado could have carried the house away and he wouldn't have known.

He ran into the bedroom and flung the door open without knocking. Sure enough, she was gone. The bed was neatly made with a note on the pillow. He recognized the paper from the stationary that Priscilla used to keep. In fact, it was the same stationery that she had used to write her note when she left.

No. This could not be happening again.

Then again, he had known it was coming. Even though he was hoping that she would stay, he knew she was going to leave. She had said so herself the night before.

And he did nothing.

He couldn't shake the feeling that he could have stopped her. He should have told her that they could work it out together. He could have gone after Austin and put him in jail for threatening his family. He could have.... But, then again, he knew that she was doing what she had to, to protect her child, just as he had been doing all along.

Daxton hurried to dress and headed into the kitchen. Lillian was already up and cooking breakfast.

"So, she left?" Lillian asked, her voice matter of fact, not looking up from the pancakes she was cooking.

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Daxton sighed, and then nodded. “Yes, she’s gone.”

Lilian nodded. Daxton suspected that she didn’t want to talk for fear of crying. But it was clear that she was angry. Not only had Josey left him, she had left his children, too. Pain gripped his heart as the memories of Priscilla leaving flooded his mind.

“Come on,” he said, pulling the skillet off the stove. “I’m taking you and your brother to Mrs. Jenkins’s house today.”

“No, we’ll be fine.” She reached for the skillet without looking up. “We always were before.”

“Lillian, look at me.”

She looked up at her father and hot, angry tears were in her eyes.

“Come here, baby girl.” Daxton enfolded her in his arms and pulled her to his chest.

“Oh, Pa!” she sobbed.

Daxton held his little girl, letting her cry on his shoulder, wishing he could take the pain away. He would bear all of his children’s pain for them if he could so they wouldn’t have to. But that wasn’t how life worked.

When her tears slowed, he pulled back and swiped a finger under her eyes. “Listen. You go to Mrs. Jenkins today and I need to go to work. But I’ll see if I can find Josey. I promise.”

Lillian shook her head, angrily wiping the tears away. “No. If she didn’t want to stay, then don’t bring her back.”

Andrew walked in and looked between them. “Is Josey still here?”

Daxton shook his head. “No, and I want you and Lillian to go to Mrs. Jenkins’s house today.”

Andrew’s lips formed a straight line. “I can take care of my little sister.”

“Not if that man comes here looking for Josey.” Daxton wasn’t in the mood for this. He hated to have to leave, and he hated to have to scare the children, but he had no choice. He wasn’t going to leave his children alone and vulnerable. He wouldn’t have been leaving them at all, but he needed to go to town and take care of things, and to warn everyone in town about James. “Go get ready.”

Both Lillian and Andrew left the room without another word.

As he waited for his children, he couldn’t help but think of James. That was what had really surprised Daxton. Out of all the people he suspected would be an outlaw, it wasn’t him. Daxton just hoped James didn’t stir any trouble in town before he got there.

After taking the children to Mrs. Jenkins’s for the day, Daxton headed into town.

Mrs. Jenkins had been delighted at the prospect of keeping the children and hadn’t asked any questions. When she saw the sad look on their faces, she told Lillian that she could help her try out a new recipe, and she told Andrew that he could go fishing with George, her driver. George stayed in a soddy a distance away from the main house. By the time Daxton left, both children seemed in better spirits. He would thank Mrs. Jenkins again later.

But right now, he needed to find James. Then James could lead him to Austin and Logan before they found Josey. After all, they were wanted for murder and robbery, and no one could find them. Why Austin had decided to come out of hiding now was beyond Daxton. He thought that Austin was probably just arrogant enough to think that no one would have the courage to arrest him.

But he didn't know Daxton.

No matter what happened, Daxton knew that he couldn't leave Josey's fate to the hands of those men. Without his protection, she wouldn't last a day. Then again, she had lasted a week on her own before he found her hiding in his barn.

But things were different now. She had no one then. Now, she had him and his family. Yes, he had to find Austin, but more importantly, Daxton had to find Josey before Austin or Logan did. If her husband's brother was looking for her, Logan would surely be looking for her, too. And with James's help, he could arrest them and eliminate the threat. Daxton shuddered to think of what could happen if they found her first.

A few minutes later, he drove into Whiskey River and pulled his team to a stop in front of the livery stable.

Dirk walked out of the barn, smiling. But his smile quickly faded when he saw the look of alarm in the sheriff's eyes.

"What's wrong?" Dirk took the reins of the team, watching as Daxton stepped down from his buckboard.

"Could I ask a favor of you?" Daxton took his hat off and ran his fingers through his dark brown hair.

“Always.” Dirk stroked the fur on Bee’s neck absentmindedly.

“I’ll need a fast horse in a little while. You have one I can borrow?”

“Of course.” Dirk’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “When do you need it?”

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“In about a half hour.” Daxton slid his hat back on. “I need to check in at the office first.”

Dirk nodded. “Everything okay, sheriff?”

Sheriff Clark sighed. “No, it’s not.”

“Well, if there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know.”

Daxton nodded. “Thanks, Dirk. Just saddle up your fastest horse for me, if you don’t mind. Add it to my bill and I’ll pay you at the end of the month.”

Dirk shook his head. “Not necessary. I’m happy to help. Whatever you need.”

Daxton clasped his friend’s shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Thanks, Dirk. I truly appreciate it.”

“Happy to help.” He started to lead Daxton’s team away but stopped. “If you need anything else, just let me know.”

The sheriff nodded. “I appreciate that.”

In times like these, Daxton realized just how lucky he was to be a part of this community. He hurried toward the sheriff’s office, and someone was there, but he couldn’t see who. He flung the door open, and Colton stood abruptly from behind the desk and spun around, drawing his gun in one fluid motion.

“Don’t do that to me again, sheriff!” Colton let out a sigh of relief. “You should know better than to sneak up on a gunfighter like that. You almost got yourself shot.”

“Ex-gunfighter,” Daxton corrected. Colton had given up being a gunfighter when he moved to Whiskey River. Now, he was perfectly happy in his new life with his wife and children.

“Still.” Colton put away his weapon, pushing his long brown hair over his shoulder. “Old habits die hard.”

Daxton nodded, but didn’t smile. “Have you seen James yet today?”

Colton shook his head, a crease forming between his eyes. “No, why?”

Daxton looked out the window, checking the surroundings as he spoke. “Because I saw him in Laramie over the weekend.” Daxton looked Colton in the eye. “He identified my children to Austin Slater.”

“Hewhat?” Colton’s voice rose several octaves.

Daxton nodded. “They were looking for Josey.”

Colton was immediately on alert. “Isn’t she still at your place?”

Daxton shook his head, taking a step closer. “Don’t tell anyone, but she left in the middle of the night after I told her that Austin Slater was looking for her.” He shook his head in disbelief, mentally kicking himself again. “Hard tellin’ where she is now.” Daxton headed toward the door. “But if you see James, don’t let him go. I need to speak with him.”

Colton chuckled, arching an eyebrow. “So, he’s no longer employed here?”

Daxton shook his head. “I have a feeling he never really was.”

“What do you mean?” Colton’s eyes narrowed. “Why would he be working for The Slater Boys? And why are they looking for Josey?”

Daxton wondered how much to tell him, but he knew he could trust Colton. “What I tell you, you can’t breathe a word to anyone... ever.”

Colton lowered his voice. “You know I won’t. But the more I know, the more I can help.”

“I know.” Daxton let out a slow breath. “Josey was married to Logan Slater. He abused her and she ran. Evidently, it had been going on for a long time.”

Colton clenched his jaw and released it. “Where do you think she could have gone?”

Daxton shook his head. “I have no idea, but she was on foot.”

Suddenly, there was a commotion outside. A few women screamed and the sound of horses’ hooves pounding along the dirt road filled the air.

Daxton opened the door and he and Colton stepped outside. Wyatt, the new saloon owner, had stepped out of the saloon next door. Riders were coming into town, and Austin was leading them. James was bringing up the rear.

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“What are you doing here?” Daxton asked Austin.

“You know what I want, rather, who I want,” Austin replied.

Daxton scoffed. “Like I’m really going to hand her over to the likes of you.” Daxton inclined his head toward him. “What do you want with her anyway?”

Austin pounded a fist against his chest. “That’s my business!”

Daxton took a step forward. “Well, if you want her, you’d better start telling me why.”

Austin let out a deep breath. “She killed my brother.”

Daxton’s heart stopped. It couldn’t be. She couldn’t have killed Logan Slater. No wonder she was on the run.

Austin dismounted. “Right now, I’m going to get me something to drink.”

“You’re not going anywhere but to a jail cell.” Daxton stepped in front of him, blocking his way. “Austin Slater, you’re under arrest.”

Austin laughed so hard that tears came to his eyes. “Really? Now? Why didn’t you arrest me in Laramie?”

“You know why,” Daxton replied. He wasn’t about to risk the lives of his children... for anyone.

“Right now, I’m going into that saloon.” Austin pointed toward the door. “I need a drink.”

Then everything happened at once. Daxton drew his six-shooter and so did Austin, but Colton was quicker and pulled both of his guns, pointing them at two of Austin’s men, and Wyatt pulled his gun and pointed it at James.

“As I said, you’re all under arrest.” Daxton motioned with his gun toward the sheriff’s office. “I only have two cells, but you’ll fit... until I can send to Laramie.”

Austin looked around at his boys again and then burst out laughing. “I own the sheriff there. If he comes to get me, he’ll let me go as soon as we get there.”

“Well, then, I’ll have to make sure that doesn’t happen. I’ll send for the U.S. Marshall... for you and for him.” Daxton motioned toward the Sheriff’s Office. “In you go.”

Austin shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

James took off down the road at lightning speed and Wyatt shot at him but missed, and he rode out of town. Then Austin and the rest of his men opened fire. Colton fired and took down two of his men, but Austin slammed into Daxton, catching him off guard, and jumped on his horse. When Daxton got to his feet, Austin was riding off with the rest of his men.

“We need to find Josey... now,” Daxton said, firing at the men as they rode out of town.

“Yeah,” Colton agreed, watching the men as they rode away. “Before they do.”

Wyatt Nash bit his lower lip and then released it. “I’m coming, too. Give me a minute

to wrap up a few things in the saloon and I'll be right out."

Daxton shook his head. "Too dangerous. He nodded toward Colton. "Colton and I can handle it." Wyatt had been a gambler before he came to Whiskey River. Now, he was a family man with a wife and owned the saloon. Since his arrival, he had cleaned up the saloon and had become a prominent member of the community.

One corner of Wyatt's lips curled into a smile. "I wasn't asking for permission."

Daxton arched an eyebrow, smiling. "Fair enough."

Wyatt nodded and started to walk away, when Daxton stopped him. "Wyatt?" Wyatt turned and lifted his eyebrows. "Thanks."

A smile spread across his lips. "Don't mention it."

"I'll see if Harrison can come with us, too," Colton announced, nodding to the hotel across the street.

"Colton, wait."

Colton turned and stopped.

"Thank you," he replied. "You have to know, I didn't intend for anyone to get hurt."

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A sly smile spread across Colton's lips. "Sheriff, it's not all about you. The people here in Whiskey River take care of their own. Or have you forgotten?"

Daxton nodded. Colton was right. If you messed with one member of Whiskey River, you messed with them all. Daxton was glad that they had already accepted Josey as one of them. He just hoped it continued.

Daxton hurried toward the livery stable to get the horses. Colton was right about one thing: They had to find Josey before Austin's gang did.

Chapter 15

Josey

Josey woke the next morning to sunlight streaming in through a hole in the earth high above her. For a moment, she thought she was dead, but her body ached all over and she was thirsty. So thirsty that she could drink a whole lake. She knew she wasn't dead. Death would have been easier and a lot less painful. Holding her hand up to shield her eyes from the bright sunlight, she could tell by the position of the sun that it was no longer morning. She had slept through the night and most of the day.

In a way, it was good that she had fallen into the hole. At least Austin wouldn't be able to find her easily. But then again, neither could anyone else.

She tried to move, but she ached all over and thought better of it. Josey ran her hand over her stomach, afraid for the baby. Surprisingly, her stomach no longer hurt. Josey just hoped that the baby was okay and hadn't died in the fall. Running a hand over

her stomach, nothing felt out of the ordinary. She pushed the thought from her mind, deciding to go to a doctor to get checked out as soon as she got out of this hole.

If she got out.

But with being on the run, a doctor would be a luxury.

Josey looked around and wooden beams supported the earth high above her, becoming the only thing holding back tons of dirt and rock from dropping on her. But it had probably been there for a while, so her falling into it shouldn't bring it down.

Another wave of fatigue washed over her again, so she slid out of sight and watched the clouds pass by overhead. For once, she wished it would rain. At least then she could get some water.

As the day wore on, she became hungry and even more thirsty, if that was possible, but she couldn't bring herself to move. Finally, the day overtook her, and she fell back to sleep, too tired to move. Too tired to stand. Too tired to live. But she had to try... for her baby.

When she opened her eyes again, it was dark, and hunger was so strong that she thought she might eat anything if it passed by close enough. She grabbed the wall of the cavern and sat up. She placed a hand over her stomach, and it still wasn't hurting. Although she didn't have anything to compare it to, she felt that she hadn't lost the baby in the fall. And luckily, she hadn't broken anything, either. Even though she knew she should find her way out and start moving again, she was glad to have had the rest. At least in this hole, she could rest all she wanted.

No one knew she was there.

Her sanity finally started to return, and she realized she had to get out before she

either died or a wild animal found her. As she looked around, it appeared that she was in a room, of sorts. From what she could tell, there was a hallway that led to the right. As she looked up and studied the beams, she wondered if this was an abandoned mine shaft. After all, she didn't know the area and she didn't know if either coal miners, or miners looking for gold, had come this way, but she was sure they had. The gold rush several years before had people hurrying to California. Why not here? But then again, it could have been an abandoned coal mine, too. After all, people needed coal to keep warm in the winter.

As she studied the room, she wondered why it had been abandoned. Maybe the coal ran out. But she decided not to think about it. She had more important things to think about... like staying alive.

Josey tried to stand but was too weak. She had to get help. But if she called out, Austin might find her. Then on the other hand, if no one knew she was there, she could die while hiding. For a moment, she thought that would be a better alternative than facing what Austin had planned for her.

Josey looked up through the hole in the ceiling to the stars, peeking through the darkness. Every once in a while, one would wink at her, as if letting her know that everything would be all right. She just hoped it was true.

As she watched, God came to mind. She wondered if He was with her. It had been a while, but she remembered that it said in the Bible that there were legions of angels at her disposal, if she only asked.

"God," she began, her voice breaking from dryness. "I need your help. If not for me, then for my baby. I know that you'll send legions of angels to protect me if I ask, but I'd be happy with just one. Please, don't hold my sins or the sins of the baby's father against him or her. But please protect him. You can let anything happen to me, but please, protect my baby. Let him or her live."

Looking up at the sky, she didn't know if her prayer had been heard. But she hoped that it had. After all, God would never forsake His people. Although it had been a while, she was definitely one of His people. If she and her baby came through this alive, she vowed to be more devout.

She looked down at her stomach and tears ran down her face as she ran a hand across her stomach again.

"Baby, none of this is your fault. I'm sorry that I'm bringing you into such a world, that you're starting your life this way." She bit her lower lip and continued, "But I promise that I'll get us out of this... somehow."

At that moment, she decided that she wanted to live. For the baby, if not anyone else. "Baby, I'll get us out of this somehow. I promise."

If she hung for the murder of Logan, she wondered if they would wait until after the baby was born to do it. But who would ever care for the child of an outlaw?

Then she thought of Daxton. Of course, he hadn't known that the father of her baby had been a cold-blooded killer, but he had accepted that she was pregnant. She hoped that he would come looking for her. But she wouldn't wish this mess she was in on anyone. No, she couldn't let Daxton get involved. He had children to think about. But she couldn't help but hope that he would be the one to find her.

Josey trusted him and she knew that he would do what was best. Not only for her, but for the baby. And if she was hanged for Logan's murder, then she would entrust the care of her child with Daxton, if he'd take on the responsibility. Not only would Daxton love him, but he was also probably the only one capable enough to keep him safe.

But she quickly pushed the thought from her mind, knowing that Daxton finding her

would be too much to ask. A miracle. What she needed was a miracle.

As she looked up at the stars, she thought about Daxton and Logan. Daxton was nothing like her late husband. In fact, before she met Daxton, she never realized that men could be so loving and unselfish. At that moment, she vowed that if she ever saw him again, she would tell him everything. About killing Logan in self-defense and let the chips fall where they may. She didn't want to run anymore. And she didn't want to keep any secrets from Daxton. No matter what happened. By telling Daxton, she knew he would protect her baby, if she were to hang. She would plead with him to wait until after the baby was born, at least. The baby deserved a chance to live... no matter what his or her parents did.

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Looking up at the stars, she thought about Daxton and the children and realized that she already thought of them as her own. If only things could be different.

Then she realized that sitting there in the dark, waiting for salvation or persecution, wasn't doing her or the baby any good. She wanted to see Daxton again. She had to tell him the truth.

"Daxton." Her voice was merely a whisper at first, but then grew louder. "Daxton!" She cried over and over again, hoping that he found her before Austin.

Chapter 16

Daxton

Daxton looked for Josey throughout the night along with Colton, Wyatt, and Harrison. Dirk and Mr. Carson stayed back to protect the town, just in case Austin and his gang came back.

Daxton hated to leave his children overnight, but he knew they were safe with Mrs. Jenkins. Besides, he'd never forgive himself if anything happened to Josey. When the faint rays of morning sunlight peeked through the clouds, Daxton turned to the men. "Why don't you go home and get some rest? We can start out again later."

"Not a chance," Colton replied. "If Austin finds her first, I'll never forgive myself for having stopped."

"Same here," Wyatt agreed.

“I’m not going anywhere until we find her,” Harrison chimed in. “We’ve covered most of the area. With no clues, it’s like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

A crease formed between Daxton’s eyes. “What are you saying?”

Harrison sighed. “Let’s go back to your ranch and see if we missed anything. I have a little experience with tracking.”

Daxton sighed. “We tried that, but there wasn’t much to go on.”

“But now it’s daybreak. We’ll be able to see more. Maybe there’s something we missed.” He looked around and then added, “I’d like to give it another shot, at least.”

Wyatt looked over at Daxton. “I’m game.”

“Let’s go,” Daxton agreed, and they started toward his ranch.

As the sunlight streamed through the lightening sky, all he could think about was Josey. She had been gone for two nights now and a full day. He knew that she must have been scared out of her mind. Alone and trying to stay ahead of Austin.

Austin Slater.

Daxton just hoped he found her before Austin or one of his men did. Daxton still found it hard to believe that Josey had killed Logan. She was sweet, kind, and innocent, but a very strong woman. Maybe Austin just thought she killed him. Maybe she didn’t do it. Maybe... she had a good reason.

From what he knew of her, of her behavior when he first met her, she had good reason. That is, if she even did it. Maybe it was an accident. Daxton found it hard to believe that Josey would ever kill anyone intentionally. But in order to find out her

side of the story, he had to find her first. Daxton was sure that Austin could be creative and find new ways to kill her... if he thought that she had killed his brother.

Daxton vowed to talk to her when he found her and hear her out. He owed her that much.

He had only known her for a short while, but she had already wormed her way into his heart and into the hearts of his children. Unintentionally, of course. He just hoped he found her soon. Horrifying images of being too late, of her lifeless body strung up in a tree—or worse—came to mind. But he refused to think that way. He would find her before Austin did. He had to.

When they stopped at Daxton's ranch. Harrison folded his arms across his saddle horn. "Daxton, why don't you go inside and check again. I'll take a look around out here."

Daxton nodded, hoping that he wouldn't go inside and find the worst.

"I'll go with him," Colton said to Harrison as he dismounted. He must have been thinking the same as Daxton, although he wore his best Poker face.

But Daxton didn't object. If he found Josey dead inside, a part of him didn't want to be alone.

"I'll stay with Harrison," Wyatt announced.

Daxton, nodded, barely acknowledging him, dreading what he might find. He headed inside and Colton followed. Out of the corner of his eye, Daxton could see that Colton's hand was hovering near his gun. It appeared that Colton feared the worst, too. But as they stepped cautiously into the house, nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. Nothing was out of place.

Please, God. Don't let me find her like this,Daxton thought to himself, hoping that he wouldn't find her broken body, dead. He was glad that the children were with Mrs. Jenkins. He just hoped that Austin didn't get the bright idea to go for them, too.

“Daxton!” Harrison yelled. “Out here!”

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Daxton glanced quickly over at Colton and their eyes met for a second. In that second, Daxton saw fear in Colton's eyes for the first time since he'd known him. But he knew it wasn't fear for himself, but fear for Josey.

They both ran quickly outside, and Harrison was squatting down on the ground, looking at something. When Daxton got closer, he could see that it was a set of small footprints.

"From what I can tell," Harrison said, "she was running and she was headed this way."

"How can you tell?" Daxton asked.

A crease formed between Harrison's eyes. "The footprints are farther apart and not as indented as they would have been if she was walking. Also, the middle of the foot isn't visible, just the toe and the heel, another indication of her running."

"Are you sure they're her footprints?" Colton asked, a crease forming between his eyes.

Harrison bit his lower lip and released it. "You said the children haven't been home, right?"

Daxton sighed. "No, they're with Mrs. Jenkins. I took them there myself last night."

"That's what I thought." Harrison stooped down, as if to get a closer look, and pointed at one of the tracks. "The footprints are shaped like a lady's shoe. The toe is

more pointed and the heel square, smaller. Also, these tracks are reasonably fresh. Made within the last twenty-four hours.”

“Let’s go.” Daxton walked ahead, following the footprints, careful not to touch them.

“How did you learn all this?” Wyatt asked behind him.

“I spent some time with the Indians here,” Harrison replied.

“There were Indians here?” Wyatt asked.

“Yes, but they were made to relocate.” Harrison studied the ground, walking a bit ahead.

Daxton couldn’t imagine living in this beautiful country and then being forced to relocate. He was sure that some stayed behind but stayed out of sight from the white man. He wouldn’t be surprised if there was a settlement close by, too. But if there was, they stayed to themselves.

“Here!” Harrison announced. “See this cobweb? It was broken and is now half rebuilt. Someone came through here after dark.”

“It was probably her.” Daxton started to rush off, but Colton grabbed his arm.

“Harrison, do you think she was alone?” Colton asked.

Daxton’s heart skipped a beat, awaiting his answer.

Harrison nodded. “Yes, there’s only one set of footprints.”

They walked along, following the trail of footprints and broken grass into the woods.

It was clear that Josey was trying to stay out of sight. Daxton was surprised that so much could be told from the land, if you were looking for it. Suddenly, the tracks stopped.

“Where did she go?” Daxton asked, looking around. He hadn’t realized it, but following her trail was almost as if she had been there with them... almost.

Harrison shook his head.

Daxton’s heart sank. “You don’t think she fell into the river, do you?” Whiskey River wound around before passing just behind his property.

“I’m not sure... oh god!” Harrison started hurrying away.

“What?” Daxton demanded, following beside him.

“Years ago, before I came, there was a mine close to here.”

“A mine?” Then Daxton remembered having heard about it. Mr. and Mrs. Carson had mentioned it a few times over the years, but it was so infrequent that he never paid it much mind. Also, Mrs. Jenkins had mentioned it a time or two.

Harrison nodded, hurrying ahead. “A coal mine. They closed it down when part of it collapsed.”

Daxton’s heart sank. “Where is it?”

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Harrison inclined his head forward. “Just up ahead. There was another entrance, too, but this is where it caved in.”

“Can you show me where?” Daxton asked, trying to keep from running.

“Of course. It’s not far.” Harrison hurried ahead with Daxton, Wyatt, and Colton hot on his heels.

“Quiet!” Colton announced, holding his arms out. “Did you hear that?”

“What?” Wyatt asked.

“Shh!!” Daxton said. They all froze, listening.

“Da....” It was weak, but it was definitely a voice. “Daxton!” the voice said again, clearer this time.

“It’s Josey! We found her!” He started to rush ahead, but Harrison held his arm out to stop him.

“Be careful. It might not be safe.” Harrison smirked. “All we need now is for you to fall in, too, and then we’d have two of you to rescue.”

Colton frowned. “Or it could be a trap.”

But at that moment, Daxton didn’t care. All he could think about was Josey. “Josey?” He waited for a moment, but there was nothing. Then he turned to Harrison. “How far

away is the mine?”

“Just up ahead.” Harrison nodded. “But be careful. If one part of it fell in, more of it may fall in, too. But I don’t think she fell in randomly. I think she fell in where it caved in before... just up ahead.”

Unable to help himself, Daxton started running in the direction that Harrison had indicated. “Josey?”

“Daxton!” Josey called out, louder this time. “Down here!”

Daxton’s heart leaped as he slowed, stepping carefully toward the sound of her voice, growing louder. “Josey?”

“Daxton!” Josey screamed, louder this time.

All of a sudden, the forest opened up to a small clearing. He looked around but saw nothing. Obviously, the vegetation had grown up around it, covering the hole. “Josey?”

“Here! I’m down here!”

“Keep talking until I find you!”

“Daxton, I’m so sorry! I should have told you... I should have—”

“None of that matters now.” Daxton walked carefully toward the sound of her voice, taking one step at a time. “We’ll talk about it when you’re safe.”

“I should have told you—” Her voice was much louder, clearer now. He was getting close.

“We can talk about it later.” Then he looked ahead and there was a hole in the ground, half covered by grass. “Josey?”

Daxton fell to his knees and started pulling the grass away from the hole, making it more visible. He looked inside and Josey was sitting on the ground, leaning against a wall, her face and clothes covered with dirt, but to him, no woman had ever looked more beautiful. She looked up and their eyes met and held. Daxton’s heart pounded, and his eyes filled with tears of joy at having found her.

“Daxton! You found me!” Tears streamed down her dirty face as she looked up at him from below. She lifted her chin and closed her eyes. “Thank you.” Instinctively, he knew it was a prayer.

“Josey, honey, are you hurt?” Daxton was so overjoyed at finding her that he felt that he could have flown down to her. But the last thing he wanted was for the men to have to rescue both of them because he wasn’t careful.

She shook her head. “No, I’m fine. Just thirsty.”

“Is anything... broken?” He really wanted to ask about the baby, but the least amount of people who knew at the moment, the better.

Josey shook her head. “No, but I’m aching all over.”

His heart fell. He hoped that she hadn’t lost the baby. Even though the father was Logan Slater, she was the mother, and that was enough. But first thing was first.

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It appeared that she was at least twenty feet down or more. They would need a rope and a horse to pull her out. Just then, she started to stand.

“Don’t move, Josey. I’ll be down to get you in just a minute.” He looked around and Colton, Wyatt, and Harrison were waiting.

“No, don’t!” A look of panic colored Josey’s face. “Don’t try it alone!”

Daxton smiled. “I’m not alone. Colton, Harrison, and Wyatt are with me.”

“Don’t worry, ma’am. We’ll have you out in no time,” Colton hollered down.

Josey nodded as a fresh wave of tears streamed down her cheeks.

Wyatt was already holding a rope when he turned to Daxton. “So, how do you want to do this?”

“Lower me down first. Once I have her secured, then you pull her out. Once she’s safe, then you can pull me out.” Even though he hadn’t had much sleep, he felt energized as relief washed over him. “I’m just glad we found her.”

Colton held the horse steady while Wyatt tied the rope securely in place. Daxton tied the other end tightly around his waist. When they were ready, he stepped to the edge of the hole and leaned back, testing it. “Okay. Lower me down.”

Daxton put his feet at the edge of the hole until he couldn’t touch it. As they lowered him down, Daxton saw that she had fallen into some sort of room. There was a coal

bin to the far right against the wall. He cringed, glad that Josey hadn't hit it when she fell. It's a wonder she hadn't broken anything. He just hoped that she hadn't lost the baby.

"Oh, Daxton!" Josey was shaky as she got to her feet and held her arms out to him.

"Josey, don't push yourself. I'll have you out of here in no time." When his feet touched the dirt floor, he quickly untied the rope from around his waist and pulled her to his chest. "Josey, honey, I'm so glad you're safe."

She nearly collapsed in his arms as she burst into tears. "Oh, Daxton! I'm so sorry... I should have told you... I should have told you everything—" she sobbed against his chest.

"Shh...." He gently brushed the hair away from her face and kissed everywhere his lips could reach. "You're safe now. And I'm never going to let you out of my sight again." Then he pulled back and looked into her eyes. "Besides, I'm the one who should be apologizing. I should have—"

"Shh...." Josey placed a finger gently to his lips. "You have nothing to be sorry for."

"We can talk about it later." Tears welled up in his eyes, threatening to spill over. "Well, let's get out of here, shall we?"

She nodded, smiling through her tears. "Sounds good to me."

He quickly wrapped the rope around her, careful not to hurt the baby, and then yelled up, "Okay, Wyatt! She's ready! Pull her up!"

"Will do!" Wyatt yelled back down.

The rope became taut and then Josey started rising up toward the hole high above, never taking her eyes from Daxton.

Once she was safely out of the hole, the rope fell back down again. He wrapped the rope around himself as quickly as he could and then tugged twice on the rope. “Okay! I’m ready!”

But no one answered.

Then the rope grew taut, and he started to rise up from the ground, higher until he reached the top.

Colton reached down and gave him a hand up, helping him from the hole. But when he turned around, Austin Slater was holding Josey to his chest with her back toward him... and a gun pressed to her head.

Chapter 17

Josey

Five minutes before....

Relief washed over Josey when she made it to the top of the hole and Colton held out his hand to help her up. “We need to get Daxton out of there.”

“That’s the plan.” Colton smirked, quickly untying the rope from around her. “Step back over there, ma’am, and we’ll have him out in no time.”

Wyatt, Colton, and Harrison immediately went to work, trying to bring Daxton up.

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Josey did as he asked and stepped to the side, wringing her hands nervously as she watched, wishing she could do more. Josey was so engrossed in watching the men rescue Daxton that she didn't hear anyone come up behind her.

Josey gasped as strong arms grabbed her from behind, fiercely grabbing her around the waist and pulling her head back in one fluid motion. The stench of strong male body odor, combined with tobacco and alcohol, wafted toward her.

"Don't breathe a word... or you're dead." There was no mistaking it: The voice belonged to Austin Slater.

"I'm already dead," Josey calmly replied as her heart sank. With Daxton's reaction when he found her, him kissing her cheeks, her face, she thought that maybe everything could actually work out. But not anymore. Not now. Austin had found her. She just hoped that Daxton wouldn't be killed in the crossfire.

Austin laughed without humor. "True, but I'm in the mood to have a little fun first."

Even though Austin was quiet, Harrison must have heard the exchange and immediately drew his weapon, along with Wyatt, quicker than she would have thought possible.

Colton narrowed his eyes, holding the rope tightly. Josey was thankful that he hadn't let it go.

Suddenly, Josey felt the unmistakable hard, cold steel of a gun barrel against her temple.

“Pull him up,” Austin instructed, tightening his grip around her. “But one word and she dies.”

Colton nodded once and then continued to pull Daxton up.

“Lower your weapons, gentlemen.” Austin’s grip tightened around her, preventing her escape.

One corner of Wyatt’s lips curled into a smile. “Not on your life.”

Austin chuckled. “Not onmylife... but maybe on hers.” Then his voice turned harsh, nearly a growl. “Pull him up and we’ll settle this like men!”

Josey’s back straightened as adrenaline coursed through her veins. “You’re not a man. You nor Logan.”

“Shut up!” Austin’s grip was so tight around her that pain shot through her body. “How dare you speak his name... after you killed him.”

“It was in self-defense. He was coming after me—”

Austin jerked her hard against his chest. “Shut up!”

Just then, Colton reached down and helped Daxton up. When he turned around, both he and Colton drew their weapons.

“Let her go,” Daxton ordered, his eyes filled with fury.

“Nuh uh. Not so fast.” Austin’s voice was calmer than she would have thought it would be when he found her. Then he started backing away, dragging her with him. “None of you have to die. Now that I have her, I’ll be on my way. But don’t try to

stop us.”

“Daxton, he’s not alone! He never is!” Josey couldn’t look behind her to see where his men were. But make no mistake. They were there.

Austin jerked her back roughly, nearly breaking her neck. “Shut up!”

Daxton’s gun clicked as he pulled back the hammer. “If you think we’ll let you leave with her, then you’re sadly mistaken, mister. Let her go.”

“Nope!” Austin kept pulling her backward, keeping her in front of him.

“Only a coward would use a woman as a shield,” Josey said calmly. She was dead now anyway. What did it matter?

“I said, shut up!”

Obviously, she had hit a nerve.

“You know, she’s right.” Daxton took a step closer, holding his gun in front of him. “You are a coward.”

Austin stopped. “Sheriff, you’d better watch who you’re talking to!” He pulled Josey up in front of him tighter. “She was the one who shot my brother in cold blood! She’s the coward!”

Daxton laughed without humor, a crazed look in his eyes. “In my book, that makes her the bravest person I know. After all, only a coward would beat a woman.”

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“So, now you’re calling my dead brother a coward, too?” Austin shouted loudly beside her ear, nearly deafening.

“You admit that your brother beat her then? Did unspeakable things to her? I saw the bruises on her arms when I met her.” Daxton took a step closer. “Under those circumstances—self-defense, being beaten—no jury in the country would convict her.”

“I didn’t report it to the authorities.” Austin smirked, taking another step back. “Where I come from, we settle matters in our own way. We have our own justice. No need to get the law involved. Now that I have what I came for, I’ll be on my way.” He took another step back, pulling her along roughly. “But she’s coming with me.”

“No, she’s not—”

“Daxton, let me go,” Josey replied calmly, a tear trailing down her face. Her fate was sealed, hers and the baby’s. She would never be free of Austin. Never. But she could still save Daxton.

Austin froze, his body stiffening behind her. “Oh, so you’re in love with her!” He let out a sinister laugh. “Sorry, but this woman’s already spoken for. And she’ll meet him in Hell in just a few minutes... but not before I let my men have their way with her first. And maybe we can have a little target practice... before we hang her.”

“I don’t think so.” Colton walked up beside Daxton, with Wyatt and Harrison flanking him. “The lady is not going anywhere with you.”

Austin laughed as if it was the funniest joke he had ever heard. “You’re calling her a lady? That’s rich! If you only knew—”

“That’s enough!” Daxton took a step closer. “I’m giving you one more chance to let her go... then I’m killing you.”

Josey felt Austin’s shoulders shrug behind her. “If I let her go, then I’m dead anyway. What does it matter? Either way, I’m not going until she’s dead. I owe my brother that much.”

“You still have a chance to leave here alive,” Harrison said, stepping up beside Daxton. “Let her go and you can ride out of here. We’ll even give you a head start.” Then, he narrowed his eyes. “But make no mistake about it: We will catch up to you... and soon.”

Austin laughed. “No, mister. She’s coming with me.”

When he backed up into the tree line, his men were hiding in the wings.

“Daxton! Look out!”

Then everything happened at once. Austin’s men started firing and Colton took down two in the blink of an eye. Austin pointed his gun at Daxton, but Josey knocked into him with her shoulder as hard as she could and then fell out of his arms and onto the ground, leaving Austin fully exposed.

Daxton raised his weapon, but Austin shot him in the shoulder, sending him to the ground.

“Daxton, no!” Josey screamed as tears sprang to her eyes.

Austin grabbed her up off the ground and held her in front of him, her feet dangling in midair like a ragdoll's.

From the ground, Daxton lifted his weapon and took aim. Josey's elbow flew into Austin's ribs again and moved to the side, giving Daxton a clear shot. In an instant, Daxton shot him right between the eyes. Austin's grip loosened immediately, and she fell to the ground, out of reach. Red, crimson blood pooled from Daxton's shoulder, but he dove toward Josey, covering her with his body, keeping her close to the ground. Wyatt and Harrison were fast, but Colton was faster, fighting it out until the rest of Austin's men jumped on their horses and rode off.

"Are you okay?" Daxton asked as he stood, pulling her to her feet. Then he grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to look in his eyes. "Josey, are you okay?"

Josey nodded as her body started shaking, unable to speak, glad that it was finally over. No matter what happened now, she would gladly endure it, for it would be nothing compared to what Austin had planned for her. When she thought of how close she had come to him killing both her and the baby....

"Hey, hey," Daxton cooed, rubbing her back as he held her against his chest, her tears mixing with his blood. "It's all over now. Shh."

"You can take me to jail now. I don't care." Then she pulled back to look into his eyes. "I'm just glad it's over. Thank you."

Daxton chuckled, obviously from relief. "Josey, you're not going to jail."

"We'll be right over here." Colton smirked as he motioned discretely to the tree line, and then started checking the bodies littering the ground for life.

Daxton nodded.

“What are you talking about?” Josey sighed, looking into his eyes. “I mean, I killed Logan.”

“In self-defense,” Daxton corrected. “I don’t want to put more strain on you but tell me what happened.”

Colton, Wyatt, and Harrison were a discreet distance away giving them privacy, and now was as good a time as any. He had to know, and she wanted to tell him. Let the chips fall where they may. She just hoped they waited to fulfill the sentence until after the baby was born. At least now, her baby could have a life... without Logan or Austin Slater. Daxton was a good man. She knew he would raise it as his own... if something were to happen to her.

So, Josey told Daxton everything. About having first met Logan, how it was wonderful at first, how she had ignored the rumors. Then she told him how everything had changed, about the beatings and more, and then she told him what happened that night, that she had warned him to stay away from her, but that he still kept coming toward her. She told him about the struggle, and then Logan falling on top of her.

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Daxton cringed, but said nothing as he listened, his eyebrows pulling together in concern, his expression unreadable.

Finally, she told him about pulling the trigger and the gun going off, Logan's eyes becoming fixed, and how she felt his blood ooze over her body. Then she told him about running and finding the clothes... everything up until Daxton found her in his barn.

When she finished her story, Daxton waited patiently, thinking. "I'll send word to the Federal Marshal about what happened here. I'm also going to tell him about Harland Duffy, the sheriff in Laramie."

Josey's eyebrows rose nearly into her hairline. "Will he be arrested, too?" She had never heard of a lawman being arrested, even if they were as crooked as a dogwood branch.

Daxton chuckled without humor. "Oh, yes!"

"But he's a lawman—"

"And lawmen are not above the law," Daxton finished. "It's obvious that Duffy abused his power, and when you abuse your power, then it's taken away."

Just then, Josey saw that the blood was spreading from his shoulder, soaking his shirt. "We need to get you to a doctor... now."

Daxton nodded as Josey slid her arm around him, under his shoulder. Then he looked

over at the other men. “Gentlemen, I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t say anything about what you just heard... or about what happened.”

“As far as I’m concerned, we just caught some notorious outlaws.” Colton smirked as he slid his arm under Daxton’s arm on the other side.

“Same here,” Harrison chimed in.

Wyatt shrugged. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Then he looked over at Josey and winked.

Everyone started laughing.

“Come on, buddy.” Colton took most of his weight off Josey. “Time to see Doc Morgan.” Obviously, he had lost a lot of blood.

“This time, I’m not going to argue with you.” Then Daxton looked over at Josey. “And I want Doc Morgan to check you out, too, while we’re there.”

She knew that he was talking about the baby, as well as her. She just hoped that the baby was okay... after having been through such an ordeal.

Chapter 18

Daxton

“Well, I have good news for you,” Doc Morgan told Daxton at his office, looking at his bullet wound. “It looks like you’re going to live.”

Daxton laughed. “I already knew that.”

“The bullet didn’t hit any bones, but it wouldn’t have hurt you at all if it had hit that thick skull of yours.”

“Hey! Wait a minute!” Daxton smiled, taking Doc Morgan’s ribbing in good stride. “Could you check out Josey before we leave, too?”

Doc Morgan smiled. “I was planning on it. Now, you can wait in the lobby, and I’ll be right in here if you need anything.”

Daxton nodded, sitting up. “Thanks, Doc, but I’ll be fine. Just take care of my girl.” Josey’s eyes were filled with worry. He gently took her hand as she passed, and then pulled her over to him and said in a low voice, “Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine.”

She gave him a slight smile, nodding. “It is now... thanks to you.” She placed a hand gently on his cheek as she gazed into his eyes, sending shivers over his body.

“Well, we’d better get going,” Doc Morgan hinted. He was usually a patient man, but Daxton guessed that he wanted to make sure that Josey was all right after the ordeal.

Daxton stood, slipping on his cowboy hat with his good hand. His other arm was in a sling. “I’ll be in the lobby if you need me.” He smiled at Josey reassuringly as he walked out and closed the door behind him. He slowly headed over to the windows and watched the sun start to sink lazily into the horizon, as shoots of orange, red, and yellow pierced the darkening blue sky as snow-capped mountains sparkled in the distance. It was truly God’s country, and he was glad to be a part of it.

As he watched the sun slowly fade in the distance, he thought of Josey, hoping that the baby was unharmed. At that moment, he realized that he already thought of the baby as his, dangerous for his heart. He just hoped that Josey would accept him as her husband. As he waited, thoughts of her invaded his mind of her piddling around the

house, cleaning and cooking... her teaching the children how to play Poker, of all things... her fishing with him and his son. Whether she knew it or not, she had already become a part of the family. She had unwittingly ingrained herself into their lives and onto his heart.

“Well!” Doc Morgan came out of the back room, drying his hands on a hand towel, grinning from ear to ear. “I’ll leave you two alone for a moment.” Then he leaned over to Josey and smiled. “I think you two have something to discuss.”

“How much do I owe you, Doc?” Daxton asked.

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“We can talk about it later...” Then he smiled at Josey. “But I wouldn’t say no to a good homecooked meal.”

Josey laughed. “Of course! It’s the least I could do!” It was the first time that Daxton had seen her smile in a while. “How about next Sunday after church?”

“Next Sunday, it is!” Then Doc Morgan’s broad smile suddenly turned serious. “But if you don’t feel up to it—”

“Nope! I feel just fine.” She smiled. “I’ll have plenty of time to rest before then.”

“Then, I’ll be there!” Doc Morgan smiled as he headed to the back room, leaving them alone to talk, as promised.

Daxton crossed the room in a few strides and took her hand as he looked into her eyes. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, revealing nothing. “I’m fine.”

Daxton was almost afraid to ask, but he had to know. “And the baby?” He held his breath, fearing the answer, the split second becoming an eternity.

“The baby is fine, too.” But she wasn’t smiling. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it.”

Daxton looked into her eyes. A smile lit his lips as he reached for her hand, his heart swelling with love. “Josey, you don’t have to do this alone.”

“But the baby—”

“Is mine,” he finished. “No one has to know anything else.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Absolutely,” he replied, pulling her into his arms. “There’s only one thing I want more.”

Josey’s eyebrows rose in concern. “Oh?”

“And that is for you to be my wife.” He paused, awaiting her answer.

One corner of her lips curled into a smile. “Well, that’s the worst marriage proposal I’ve ever heard, but I accept.”

Elation filled his chest as he pulled her to him and crushed his lips to hers. His lips moved with hers in perfect unison and she fit the contours of his body like a glove. As if they had been made for each other.

She pulled back a moment later, breathless. “So, when would you like to have this blessed event?”

“Now.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Seriously?”

Daxton smiled. “How about this Sunday after service? I’ll talk to Preacher Henley and see if he can do it on such short notice.”

“I’m sure he can.”

Then he brushed a strand of her hair back away from her face, edging it behind her head. "I have only one request."

She straightened, her eyes filled with conviction. "Anything."

He pulled her to him, their eyes only an inch apart. "The baby is mine. No one knows... not even him." He bit his upper lip and then released it, wanting to say it correctly. "I want him to have a fair chance at a good life. I don't want any clouds held over his head. We owe him that much."

A broad grin spread across Josey's face. "Is that what you want?"

"Yes, it is," Daxton replied. "So, what do you say?"

One corner of her lips curled into a smile. "I say 'Congratulations... Pa.'"

Pure joy coursed through his entire body as he picked her up and swung her around. "I'm going to be a father!"

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“Shh! Don’t say that too loudly until after we’re married.” But Josey was smiling, too. “I love you, Sheriff Clark.”

“I love you, too... Mrs. Clark.”

“Not so fast,” she corrected as he released her. “Not until after you say those two magic words.”

A crease formed between his eyes as he cocked his head to the side... and then it dawned on him. “I do.”

Epilogue

Josey

Everyone cheered as Josey and Daxton walked out of the Whiskey River Community Church, hand in hand, followed by their friends and citizens of the town. Just about everyone in Whiskey River had been invited to the wedding. And from the look of it, everyone had attended.

Colton slapped Daxton on the back, holding his son, Blake. “Congratulations, sheriff! You finally did it.”

“Yes,” Daxton replied, giving Josey’s hand a gentle squeeze. “All it took was meeting the right woman.”

Colton wrapped his free hand around Ella, who was holding their daughter, Hannah.

“It sure does.” He looked over at Ella, smiling up at him, and then back to Daxton. “I’ll leave you to it, then.” He released his wife and extended his hand to Daxton. “I hope you both will be very happy.”

“Thank you so much... for everything,” Daxton replied.

Colton nodded and then walked away with his family.

“Hello, my husband,” Josey said, holding Daxton’s hand.

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Hello, my wife.”

Just then, Lillian and Andrew walked up beside them, dressed in their Sunday best. Then Lillian whispered something to her brother.

“Congratulations, Pa, Josey,” Andrew said, his face solemn as he extended his hand to his father.

Josey’s heart sank as she watched, fearing they didn’t approve. “Andrew, Lillian, is everything okay?”

Lillian looked up at her father, and then at Josey. “I just wanted to ask you something.”

Josey smiled, but her heart was pounding. “Yes. You know you can ask me anything. What’s wrong?” She feared that they didn’t approve of their marriage. Very quickly, the happiest day of her life could easily turn into the worst. The children’s approval of her meant everything to her.

Lillian looked up at her with tear-filled eyes. “May I call you... Ma?”

Tears of joy sprang to Josey’s eyes as her heart soared. “Yes, of course, my little

darling.” She bit her lower lip and then released it as she looked at both Lillian and Andrew. “I know I’m not your real mother, but from this day forward, I’d like to be. That is, if it’s okay with both of you.”

Andrew and Lillian looked at each other and then wrapped their arms around her... their new mother. “Thank you, Ma,” they both said in unison.

Then Andrew looked into her eyes. “Welcome to the family.”

Josey’s heart soared with joy. Now, her family was almost complete... nearly. She looked over their heads to Daxton and raised her eyebrows, and he nodded.

“How would you both like to have a baby brother or sister?”

Andrew’s eyes grew wide. “Really?”

Josey nodded.

“What?” Lillian’s eyes flew open wide as she looked between Josey and her father.

“What does that mean?”

Daxton picked her up, smiling. “It means that Josey and I are having a baby! But you have to keep it quiet for a little bit, okay?”

“Okay,” Lillian replied, and then lowered her voice into a stage whisper. “I hope we have a girl. I’m tired of being the only one.”

Josey laughed. “Well, you’re not anymore. You have me now. Remember?”

“Do you mean that?” Lillian asked, raising her eyebrows.

“I most certainly do.” With that, Josey took the arm of her new husband and let him

lead her to their buckboard, headed to their new life... together. At that moment, Josey realized she was the luckiest woman on earth, for now she had the family she had always wanted. She was finally home.

The End