



Ava's Admirer (Westward Home and Hearts Mail-Order Brides #50)

Author: *Marlene Bierworth*

Category: Historical

Description: Provided with funds to escape her tarnished existence, and instructions that her benefactor waits for her at the end of her stagecoach ride, Ava packs to leave Dodge City. The trouble is, she is not ready to become a mail-order bride and decides, instead, to flee to the safety of her cousin Gracie's home.

Upon her arrival, Ava is bombarded with gifts from a secret admirer, and Orson Shilling, one of her stagecoach companions, befriends her to help solve the identity of her devotee. Deceit, secrets, and unresolved pasts spin a tangled web that even love and kindness cannot unravel. What will it take for Blazer's newest couple to find their happily ever after?

Mildred Crenshaw, from the Westward Home and Hearts Matrimonial Agency, agrees to an unusual method of pairing in this complicated love match, with hopes of liberating two lost souls. Join Ava and Orson as they traverse an unexpected path, falling prey to the potholes of broken memories to answer questions concerning honor and disgrace.

Total Pages (Source): 13

C H A P T E R 1

When the head of the man next to her flopped against her shoulder, Ava Gardner tensed before pushing her fellow traveler's sleepy form in the other direction. She heard his head hit the stagecoach's window frame and cringed when his face contorted to reflect something akin to anger.

His earsplitting snore caught midway in his throat, and he jolted awake, cussing in a way she had hoped never to hear again. "Pardon," he said, when he noticed her staring at him. "It's been a long day."

"The driver says we will soon arrive at the final coach stop for lunch before we reach our day's destination, Mr. Simcoe. After that, we are only a few hours away from a cozy room at the Ace Hotel." She had read the name of the establishment in one of Gracie's letters. At the time, she recalled picturing it as a grand getaway, never dreaming she might one day see it for herself.

"Saloon rooms suit me fine," Doug Simcoe said. "My throat is parched from all the trail dirt the horses kick back at us. It seems as if we've been traveling forever."

"Forever is a slight exaggeration, sir," Ava said, annoyed at the man's impatience and his lack of enthusiasm to simply be alive and on a new adventure.

To distract herself from the rude man, Ava studied the woman and young boy—whom she supposed to be approximately ten years old—seated across from her, amusing herself with silent speculation. They had not been passengers on the same westbound train she'd occupied, but appeared quite suddenly at the Farnsworth

Stagecoach Depot carrying two carpet bags, their faces full of secrets. Little conversation came from their corner of the coach. Even the youngster seemed to be haunted by an inner demon, one that might even trump Ava's.

Mr. Orson Shilling, a gentleman in a three-piece suit, sat next to the child. He spoke politely when spoken to, but mostly remained aloof. Ava often caught him scrutinizing her as if he could see through the well-planned facade she proudly displayed for the world to see. She'd known curious men in the past, but never while wearing the respectable traveling dress she'd purchased using the money in the envelope anonymously bequeathed to her by a well-wisher. It was just as well that they were a quiet lot, for Ava did not see the need to prove herself to strangers.

Gracie awaited her in Blazer, eager to welcome her into smalltown life. It wouldn't be long now before she would have to prove her worth to a reputable society on a day-to-day basis.

"Coach-stop coming up, folks," the driver called out. "Prepare to disembark."

Ava scanned the area outside her window, where the trees grew sparse, and the land opened up to a dirt yard. A log cabin with an appealing front porch stood at the ready to receive its guests. Ava's idea of a perfect home had always included a verandah facing the western sky, complete with a rocker and a cool glass of lemonade. It was a dream that had never died despite the direction her life had taken.

The driver steered the horses toward the structure, stopping close to the front door. A man hurried outside to help the driver with the horses while an older woman waved, beckoning for the passengers to come inside.

The mother and son were the first passengers out of the coach. On the boy's heels, the sleepy Mr. Simcoe stumbled over Ava's feet to escape the coach as he raced for the outhouse tucked discreetly between the house and the barn.

Mr. Shilling smiled apologetically.” Excuse Mr. Simcoe’s manners, Miss. Seems he is in need of emptying his bladder after all the whiskey he sipped from his flask.”

“I believe you are right.”

“Let me come around to help you disembark,” he said, disappearing through the door closest to him.

She started to object, then decided it might be nice to be treated with a deliberate thoughtfulness, and she might as well start now to graciously accept spontaneous acts of kindness. He opened her door, and she leaned forward, catching the twinkle in his eye that revealed something akin to interest.

That would never do. True, Ava had started out as a mail-order bride, but for someone else other than Orson Shilling.

Even though, she’d already accepted the getaway money, she had hoped to escape the second part of the sweet deal, by slipping away quietly to a different town. She’d determined to shake her benefactor off her trail, but one never knew who lurked in the shadows. Ava must be careful at first, for men were a cunning bunch. Perhaps he watched from a distance, not eager to make a move on redeeming his prize harlot, or if his intentions had indeed been pure and she’d thrown that opportunity to the wind, so be it. Ava would not appear totally wanton—should he be watching from afar. Standing him up piqued what was left of her conscience, but Ava was not ready to go down the road of romance quite yet.

The money she could use. A man, not so much. Still, when the time came, she might consider entertaining advances from a gentleman such as Orson Shilling.

Ava took the hand he offered, for it was good practice to become comfortable in her new role, and stepped out onto the ground. He was tall and olive-skinned, his features

refined and confident. The smile he offered revealed white teeth of perfect quality, a refreshing change from the men's mouths who had visited her former workplace. The aura surrounding him depicted grace and poise, and she was captivated. Perhaps she might even fit into his world...eventually.

She wondered why he chose that moment to indulge in conversation when he had avoided speaking most of the way from Farnsworth. He had been on the same train as she, but when or where he'd boarded, she did not know. The only reason she knew that much was because she'd seen him step from his statelier accommodations farther down the depot platform, from a cabin car where employees pampered the wealthier travelers, allowing them to relax during the transport. She did not choose to waste the gift of her money on such luxuries, unsure of what the cost might be to maintain her future independent status in Blazer. The economy car had served her purpose well enough.

When Mr. Shilling boarded the same stagecoach as Ava, it forced the gentleman to endure a rougher means of travel, but he appeared to manage it without whining, unlike the fellow who had parked his sorry backside beside her on the coach seat. That brand of man, she understood and would avoid at all costs in her future.

Staring into Orson's warm, welcoming eyes bewitched her into believing her new life might actually work in her favor. "Thank you, Mr. Shilling." She stepped back, breaking the connection between them, releasing a breath she'd held unconsciously.

He offered her his arm. "Shall we go inside and see what the woman has prepared for us weary travelers?"

Ava walked alongside him and asked. "Are you headed for the gold fields, sir?"

He laughed. "Do I look like the kind of man that might pan in cool waters or risk being buried in a mine for a chance at obtaining more wealth?"

“I really don’t know, sir, where men of your station obtain your wealth. Hopefully, it is from a reputable source and not some greed-driven takeover at someone else’s expense.” Ava was surprised at her boldness, and she wondered if she should speak her mind quite so freely. Her new role as a free woman bewildered her at times. Nevertheless, she’d met many a tyrant, and she despised the power they flaunted on underlings, her included, and that opinion would never change.

“I have met the disreputable businessmen of whom you speak, but I assure you, I have not been taken in by such corruption,” Orson said, looking unoffended by her question.

“I am pleased to hear that, Mr. Shilling,” Ava said, relieved to see that he did not appear insulted by her question. “If not the gold fields, where is your final destination?”

“I will get off the coach about twenty-miles from Deadwood in the small town of Blazer.” He studied her before blurting out, “Surely, a fine lady such as yourself is not interested in the Black Hills gold rush?”

Ava stood a little straighter, appreciating the fact that he viewed her as a lady. It seemed the newly purchased wardrobe was doing its job. “No. I have a cousin in Blazer, and she has promised to help me to resettle.”

The tension left his face. “Perfect. Do you mind if I look you up while I am in town?”

Ava felt the heat rise from her neck into her face. She knew of all the lines a man could possibly throw at a woman in the hope of winning her favor, but in her experience, self-interest ruled their motives and inspired the flattery. Orson Shilling’s comment and the integrity showing on his face appeared authentic, as near as she could tell, but then Ava had not been around his kind, enough to figure out what made them tick.

“That would be fine, Mr. Shilling. I am told it is a small town, so we, no doubt, will surely encounter one another at some time.”

Orson bowed his head ever so slightly. It was a show of respect that had not yet lost its glowing effect on the woman. When he dropped her arm, he motioned for her to proceed him into the cabin.

The fragrance of his aftershave was quickly replaced by the sweet smell of freshly-baked cinnamon rolls.

The woman of the house graciously provided basins of warm water, soap, and towels to the dusty travelers, and when Ava’s skin tingled with the feeling of cleanliness, she turned her attention to the table. The setting was simple. No fuss had been made on the part of the hostess to portray an image that might serve to contrast the rustic cabin.

Ava sat, and soon, the other four from the coach and the driver joined her.

The meal served on the rectangular table was equally plain, but the tasty spices added to the beef stew and the mix of finely cut vegetables spoke highly of the cook’s ability to give flare to the simple. The fluffy dumpling she took from the bowl melted in her mouth, leaving her wanting seconds. She wondered if ladies indulged in seconds, and she watched the mother to see, but the woman did not partake, and Ava held her craving at bay. It was worth the discipline when the cinnamon rolls and a strong cup of tea appeared to finish off the luncheon. That would be the last of the food available until they arrived in Blazer later that evening.

Ava’s excitement mounted. Her cousin had described Blazer in the letters she’d received from her over the past two years, and Ava almost felt as if she could walk anywhere within the town limits blindfolded. When Gracie heard that Ava was coming to South Dakota, she sought to correct the exaggerated portrayal of her new

hometown, claiming she'd initially viewed it through rose-colored glasses, filtered through her own personal escape from a life of dread. Regardless, Ava would gladly settle for her more recent and balanced description. Anything was better than the wild city and all of the memories from which she'd fled.

The cousins had only met once, when Ava was five years old, and she was still innocent as to the path her life might take. Gracie's rough times ended when she found her home sweet home in the upper-middle section of the country. It seemed only proper that when the opportunity for Ava to relocate presented itself, she would flee to family, avoiding Crater Valley where her betrothed—who had most graciously funded her escape—waited for his mail-order bride. The thought that he could do much better than her, made her rest easier with her decision to take the money and run.

Ava hoped that perhaps her true soulmate occupied the same town as the man who had stolen her cousin's heart. Could there be another fellow ready and willing to shower Ava with unconditional love, the same as Slate Yagger had done for Gracie? That remained to be seen.

Horse's hooves thundered, and the sound of the line's jingling passed by the open doorway as a fresh team pulled the stagecoach up to the front of the building. Its arrival brought the driver to his feet.

"Thanks for the grub, Maisy," he said. To the passengers lingering at the table, he added, "We'll be pulling out in five minutes, folks."

The passengers dozed for the next hour, likely the result of having no activity after consuming a big meal, coupled with the smoother grade of the landscape.

Ava closed her eyes, but sleep evaded her. The fantastic but unexpected adventure with which she'd been gifted consumed her being, and she wondered at the reason

her donor would give for having picked her from all of the wayward girls in the saloon to fulfill his mission of compassion. Surely that was the only reason a man of worth might marry a lost soul such as herself. The envelope containing the money and note as to where to meet her benefactor, had been given to her by the Dodge City Bank manager, who would not divulge the source. The note read: “Take the funds and leave town, wiping the dust of the city behind you. Meet me in Crater Valley, where the preacher awaits. God’s blessings are new every morning. Walk in them as you seek to find a new beginning, one the Lord has in store for you.” By the mention of God, she figured the person to be a Christian with an abundance of wealth and a sense of duty to help the ‘least of these.’ She did not want to be pitied. She’d done what she had to do to survive, and she would not have some do-gooder holding it over her head.

She recalled hearing that last phrase quoted years before, by a man behind a pulpit who’d passed around a collection plate, petitioning churchgoers to help the poor—the least of these. It was the one and only time her overly-proud father had taken his family to a house of God. She wondered if he’d been put off because he had no offering to give or if it reminded him of the sad state of his finances.

Young Ava received her answer the following day. When the same preacher arrived at the Gardners’ front door, an abandoned shack that sheltered them from the weather, Pa made them all hide in the back room. The preacher and his wife left a few minutes later with the food basket still in their buggy—a failed attempt at their well-meaning generosity.

Ava’s tummy grumbled the rest of that day, every time she thought of the provisions her father had denied his hungry family. She cried herself to sleep due to the cramps in her underfed belly, pledging to never again refuse a free gift should someone attempt to help her in the future.

That opportunity never knocked on her door again, not until three weeks ago when

the banker arrived.

The distraught young woman neither hid nor declined the gift, and she made immediate plans to leave town as the donor had stipulated, minus the condition of the meeting place. Whether the “blessings every morning” to which he referred would continue without the patron’s continued support, she had no idea, as the concept of acknowledging miracles from a heavenly source was foreign to the unchurched woman. Perhaps she would search out a congregation in Gracie’s town to help her understand the words the preacher taught from the Bible.

Ava’s first view of Blazer was a gorgeous sunset in the westerly sky. She watched as they passed the shops and services along the main street, ticking each one off in her mind. In her estimation, Gracie’s initial observation of the town provided Ava the same thrill, settling deep in her soul. She vowed never to let the wonder of freedom and choices lessen in her heart of thanksgiving.

She felt eyes on her and found Mr. Shilling staring again. He was a strange man, opening up to her for that one brief discussion at the stage stop, becoming as close-mouthed as ever when the journey continued after lunch. She smiled at him, and he nodded politely.

Ava doubted she would ever be able to figure out a man’s mind.

Orson bolted from the coach as soon as the wheels stopped turning, and he rushed to the far side, where the mother and boy were emerging. He offered her a hand, and she stared at it as if confused at what to do with it. Eventually, she accepted his help and stepped down onto the ground.

The boy jumped down behind her, staying close to her full skirt. It was odd for a boy his age, but Ava doubted his maturity had reached his ten years for whatever reason. The world appeared full of hard cases.

His smile broadened when Ava's body framed the coach's doorway, and she gladly accepted his hand when he offered to help her disembark. She hoped her cousin was nearby, watching. She did not wish to appear downtrodden in person—as much of their correspondence had been by mail. The fact that a gentleman would take the time to show kindness at the end of her long journey should encourage Gracie that a suitable match might soon rescue her from becoming a permanent guest in the Yagger home.

“Thank you, Mr. Shilling. It has been pleasant traveling this last leg of the journey with you. I hope you enjoy your time in Blazer.”

He only had time to touch the rim of his hat before a woman passed him, drawing Ava into her embrace. “Ava Gardner—I'd know you anywhere. You still have those cute dimples I envied when we were children.”

“Gracie,” Ava said, unconvinced she in turn might recognize her hostess anywhere, and she said so in a lighthearted manner. “I see that you have put on some weight.”

“Oh, yes. Our first baby. And, of course, I told you about Blanche, the young girl we adopted. Who would have thought I'd love being a mother?”

Ava also yearned for a family, but she would first need a man of great understanding to accept her as is. Perhaps Slate Yagger had a friend who might be equally considerate. “If I recall correctly, you always loved your doll, treating her like a living baby.”

“Blanche has taken over, and now, she cares for it as delicately as I did. I thank the Lord for the precious memories.”

“As do I, cousin.”

“You must be exhausted, and here I stand holding you captive in the street.” Gracie reached for her hand. “Come on. Blanche is waiting for us at home, guarding her freshly baked cake that is as lopsided as she can be at times. Her heart was in the right place while laboring over the welcoming cake, and I couldn’t take that joy from the girl by criticizing her efforts.”

“I’m sure it will be delicious. As we both know, appearance is not always what’s important,” Ava said, her attention drawn to a depot worker who emerged from the building to unload the passengers’ bags from the top of the coach. “What about my cases?”

“Slate said he’d swing by when he’s finished work to pick them up.” She called up to the driver who collected his gun and sack before climbing down from the upper bench. “Hos, you can bring Miss Jenkins’ belongings inside the depot for Slate to pick up later.”

“I would do anything for the prettiest expectant mother in all of Blazer,” he said when his feet hit the ground.

“I suspect I might be the only one at the moment, but a lady loves to hear compliments from a man as fine as you,” she said to the aging driver.

Ava noticed her companion lingering nearby, watching her interaction with Gracie. When their eyes met, he smiled and picked up his suitcase. She called out to him, “Mr. Shilling, Ace’s Hotel is just a short jaunt from here,” Ava said as she pointed to her right and across the street. She turned to receive confirmation from her cousin. “Am I right, Gracie?”

“Yes, you are a good student of my letters,” Gracie said, nodding affirmation at the man Ava had addressed.

“I memorized the layout of your town in anticipation of this place becoming my new home,” Ava said.

“Good day, ladies,” Orson said, moving down the street at a lively pace.

“Now, who was that dear man?” Gracie asked, her eyelids flickering in a teasing manner.

“Not sure when he got on the train, but he got off in Farnsworth, same as me, and boarded the stagecoach. I figured he was headed for the gold mines, but no. It appears he has business in Blazer.” Ava arched her brows questioningly.

“Don’t look so surprised. Blazer is an enterprising community that attracts all kinds of businesspeople. Sometimes, I wish it would stop growing. I don’t want it to lose its smalltown, country charm.” Gracie scanned the area, and Ava could tell that her cousin loved the settlement she now called home.

Ava clutched the purse she always carried with her and sighed. “Shall we go to your house now? I would love nothing more than to put my feet up and sip a cup of hot tea.”

“Of course,” Gracie said. “I’m daydreaming again. Slate says I am my own worst enemy when it comes to keeping a rein on my schedule. There are so many distractions.”

The two ladies headed off down the road in the opposite direction of the hotel. “It’s an easy walk. You’ll love your room. I put you in the same guestroom Slate provided for me on our wedding night. I hardly knew how to respond to such an understanding and patient man.”

“Oh, he sounds wonderful, Gracie. I am so happy for you.”

“There is a man out there just waiting to meet you and make your every dream come true.”

“I stopped dreaming a long time ago,” Ava said.

“Then you need to start again. You’ve made it out of your fiery pit and have lived to see a brighter day. That is fertile ground on which to grow hope.” Gracie bumped her cousin’s arm playfully. “That, and your mystery donor you left behind. How ever will you go to your grave not knowing the identity of the man who changed your life?”

“I would prefer that to marrying the man in Crater Valley. Even his hometown sounds depressing. I tried to guess, but I wound up eliminating all of my contacts in Dodge City, and was no further ahead. I may never uncover his identity, but I would like to be given the opportunity to thank the person for showing such kindness to me, gifting me freedom beyond my wildest imagination.”

“When I was in dire straits before coming to Blazer, an affluent man to support me would have been a lifesaver, but I have learned that riches and happiness do not necessarily go hand in hand. Slate is well off. I was lucky in that respect, but that’s not what I love about him.”

“Intuitively, I suppose I knew that,” Ava said. “It gave me the courage to run from a marriage of convenience, one that likely came with trappings of a different kind. That envelope supplied me with all the funds necessary to start up an independent life of my own.”

Ava stood at the gate for a long moment taking it all in. The white picket fence that crept into every woman’s dream was bordered by a vibrant display of low-spreading blooms that continued up both sides of the walkway. The grand, two-story home with an enormous front porch facing the street was where the newcomer swore she’d spend all her free time. There was, no doubt, a fireplace behind a wall of differently

shaped, colorful stones where smoke presently billowed from the chimney. Last, but not least, came something practical: a small barn behind the house for the horses, with an addition jutting out to the side with a sign on the door: Outhouse.

“Oh Gracie. It’s lovely.”

Gracie hugged Ava. “At first, I counted it as more than I deserved, but I have a clearer understanding now of my position in this world and the next. I needed to let go of the past and embrace the future He provided for me. ‘Come as you are,’ the Lord declares to weary souls, and let me tell you, He got a sorry package when I showed up on His doorstep.”

“Yet, here you are, a respectable member of Blazer, with a home and a husband, soon to birth your own flesh and blood. To be so blessed seems almost like greed.”

“I am so glad you thought of me when your second chance came along. You and I will be great friends; you wait and see.” As an afterthought, Gracie added, “And you will find yourself a fellow of your choosing right here in Blazer, rich in the unconditional love that matters.”

C H A P T E R 2

The next morning, Ava yawned and stretched fully out in the soft double bed in the guest room. It was the first decent sleep she'd had in ages, and it helped to make the whole world look brighter and hopeful. The sun perched well above the horizon, and Ava knew she'd overslept—likely missed breakfast altogether—but Gracie had assured Ava she did not need to operate on the household's time schedule. Slate came and went while working at the livery. Blanche attended summer tutoring classes with the local teacher to help her catch up as a result of her lack of education while her parents were still alive. On top of that was Gracie's miserable mood—to which she readily admitted—as she endured morning sickness that had continued long after the first trimester of her pregnancy. As a result, Ava was advised not to rush down to the kitchen to join in the madness—at least not on the first morning of her arrival.

If that was typical home life, it did not sound appealing at all. Still, they were such a happy family. She'd met Slate the night before, and she hadn't felt the least bit intimidated by his burly stature. Ava enjoyed his country ease. Slate did not fit the mold of a three-piece suit type of man, but jolly and content. Mostly, she noticed the love for his family he expressed with his every word and action. It was a joy to watch. Blanche, the adopted daughter, appeared to be well adjusted in her new situation. She had lost her mother and little brother as a result of eating poisoned meat. Her picky eating habits were the main reasons for her survival. Motherhood had been thrust upon Gracie rather abruptly as a new bride, but she must've picked up the knack, for Blanche adored her.

Of course, Ava would only indulge in laziness this one morning, it being her first in town. After that, she would pull her weight around the Yagger house until she got her

bearings and found out where she fit into her new life. Mornings had never been a strong time of day after having worked most of the night, but her inner timetable was adjusting. Besides, it felt good to see the early sun in the sky outside her window. A light breeze from the open window blew the curtains, and she breathed in the fresh air.

She kicked her legs over the side of the bed and slipped on her housecoat. The view outside the window offered a grassy field that ended at a line of trees in the distance. The location of the house was just outside of town, which provided a certain degree of peace and quiet. It was a new sensation for the Dodge City girl, who had lived with noise and constant pressure far too long. Although, twenty-four years was not a lot when considering one's lifetime, Ava felt as if she'd been dodging emotional bullets for an eternity. All that changed when the banker handed her the "freedom cash," a gift that Ava vowed not to mess up. The thought of starting over played music in her ears, but the melody was often silenced when self-doubt and fear crept in to steal her joy.

Ava squared her shoulders. She had come to the right place, for Gracie would understand her plight. If her cousin could make a respectable life for herself, so could she.

Noise from the kitchen put her into action. She found a jug of warm water outside her door and washed in record time. She chose to adorn practical attire, as she had no idea what the day might hold. A knock sounded, and she opened the door to find young Blanche standing there with a tray.

"Mama had to go to town. She said for me to deliver breakfast to your room. If you want company, I have the time to sit with you."

"Do you not have a tutoring class?" Ava asked.

“Yes, ma’am. The teacher is helping lots of students this summer. In the morning, she prepares the older students for college. I am slotted into her schedule for one o’clock.”

“Well, then, I would love to have your company. As you can see, I am already dressed, and we can go sit in the kitchen instead of staying cooped up in my room if you’d like.”

Blanche peeked around Ava and smiled. “I see you got yourself all settled in. You keep your bedroom tidier than I do.”

“I haven’t been here long enough to mess it up. Give me time,” Ava said, laughing. “I’d rather not start with muffin crumbs all over the floor.”

“Mama has that morning glory recipe down pat. It’s Papa’s favorite.”

“I shall have to take some lessons from her before I launch out on my own, as I have not had much experience in the kitchen.”

“It’s a cinch. I can help you, if you’d like.”

“That is very generous of you, but I don’t want to infringe on the schedule already set in place.”

“Aw, I’ve got lots of time for company,” Blanche said, moving down the hall toward the kitchen. Ava closed the door to her room and followed.

The girl chattered nonstop. “We’ve never had anyone come from far off to stay at our house. I like to forget where I come from and imagine Blazer is the entire earth.”

“That is good news. I will follow suit and forget where I came from, for I doubt there

is no place as peaceful as this corner of South Dakota.”

“It’s not always peaceful,” she said, placing the tray on the table and plunking into the chair across from it. “When fellows hit it big at the mines, and it gets too crowded over in Central City, they ride all the way to Blazer and set up a howling enough to make the wolves hide in their dens. Papa says they drink and carouse until they’ve spent all their hard-earned nuggets, and then they head back to their claims like sad puppies with their tails between their legs.”

“It does seem foolish. I would think prospectors come with dreams to fulfill, hoping for the future their riches will bring to pass.”

“Makes sense when you and me say it, but most get the yellow fever and lose sight of why they came. And some only scrape together enough to survive. Takes a patient kind of person to enjoy searching for that elusive yellow treasure.” Blanche seemed very wise with regard to the gold rush.

“I suppose it’s a gamble some are willing to take.” Ava wondered if she might have risked winning or losing in the gold fields had she saved enough personal funds to make it this far. Any existence had to be better than the one she left behind. Thank goodness the donor had taken that venture off her plate of possibilities.

“Papa has a claim outside Central City, and we go there for a holiday every year. That’s where I lost my first family and gained another with the Yaggers,” Blanche said with an air of reminiscence. “And I have quite a stash of nuggets growing in my secret hiding place.”

“Slate is your stepfather, right?” Ava half knew the story but she wanted to hear the child’s version.

“He is, but don’t tell him that. Papa and Mama Gracie consider us all closer than

blood kin, and I like it that way. The folks that birthed me had the gold fever and it killed them. They weren't cut out to be frontiersmen. The Yaggers stepped right in that very day and took me home to live with them. They are God's people to be sure."

"I'm sorry about the loss of your family in the gold camps."

"I missed my brother for a while, but then I met Dakota, Mrs. Holiday's boy, and he fills the void right proper. I settled in to being a Yagger just like I was born to it."

"Yes, you have, little miss," Ava said with a chuckle. "Mrs. Holiday, she is Gracie's good friend, right?"

"Oh, she's an angel of a woman." Blanche said, exaggerating the compliment by stretching out the syllables. "If I can make it to her age with my wings still intact, I'll consider it an intervention from the Good Lord himself. My wild side often gets me into trouble."

Ava laughed, causing a lump of muffin to lodge in her throat, bringing on a coughing fit. Blanche immediately jumped to her feet and rushed to pound her on the back. Ava doused her mouth with a swig of coffee to gain control.

"You are a delightful child, Blanche, and I am sure your parents will manage to keep your wild side in check."

"I daresay they will," Blanche said as she plopped back into her chair, leaned forward, and rested her chin on the edge of the table. "If their scolding doesn't work, the time I spend in my room as punishment will fix the problem. Who can cause trouble staring out the window?"

Ava smiled and pushed the tray away. "This was very tasty—did you make it, or did your mother?"

“I scrambled the eggs and put on the coffee. Mama fried the bacon and baked the muffins.”

“A good team effort. Do you have time to give me a tour of your town?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, jumping to her feet again. “Best get your parasol. The sun is already hot, and you don’t want to burn that ivory skin of yours. Did you never get outside back where you come from?”

“I did, on occasion, but most of my time was spent indoors.”

“Can’t imagine being cooped up inside. I live to breathe in God’s fresh air.” Blanche scooped up the dirty dishes and headed for the wash basin. “This won’t take me long. I’ll finish these up in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.”

Ava went to her room to retrieve her parasol. There had been a bin full of sunshades made available to the working girls in Dodge City, but she’d mostly used them to hide her shame when forced to go out in public. How refreshing it would be to actually use them for their proper purpose.

Five minutes later, Ava and Blanche headed for the town’s center. The girl provided a running account of every store or shop, its owners, and the pros and cons of crossing its threshold to spend even a single penny of her money.

“You seem to have a good sense of money management. Your father must be proud.”

“I suppose. He gives me most of the stuff I need, and I am a penny-pincher when it comes to spending some of my stash. I’m shopping for something real special to give the new baby when it comes, and of course, my list of Christmas and birthday presents are growing, but I like to make homemade gifts—Mama says they’re her favorite.”

“It’s true that the best memories come from receiving something someone has crafted with their own hands,” Ava said. Not that she had many of those treasures in her hope chest, but the few she’d gotten over the years always stirred pleasant reminders of the gift giver.

“Where did your mother go this morning?”

“Aw, she’s on a charity mission. A family on the other side of town is struggling.”

“Did she bring them some muffins?” Ava asked.

“Yes, she did. She said the Yagger family could do without the extra dozen she baked.”

“Your mama knows what it’s like to be in need,” Ava said, “and I’m sure helping others is a rewarding experience.”

“Mama doesn’t do anything for reward. All the glory goes to God. In all my years, I never saw such a thankful soul as your cousin Gracie.”

“She has much to be grateful for—a home, family, and friends—none of which is to be taken for granted.” Ava sighed and stared off into the distance. “So do I.”

“You come from a poor background, too? I’d have never known, judging by the pretty dresses you wear.”

“Newly purchased to impress you,” Ava said. “I suppose poverty is a family curse handed down to Gracie and me. Her mother and mine were sisters, and neither of them chose to marry into money.”

“Money isn’t everything. Papa pounds that into my head every chance he gets. Says

coveting is sinful, and we're to be content, but some jingle in your pocket sure comes in handy when you want to buy something special." The girl stopped and placed her hands on her hips in a thoughtful stance. "I can't figure out what color to buy for the baby. Why, I could have a sister or a brother, and folks would be horror-stricken to see Slate Junior running around in a pink bonnet."

Ava didn't respond, caught up in her own reflections. The door to the Cranston saloon loomed ahead of her, the previous night's inebriated patrons still sleeping it off on the boardwalk, leaning against the building. They would be first in line for the eleven o'clock opening hour. The inside door was firmly shut, but Ava knew the preparations the owner had going on inside. Every institution was the same, providing the gaming, entertainment, and an endless supply of liquor.

Her heart beat rapidly as if the demon stronghold could somehow snatch her back inside and lock the doors to her freedom forever. She felt a tug on her arm, saving her from an emotional collapse right there on the main street.

"Miss Gardner, are you all right? You look as white as a sheet."

Ava inhaled deeply and turned to gaze at the child, concern written all over her features. "I'm fine. You are just like your mother, seeing brokenness and reaching out to rescue others from falling."

"Huh?" Blanche screwed up her face, dumbfounded.

"Never mind. Best if you don't know your strengths. Could serve to puff you up."

"Papa would sure squash that down real quick."

"Why don't we go into the clothing store and take a gander at their selection of baby gifts? I want to get something for the wee one, too."

“It isn’t coming for a few months yet, but I always say it’s better to be prepared than rush around like a hen with her head cut off after it comes.”

“I agree. Let’s shop, Blanche.”

Blanche raced ahead and disappeared through the door. Ava was slow to follow. She felt a hand on her arm and turned to see Mr. Shilling behind her. He appeared out of breath, but he held his hat against his heart and smiled hugely as if they were long-lost friends.

“Miss Gardner—how pleasant to see you out and about on this fine morning, looking well rested from your trip.”

“I did sleep well, thank you,” Ava said. “My cousin’s daughter and I are out on the town, doing some shopping for the new baby that will soon arrive in the Yagger home.”

“A new baby,” Orson said.

“Yes. It seems the dilemma we face is pink or blue.”

He chuckled. “Perhaps yellow or green would suffice.”

“Those are excellent suggestions. It sounds as if you’ve shopped for baby items before. Do you have a family?” When he avoided her eyes, she added, “Siblings, perhaps?”

“I do have a brother, but my sister is deceased. We boys may live in different states, but we try to gather during the Christmas season, although even that has proven difficult as of late.”

“I am sorry to hear about your sister. I suspect the empty chair at the table makes the holiday celebrations harder to bear.”

“It does.” He put his hat on his head. “I should let you get back to your mission. That young girl will be wondering what happened to you.” He started to turn, but then reached for her arm again. “Miss Gardner, would you do me the honor of dining with me tonight?”

She was startled by the unexpected invitation. “Tonight is not good. Gracie has invited friends for supper. A welcome-to-Blazer party in my honor.”

“Splendid. Do you think you will like this town you’ve come to?”

“I do. It’s quiet, and I could use some of that right now.”

“I saw an ominous shadow cross those beautiful features of yours—are you harboring a secret?”

“If I were, I’d never tell you or it would no longer be a secret.”

“That’s a polite way of telling me to mind my own business,” Orson said, chuckling. “I shall promise to be more discreet if you’ll agree to dine with me tomorrow evening.”

“You are persistent, sir.”

“I know a good thing when I see it, and I am not ready to say goodbye to you just yet.”

“How long will your business keep you here?”

“Indefinitely. One never knows how long it will take for the wheels of change to turn.”

“Wheels of change? That is an odd way of describing your job situation,” she said. It didn’t take long for her to realize that the phrase fully applied to her situation as well.

“I am very conscious that work is done correctly, especially in construction. Someone’s life may hang in the balance of an unskilled worker’s mistake.”

“It is encouraging to witness such diligence when overseeing work to its conclusion. So many self-made carpenters throw up a building in record time, and for years following its completion, it suffers continuous repairs.”

“Which will not happen in my case.”

Blanche popped her head through the open door of the shop and called out, “Are you coming, Miss Gardner?”

“Of course,” she said, smiling apologetically to the man at her side. “Good day, Mr. Shilling.”

“Until tomorrow evening—shall I call around to pick you up at six?”

“Yes, at my cousin’s house. I’m not sure I can direct you there as of yet. We could meet—”

“It appears the Yaggers are a well-respected family in these parts. Getting directions should be easy.”

He turned and headed down the street in the opposite direction, and she stared after him, wondering as to his interest in obtaining knowledge about the Yaggers

reputation. Perhaps Slate was somehow connected to the construction job Mr. Shilling was undertaking in town. That scenario made sense if it were a side-interest for Slate, as she knew him to be employed at the livery.

Why a man of his status would single out a girl like her to dine with was beyond her reasoning. Surely, he was not so desperate as to settle for a stagecoach acquaintance. Of course, he did not know her past, and she might seem as good a choice as any of the women in Blazer. That must have been it, for if he had known her story, he likely would have run in the opposite direction.

Ava wondered if there were any men alive—besides the honorable Slate Yagger—who would not be horrified at the thought of courting a dance hall girl. Could a secret of that magnitude possibly remain silent for a lifetime? More directly, did she have the nerve to deceive a man who might become attracted to her in the future?

C H A P T E R 3

When the girls arrived home, Ava tucked their purchases into her bedroom drawer, just in case Gracie went snooping in Blanche's. She peeked in while passing, and by the state of its disorder, her mother very well might feel the need to tackle the clutter.

While freshening up and waiting for her cousin's return, she heard a tapping on the door. She opened it to find Blanche standing there holding a vase of long-stemmed flowers. "These arrived at the front door, and the card is addressed to Miss Ava Gardner."

"Me? No one knows me here."

"The card might give us some hints as to the identity of your admirer."

"Nonsense. I've only been here overnight, although I walked downtown this morning. Who could have noticed me enough to warrant sending flowers?"

The girl's eyes bulged with anticipation and impatience as she withdrew the envelope and passed it to Ava. "This might help." She made no sign of moving, even after Ava took the vase and set it on the table by the door.

"A mite curious, aren't you, Blanche?"

"I'm curious about everything, but Mama has another name for it: meddling."

Ava withdrew the card from the tiny envelope and read it aloud for Blanche's benefit.

It was ridiculous to think she had an admirer in Blazer. She knew a total of three men; Slate, Mr. Shilling and that dreadful passenger she hoped never to encounter again. If it were Mr. Shilling, why wouldn't he have saved the generous token for their dinner tomorrow evening?

“Welcome to Blazer.”

“That's it? Not signed, 'Love, from...somebody?'” Blanche's face filled with confusion. “No one gives flowers without expecting credit for the effort.”

Ava thought she'd enlighten the girl. “I suspect they might be from Mr. Shilling. We traveled together in the stagecoach—perhaps he wanted to be kind to the newcomer.”

“Is that the man you were talking to in town?” Blanche did not wait for confirmation. “He was so handsome. The most striking figure of a man I've ever seen walking down our streets.”

“He asked me to dine with him tomorrow night.”

Blanche rolled her eyes. She leaned her body against the wall, crisscrossed her arms at her chest, and groaned with glee. “He's our man...well, not my man, but definitely yours. You sure did snag a looker.”

“Mr. Shilling has not been snagged, Blanche Yagger. He is merely showing some kindness to one of the few people in town he knows. It must be monotonous eating alone when he does business in each new location. Most likely, he just yearns for some company.”

“I like my theory better,” Blanche stated confidently. “The man is spellbound by your loveliness, and the tiny bit of conversation one is able to make while speaking freely in a stagecoach filled with listening ears has only piqued his interest in you.”

Another voice sounded behind her, and Gracie came into view. “Are you bothering Miss Gardner with your crazy romantic ideas?”

Blanche pointed to the bouquet. “Your cousin has an admirer, and she’s only been here one day. How shall we keep the men from hammering down our front door once the news of her arrival leaks out?”

Gracie scuffed the top of her head. “Go comb your hair and get ready for your class. The morning has slipped away, and you should have a snack before you leave.”

“Aw, Mama,” Blanche groaned. “Make her tell you about Mr. Shilling—the most gorgeous man in all of Blazer, maybe for miles around.”

“Mr. Shilling?” Her brows raised as she grinned at Ava.

“You met my fellow stagecoach passenger to whom I gave directions to the hotel at the depot yesterday. He’s definitely not my secret admirer, ” she cast a warning glance in Blanche’s direction, “or anything for that matter. The man is here on business, and when it’s completed, he will leave on the same coach he came in on.”

“Aw shucks. He’d be quite the catch,” Blanche said, shuffling off to her bedroom. “Best get ready for school. I’ll be glad when I’m old enough to do as I please all day long.”

“Such a day is nonexistent, young lady,” Gracie called after her and then looked at Ava. “That girl is so excited having you here; her brain is in a muddle.”

“I enjoyed spending the morning with her. She showed me around your town.”

“I’m glad she filled the void after I abandoned you. The Charring family lost their son last week, and Mary’s not been herself. The grieving youngsters feel neglected with

their mother's heart distracted and unable to comfort them, so I try my best to bring them treats and play games with the little ones."

"I can help to lessen the load for you."

"I will take you to visit soon, perhaps tomorrow—it might brighten Mary's day."

"Not during the supper hour," Blanche said as she passed the women again, going the opposite way in the hallway toward the kitchen.

"That dress has a rip in the hem, girl. Why didn't you put it in the sewing basket?"

"My foot got stuck in the bottom. It's just a little rip—the teacher will never notice." Blanche winked at Ava. "Mama, be sure to ask your cousin about her plans for tomorrow night." With that stick of dynamite fused, she skipped from view, singing a love ditty.

Gracie faced Ava and grinned. "Tomorrow night?"

"Mr. Shilling originally asked me to dine with him tonight, but I told him you'd invited company, so he switched it to the next night. The man must be bored silly when his work day is done, and he has no one to chat with."

"Interesting," Gracie said. "Probably sent the flowers, too. Fellows do that sort of thing when they're wooing a lady."

"He is not wooing me. The man is not setting up residence in Blazer, and I am, so that's the end of the little romantic agenda you and your daughter are drumming up."

"Fine. Subject dropped for now," Gracie said. "I'm running behind and wondered if you might help in the kitchen. I hate to ask you to prepare the food for your own

party, but I want to make it special for everyone, and the Holiday youngsters can be so picky.”

“You know I haven’t cooked a meal in years, right?”

“I recall, from your letters that old Sookie worked in the kitchen and fed the saloon employees. Some days, I wish I had my own cook,” Gracie said, leading Ava down the hallway by the arm.

“Sookie is still there, and he made it clear he did not want any of us to darken his doorway when he was preparing meals,” Ava said. “Ma set me to work with Pa on the farm, choosing to teach my younger sister, Jenny, how to run a household, so I lost out on training at home as well.”

“Well, I can teach you the basics, but I’m not a fancy cook. Skylar has been a godsend in helping me fit in and run Slate’s home with some sort of efficiency. And Blanche is always willing to help, which surprises me. Knowing her deceased mother gave the young girl far too many chores for her age, I try not to burden her with menial tasks.”

“Eating is not a menial task, cousin. She will appreciate the discipline when that tall, dark stranger sweeps her off her feet someday.”

“Oh, my—she is a child who has grown up far too fast in my opinion. Slate will not be recommending suitors for a long time to come.”

“I agree. She is young and has a chance for a wonderful childhood, unlike us,” Ava said. “It is obvious that Blanche loves you and Slate and the life you’ve provided for her in Blazer. She will grow up strong in mind and emotions and make you both very proud.”

The girl darted for the entrance and nearly tripped over the ladies at the doorway to the kitchen, speaking as she went. “I took an apple for the teacher, Mama. She must be plumb worn out, trying to make Deardra understand anything as complicated as a college exam. That girl should stay home, marry Jim Stone who is crazy about her, and forget about a higher education.”

“Goodbye, Blanche,” Gracie said, rolling her eyes. “Have a good afternoon.”

“Yes, ma’am. My brain is operating just fine.” The door slammed behind her, and Ava saw the figure race past the window on her way to town.

“That girl will give me premature gray hair.”

“She is a delight. I think we will be great friends.”

Shep and Skylar Holiday arrived promptly at six with their three children. Dakota was the eldest, a handsome lad at five, and Chrissy was a very adventurous three-year-old who loved to explore her surroundings and had everyone on the lookout for the next exploratory crash. In a basket squirmed Simon, the baby of the family, whose flailing arms and feet seemed to suggest he might be a match for his rambunctious sister.

The men and children disappeared into the other room, and the three ladies prepared to serve the meal.

“Gracie, you look tired,” Skylar said. “Are you getting enough sleep? You’ve waited a long time for this baby, and now you need to look after yourself so you’ll be strong enough for the birthing.”

“I know. It’s just that there are so many hurting folks, and I want to help.”

“You’ll be of no help if you make yourself sick.” Skylar looked at Ava. “Your cousin takes on far too much. She needs to relax more. I hope you have influence over her where I have failed.”

“I know she wants this baby, but she finds it equally hard to sit still. I have offered to help with the Charring family who are grieving a lost son.”

“One of her many missions. That woman is so grateful for her second chance with Slate that she feels it her duty to show compassion to all of Blazer’s hard luck cases.”

“I shall try my best to rein her in, Skylar.” Ava could relate to the compulsion to fix other’s problems as payback for someone having rescued her. Yet, in her case, at that particular moment in time, the motivation would be wrongly placed. Gracie seemed to glow with some inner force Ava did not understand. Perhaps the new religion she’d mentioned on occasion in her letters was the agent spurring her on to do good works. She would have to ask her cousin one day. The discussion might help her manage to keep sitting in one spot, thus forcing her to rest.

“And how did you enjoy your first day in our town?” Skylar asked.

“Young Blanche showed me around, and it all felt very comfortable, like a safe place one might settle in and call home. I am glad I chose to come here.” She did not mention her reaction to the saloon. There was one to be found in every town, and she’d simply have to deal with its presence in Blazer rather than let the fears it triggered consume her.

“And there is a gentleman caller on the prowl,” Gracie said in a teasing voice as she scooped the mashed potatoes into a serving bowl.

“A gentleman caller—already?” Skylar’s eyes beamed, and in apparent reminiscence, added, “I remember those days.”

“Mr. Shilling is just a man I met on the stagecoach who is here temporarily on business. There is nothing long-lasting about him ‘calling’ on me, Ava said, hoping that would end the discussion.

“But he sent flowers. Only men who are serious about making a good impression on a lady send flowers.” Gracie ducked Ava’s swat and went to place the full bowl on the table. “We’re almost ready—how about you call the family in from the parlor, Ava? Skylar, you can make up plates for the young’uns before we all gather at the table.”

Skylar nudged Ava playfully as she passed her. “Flowers, Miss Gardner? Gracie is right about men hereabouts not sending flowers for no good reason. I’d guard my heart if your admirer plans on leaving.”

“No fear there, Skylar, as it is too early for me to entertain men. They are in my far distant future.”

“Oh, love seldom works that way, my dear,” Skylar said, removing three small plates from the shelf, “but some things are best learned in time. We shall see.”

Ava felt confident with her timetable, and she was determined to stick to her plans to modify her character to respond as a lady should. The task would require her entire body, soul, and mind to come into agreement, which the liberated woman knew would be a learning process. Her foremost goal was to replace her trained, flippant interactions with men into something that would support a relationship of deeper value.

Being among the people seated around Gracie’s table would make such a character transition possible.

Orson sat alone in his hotel room with a tray he’d ordered from the kitchen. He was not a loner, and he missed people, especially the ones he knew and loved. The

strangers occupying his efforts this past year were exhausting, and if he hadn't promised his wife on her death bed to pursue the ghosts that plagued him, he'd have long abandoned the mission that had gone awry.

The walls seemed to close in around him. He jumped up, grabbed his hat, and left his second-floor room for the outside and a dose of fresh air. He walked along the storefronts and stopped to stare at the activity surrounding the saloon. Orson had witnessed Ava staring long and hard at the house of ill-repute earlier, and he wished to know the directions her thoughts had taken her.

He crossed the street and continued until the shops and noise were behind him. When the sign marking the town's limits came into view, he recalled the instructions to the Yagger place given to him by Ace, the hotel owner. It was nearby, and curiosity spurred him on. When he rounded the corner, he recognized the two-story building that had been described to him.

Light shone through the windows. Orson heard a piano playing an upbeat tune and children squealing. The family had provided a fine welcome for Ava, the newcomer. That alone encouraged him, instilling hope that his mission would not be a total waste of time and money.

When the door opened, it startled him, and he stepped into the shadow of a tree. Sounds of a baby crying drifted to the end of the walkway, and he saw Ava bouncing a bundle in her arms and pacing back and forth across the length of the porch. When the crying continued, she descended the steps and started down the cobblestone path, stopping to show the infant the display of flowers. The moonlight illuminating the couple made Orson catch his breath.

She was gorgeous. Dare he believe that her beauty reached the inside? He leaned against the trunk, and his foot slipped on some damp leaves underfoot. The noise attracted the woman and he heard her gasp.

Before she fled back to the porch, he called out, “It’s only me, Miss Gardner.”

She halted her escape and twisted to face the shadow the tree had cast from the post lantern on the roadway where he stood.

“Mr. Shilling—is that you?”

He stepped into the open. “You’ve caught me. I never intended to spoil your party. I will leave now.”

“You can stay a few minutes,” she said. “I think the baby prefers the sound of your voice to the music inside. It’s the first time he’s quieted since the after-dinner festivities started.”

“It’s likely past his bedtime. Children react best to schedules.”

“You are familiar with the likes and dislikes of babies, sir?”

“I am.” Should he tell her he had a daughter at home? His heart weakened at the picture of the woman as she stood there cradling the child. “My daughter is six-years-old now, but when she was young, there were many nights we disrupted her schedule and dealt with the consequences for days afterward.”

“You never said you were a family man.”

He saw the surprise on her face and suspected her mind weighed the honor of his dinner invitation.

“My wife died three years ago.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Mr. Shilling.”

“It’s getting easier, but I miss my little Sheena when I am gone on business.”

“Sheena is a different name. I’m not sure I’ve heard it before.” Ava moved closer to the road to stand at the gate, a few feet away from Orson.

“My wife was a tad eccentric, but we made a go of it. My mother liked her, and she is a hard woman to satisfy.”

“Does your mother look after Sheena when you are away from home?”

“She does. I owe her a lot.” He studied her. “Are your mother and father still alive?”

“No, my parents and sister caught the plague years back when the outbreak came to town. I am alone except for my cousin, Gracie.”

“My condolences,” he said. “Mrs. Yagger must think a lot of you to throw you such a grand welcome party.”

“We only met once when I was very young, but she found me a few years ago, and we have exchanged letters ever since.”

“Then she barely knows you? Unless of course, women can share in words on paper as effectively as they can face to face?” Orson asked, wondering if the ladies had compared notes on their questionable pasts. It would be nice for one struggling to have a friend, even if only by mail.

He noticed relief flood Ava’s face when the door to the house opened, cutting short her time to respond to his question. Light from behind the woman revealed Gracie Yagger’s silhouette. “Ava, come in now. Shep and Skylar are packing up to go, and they’re looking for Simon.”

Ava turned to Orson. “I must go in now, but I’ll see you tomorrow at six. Good night, Mr. Shilling.”

He watched her hurry up the walkway and saw the stern warning on her cousin’s face as she stared him down. Maybe he had made an enemy by lingering outside the doorway this late in the evening.

Orson turned and headed back towards town.

C H A P T E R 4

The next morning, Ava got up, dressed and hurried into the kitchen to find Gracie pounding dough on a board. “I recall determining my mother’s mood by the force of her hand on the morning bread.”

Gracie glanced in her direction and then returned to her task. “Suppose I am a trifle put out.”

“Did Blanche or Slate set your morning off to a bad start?”

“No, you did.”

“Me? I just walked into the room.”

“Well, not you directly, but—what was that man’s name? The one who is stalking you.”

“Mr. Shilling from last night? He’s not stalking me.”

“What do you call it when a man hides in the shadows and watches a dinner party late at night, uninvited, I might add?”

Ava hesitated. “I never got around to asking him why he came. The baby was fussy, and I took him out of the noisy house for a few minutes.”

“A woman should be able to step outside her door without fearing that a man is

lurking in the shadows for goodness knows what reason.” The dough received an extra hard pound after that statement.

“He did startle me at first, but he has always been kind and a perfect gentleman in my company,” Ava said.

“To send a woman flowers, and invite her to dinner on her first day in town is not proper,” Gracie fumed. “If you wish to portray a character of worth here in Blazer, you won’t respond to such wooing.”

“Don’t be absurd. Dinner is a far cry from marrying a man the same day you land in town as you did.”

“That was different. The coupling was prearranged by a reputable source.”

“If I recall, it was Mildred Crenshaw from the Westward Home and Hearts Matrimonial Agency?”

“Why, yes, and she made a good match for Slate and me.”

“I believe she was the one who signed the paper for my match as well, but I hightailed it in the opposite direction.”

“Really? Pray tell,” Gracie said, wiping her hands on her bib apron and approaching Ava.

“The note came with the money. I supposed the donor to be a man who wanted to marry me—why else would he set me free from my self-made prison? Whoever he is, he knows the hole I crawled out of, and I’ll have none of that. His money provided the funds for me to run, as he suggested. I simply ran in a different direction.”

“I think I understand, and I am glad you ran to us,” Gracie said, hugging Ava. She pushed her to arms-length and held her gaze steady. “But just because a man in a fine suit pays a lady attention doesn’t make the match any more right, even if he’s unaware of your past. Be careful, that’s all I ask.”

“I will,” Ava agreed. “I am only going out to dinner with a man who is visiting our town. I’d be a fool to encourage any affections to grow between us. I am not the least bit interested in mending a broken heart.”

“Smart girl.” She reached for Ava’s hand. “Come over here and let me show you how to make bread and cinnamon rolls—they are Slate’s favorite.”

As she puttered around the kitchen, Ava sought to recollect the details of the short discussions that had transpired between her and Mr. Shilling. He was in construction and there in Blazer on business. He was a widower with a six-year-old daughter, Sheena, whom his mother cared for in his absence. He insinuated that his mother held them on a tight rein with notions as eccentric as his wife’s had been—but that was her take on his words. It was none of her business to judge the characters of either lady.

When he had started to ask questions about her, even one as simple as about her relationship with Gracie, her throat had choked up with the fear that she might slip and give away her secret.

It would have been accurate to say that Gracie had searched her out after the new bride had found religion. Ava suspected her purpose in contacting the long-lost cousin had primarily been to drag Ava out of sin’s pit and introduce her to the savior of her soul. At the time, the saloon girl, whose self-worth sat at an all-time low, had skipped over the religious applications included in her correspondence, but Ava felt more in the mood now to pursue knowledge in the spiritual realm. It certainly made for a newer Gracie than the rebellious child she’d met years ago.

Ava concluded it might prove difficult in her new life to relate partial truths in conversation, careful not to dive in so deeply that her past would become suspect.

She sighed, and Gracie must have taken it as fatigue. “The lunch dishes are done, and you’ve helped me non-stop since morning, Ava. You must still be tired from your journey.”

“I am somewhat lacking in energy.”

“Besides, you have a date to prepare for, and black circles under your eyes will never do. The man will think I am working you too hard.”

“I don’t mind helping, but perhaps I will lay down for a while before it’s time to dress for dinner.”

Gracie untied Ava’s apron and gave her a gentle push toward the staircase. “Off you go. I’ll see you later when you’re well-rested.”

Ava only intended to relax on top of the covers for a short while, but within minutes, she fell fast asleep. When she awoke, the sun was low in the sky, and she bolted to her feet.

The afternoon nap had worked wonders. She felt revived and grateful for having a clear head with which to control what or what not she disclosed during her dinner engagement. She wondered how long it would take for her responses to become second nature, for it was exhausting to consciously plan out every encounter beforehand.

Ava chose to wear her favorite new gown to dinner that evening. The least she could do was not to embarrass the well-dressed man in the three-piece suit who had extended the invitation to her. It was turquoise, with layers of flounce in the back and

quite shapely in the front. Some ivory embroidered detail made the outfit exquisite, but it still landed somewhere at the low-end budget of fashionable attire. Determined to put on a good front, Ava had not wasted a penny of the money entrusted to her, carefully stretching out the funds for as long as possible to finance her uncertain future. In her wardrobe, she found shoes, a purse, and a shawl to compliment the ensemble. She wore her hair in an upsweep, not too harsh but not loose enough to be considered lewd.

Looking at the image staring back at her in the mirror, Ava grinned and said, “Now, you don’t look half-bad all gussied up like a lady.” Satisfied she’d done all she could, she headed for the door.

Slate was in the kitchen when she showed her face, and he whistled long enough to make Ava blush. Gracie turned from the cookstove and studied her. “Oh, my. You look just like your mama.”

“Who looked just like your mama,” Ava said, and the girls laughed.

“I took after my father: the blonde hair and the meat on my bones.”

“Don’t you go putting yourself down,” Slate said, coming over to plant a kiss on her cheek. “Mrs. Yagger, you are a fine-fitting lassie who simply glows with motherhood on the horizon.”

“She needs to get off her feet, Slate. Her ankles are swollen,” Ava said, forcing the woman to sit at the table. “While I wait, let me dish out your portions. Where is Blanche tonight?”

“Having a sleepover at a friend’s house,” Gracie said. “She and Beth are impossible to keep apart.”

“Well, I would think that with you being so close to delivery, the girl needs to help around here more,” Slate said.

“I’m here now, Slate, and I promise to pull my end of the load. Tomorrow, I will follow instructions from the lady of the house while she rests with her feet up and sips tea.”

“Just the same, it isn’t like Blanche to shirk her chores.”

“I told her she could go, Slate. She’s just a child, and I won’t be depriving her of that joy like me and Ava were.”

Slate threw his hands in the air. “I give up. Three women in the house are too many to fight.”

“Maybe soon, you will have four,” Gracie teased. “What if the Lord thinks you need a girl instead of a boy? Are you ready for that?”

Slate chuckled. “Whatever he sends me, I’m ready for it, but in the meantime, please rest. This is your first, and—”

“Don’t you dare say I’m getting up in years, Mr. Yagger,” Gracie warned.

Ava chuckled. “Sit, both of you, and let me dish out your suppers.”

She’d barely finished when a knock came at the door.

“Perfect timing. Sounds like loverboy has arrived,” Slate said.

Ava looked horrified.

“Loverboy? I daresay you’d best watch your tongue, Mr. Yagger,” Gracie roared.

“It’s all right, Gracie. He was just joshing,” Ava said after recovering from his remark. You just never knew what might come out of that man’s mouth. “You two relax and enjoy your meal, and leave the dishes for me to clean up when I get home.”

“I’ll do no such thing,” Gracie grunted. “I’m not an invalid.”

“Of course, you’re not, but I can help out once in a while. Besides, I slept this afternoon and will not be ready to retire until late.”

The knock sounded harder, and Ava inhaled deeply. “I’m off now. You two behave while I’m gone.” Ava laughed, grabbed up her purse, and hurried to answer the door. She opened it to see Mr. Shilling dressed in his usual finery, with a bouquet wrapped together with a yellow ribbon at the base of the stems.

He passed them to her as she stood staring. “Good evening, Miss Gardner. You look absolute lovely.”

She took in the flowers, somewhat dazed. “You didn’t have to bring me flowers again.”

His brows raised. “Again?”

“Why, yes,” she stammered. “A gorgeous arrangement arrived at our doorway yesterday, and I assumed...” Now, she was embarrassed, for he looked totally mystified.

“I am sorry someone beat me to the punch, but I spent an hour in a nearby meadow picking this fresh bunch to give you tonight. That’s the way a gentleman gives gifts to a lady.”

“But I’ve met no one else who might have reason to gift a stranger since my arrival.”

“Perhaps your cousin’s friends?”

“They would have said something when they saw them sitting in the parlor.”

“And was there a card?”

“A welcome card, nothing more.”

“Then, I see I have competition. A secret admirer. Apparently, someone saw you downtown yesterday morning and has laid claim to the newcomer.”

“Then he should have signed his name,” Ava said, a trifle annoyed. “I do not respond well to games men may choose to play.”

“I shall remember that in the future,” Orson said, a little too glibly for her liking.

“Give me a minute to put these in water.”

Ava rushed back into the kitchen, found a long, narrow tumbler in the cupboard, and filled it with water. She ignored the questioning gazes coming from the couple seated at the table and plunked the flowers down between them. “Enjoy,” she muttered, before hurrying back to the man at the door.

“Shall we go, Mr. Shilling?”

C H A P T E R 5

Orson took Ava to Ace's Hotel, where a cook and waitress stood ready to serve the guests as they arrived. The table linens were pure white, and the napkins were hunter green to match the curtains, whereas the walls were a pale, softer shade of the color. The chair he pulled out for her to sit upon was cushioned and upholstered in a striped pattern that picked up the colors scattered around the dining room.

The plates were trimmed in what appeared to be gold around the edge. Her finger traced it as she sought to take in all the splendor.

"I suspect that gold ring could be the real thing, considering the part of the country we are in," Orson said as he took his napkin, shook out the fold, and laid it out flat on his lap. She did likewise, as if she had done it her entire life.

"Did you know Slate Yagger has a claim up in the country?" she asked to make conversation.

"I did not. He is an industrious man, to be sure."

"Indeed, although he much prefers working in the livery with the animals, and according to Blanche, they go to the gold site yearly for a holiday. I'm told that is where the child met the Yaggers, and they love to celebrate their beginnings there."

"A wonderful tradition full of fond memories."

"I believe it is where Gracie found religion, as well."

“Ah, it must be holy ground indeed,” he said.

She could not determine his motivation for the remark. “Are you being sacrilegious, Mr. Shilling? I understand the concept of a church being holy, but I doubt an outdoor piece of land with a creek running through it could be considered sacred ground.”

“My mother says that wherever Christians’ walk is holy unto the Lord,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I am not sure what that means myself.”

“I, too, am ignorant concerning spiritual matters, but I plan on attending Gracie’s church in the hope of educating myself.”

“A noble venture, Miss Gardner. I wish you luck.” He motioned to the waitress, who rushed over.

“Good evening, Mr. Shilling,” she nodded to Ava, “and to you, miss. What can I bring you to drink?”

“Do you enjoy spirits, Miss Gardner?” he asked.

She unconsciously licked her dry lips as she had downed all kinds of liquor in her day. “I’d prefer not to sir.”

“Iced tea might suit your fancy on this warm evening, miss,” the server offered.

“That sounds wonderful. Thank you.”

“I’ll have the same,” Orson said.

When the girl had left, Ava said, “If you prefer a stronger drink, I won’t be offended.”

“Iced tea is fine. There is a time and place for everything.”

“Do you frequent the saloons, Mr. Shilling?”

“Rarely. My family has suffered bitter consequences resulting from my father’s enjoyment of such institutions,” he said.

“I am sorry to hear that—shall we talk of brighter things, then?” Ava said, nipping that dialogue in the bud, wondering whatever had possessed her to open that can of worms. She must, indeed, learn the delicate art of polite conversation. Orson Shilling would be a good practice run for her. Knowing his repulsive dealings with the house of ill repute, she’d closed the door on any chance of their becoming more than mere dinner companions.

“Tell me about your daughter,” Ava said, believing it to be a safer topic.

“Sheena is my pride and joy. She is not at all pretentious and would live in the barn if my mother didn’t demand she balance her interests.”

“Ah, so, she would get along famously with Slate Yagger,” Ava said, removing her hand for the server to place the drinks on the table. She chastised herself, bringing to memory that a lady kept her hands in her lap. Never once had Skylar or Gracie placed their elbows on the table during the welcome home dinner. By contrast, she had fought the habit at every turn.

“Would you care to view the menu now, Mr. Shilling?” the waitress asked.

“Bring them to the table, thank you.” He nodded, and the girl scurried away. She returned a short minute later with two papers, the words displayed on them in a decorative script, outlining five meal choices.

“Salmon? I can’t recall the last time I enjoyed fish,” Ava remarked as she scanned the page. “Perhaps they came from the French Creek and have gold dust speckled on them.”

“Perhaps,” he said, consumed with reading the menu.

She looked at the price and gasped. “Oh. yes, I do believe they are cooked in gold dust. I’ll have the beef stew, please.”

When the server returned, Orson ordered two salmon dinners, and she swallowed the lump in her throat. That would take half of what remained of her savings. “I’m paying, Miss Gardner, and I am thrilled to remedy the lack of fish in your diet. I hear seafood is a healthy choice.”

“I suppose it is,” she said, her fingers fidgeting with the napkin on her lap.

“Tell me about your family while we wait,” he said.

“My family? Well, you have seen the best part of it: Gracie.” She grabbed for her drink, and in her haste, managed to spill some of it on the linen. “Oh, my…”

“Are you nervous, Miss Gardner?” Nonchalantly, he reached for an extra napkin on a nearby table and proceeded to dab at the wet spot.

“I daresay I am not accustomed to dining in such a grand setting.” As if to mock her lack of experience, a man with a violin started playing softly in the background.

“Then consider this my treat. It will draw out the princess in you—I hear every girl has dreamed of such royal splendors at one time or another.”

“I don’t recall ever entertaining such a fantasy, but thank you for bringing me to dine

here. I shall cherish the memory forever.” There. She had blown it. A memory...he’d know that not only did she not frequent such luxury, but she actually possessed a poverty mentality, meaning she was no doubt, a waste of his time and effort.

Orson Shilling never flinched. Ava could not tell if he’d been shocked or accepted her response as her personal normal, but he did not seem any less interested in pursuing their evening together. It might have been easier if he had called it to an immediate halt, for his acceptance inspired dreams to spark emotions in her where they had no right.

“What are your plans now that you’ve decided to live in Blazer?” he asked. He took a sip of his drink.

“My timing is opportune, coming here with my cousin so close to her delivery time. I suspect that will keep me busy for a while, but I shall keep my eyes open for a job so I will not become one of those guests who never move out.”

Orson laughed. “You do not look like the type to sponge off of well-meaning folks forever.”

She grinned and took a chance, eager to see how her new character was shining through. “What type do I look like to you, Mr. Shilling?”

He leaned back in his chair, placed a hand on his chin, and tapped his fingernail against his skin, studying her all the while but playfully, or so it seemed to Ava.

“If I lived here, I would love to see you behind the counter at the mercantile. Or perhaps you have the inquisitiveness necessary to be a reporter. You’d meet plenty of folks if you trained for the post office. I’d say your possibilities are endless.”

“We both agree, not a waitress, and especially not at Ace’s Hotel.”

“You have a contagious and winning smile, Miss Gardner. I’d say that will get you anything your heart desires,” he said. His sincerity in her abilities left her almost believing anything was possible. “Do you know what your heart desires?”

There was something deep-set in his expression, as if her answer was something he’d contemplated and was now seeking confirmation. The man was complex and out of her league. She’d never understand his kind.

“I desire a fresh start and reuniting with my lost family. I shall have to see what else unfolds as the days pass.”

“Wise to move slowly and avoid pitfalls that may be lurking nearby to swallow you up.”

She frowned, not liking the direction of the conversation. “I am a big girl and can look after myself. You need not worry about demons wishing to swallow me alive.”

His expression lightened. “Maybe I am thinking about that secret admirer, who could be watching us this very minute. Or worse still, he might be that drunk who wanted to use your shoulder as a pillow in the stagecoach that knows you are a princess in waiting.”

“Then he —and you apparently—know something I do not,” Ava said, annoyed at his nonsense. “Why do you talk so foolish? Just when I think you are the sane one between the two of us, you say the most annoying things.”

“I apologize, Princess,” he said, without batting an eye.

If the meal had not shown up at that very minute, she would have walked out and settled for leftovers at the Yaggers’ house.

The salmon was cooked to perfection, and the vegetables were delicious but new to her palate. She refused to ask what they were, lest her ignorance turn her into a laughing stock again. Instead, she spoke to the waitress when she came to pick up their dirty plates. “Is it the cook’s secret, or does he give out recipes on how to cook these scrumptious vegetables?”

“Not the salmon, but the asparagus or the squash?” the girl asked.

Great, now that she had a name, she went for the gold. “I would love to learn how to cook them for my family.”

The cook was standing at the doorway to the kitchen listening in, but now he moseyed on over to the table. “You’re new in town?”

“Yes, but I plan on making Blazer my home.”

“Do you like to cook, miss?”

“I like to learn new dishes, and I do know my way around a kitchen.” It was a bit of a stretch, but if he’d just give her the recipe, she felt certain Gracie could help her master it.

“I’m looking for an apprentice, someone who enjoys the kitchen as much as me. If you’re looking for a job, that is.”

“A job?” Did she look as if she needed a job?

“Go for it, Princess,” Orson said.

“It’s been a while since I worked in a kitchen—cooked meals were included in my previous line of employment. I’m sorry if I’ve misled you.” Ava stood, hating that

her dinner companion had heard that tidbit of her past, as all information gave ammunition that could add up if he wanted to make a possible guess. “Mr. Shilling, are you ready to leave?”

He eased to his feet, not seemingly in any hurry, and from his billfold dropped a large bill on the table. “Keep the change. I’ll pop in later for a coffee before I retire. Thank you for a delicious meal.”

Outside, Ava breathed in the night air as if she’d been suffocating. This was all wrong. She was not ready for a job or a romance or...whatever this evening was doing to her insides.

Orson helped her into the carriage he’d rented, and lit the lantern hanging from the corner, before hitting the lines on the solitary horse and trotting down the road. “Are you in a hurry to go home? I found a really nice view from a sandy beach when I was out earlier, if you’d care to see it.”

Ava did not trust herself to linger in his company, but she felt helpless to resist. She breathed in deeply, the energy boosting her mood. “The lake view sounds delightful, Mr. Shilling.”

Five minutes out of town, he turned the carriage left into a thicket, and stopped. “We need to walk from here.” He stepped out, grabbed the lantern, and offered her his hand. “Bring your shawl. It might be cooler by the water.”

She grabbed her cape and purse, and when he offered a hand, she took it cautiously, for her good sense was still alert to the fact that she was in a lonely spot in the late evening with a relative stranger. She should be afraid but rarely did a man surprise her anymore, and she did have her trusty derringer tucked away inside her purse. It was a weapon she knew full well how to use.

A few minutes later, the wooded area thinned to reveal a clearing that led to a sandy beach. Not a ripple stirred the water. Its stillness quieted her soul. A brilliant beam from the full moon shone from the far shore to where they stood, bringing the nearby vegetation to a shine in its depths. “A reflective mirror image. It’s glorious, Orson.”

“Do you realize that’s the first time you’ve called me by my Christian name?”

“I hadn’t noticed. I hope you are not offended.”

“On the contrary. I’ve never cared for my name before I heard it spoken by you.”

“That can’t be true, sir. You were married—surely your wife called you by your first name.”

He chuckled. “Iris called me Mr. Shilling or husband dear, but never Orson.”

She scrunched her brows and cocked her head to the side, not knowing whether to believe him or not. “You’re joshing.”

“I’m afraid not. I did say she was eccentric, did I not?”

“I suppose I have never met such a woman. You were quite the gentleman to allow such formality behind closed doors.”

“A man does not want to talk about his deceased wife while in the company of a lovely lady such as yourself.”

“What game are you playing? You are here on business, and you choose to fill a stranger’s head with flattery. What’s a girl to think about that?”

He studied her and then backed off. “Perhaps I am concerned about your secret

admirer and want to stay close to protect you.”

She raised a brow and said, “You are teasing me, sir. I do not fear a person —as his or her identity is still under question—who would send me a welcoming bouquet.”

“Are you not the least bit curious?”

“I leave that query entirely in yours and Gracie’s hands. You two have enough suspicion to keep the well-wisher at bay.”

“You are rather independent, aren’t you?”

“It’s a newly developed status, and I am enjoying its freedom.”

“Did you leave an oppressor behind, perhaps one lying in wait to snatch you back?” His question was asked in a flippant tone, as if playing a spy game with his prey, but it hit Ava with the force of a lightning strike. He reached for her arm. “I’m sorry, Ava. My misplaced humor has upset you.”

She sucked the moist air into her lungs, and turned her attention to the lake. “It’s a rather unpleasant conversation for this grand setting, Mr. Shilling.”

“Oh, I did like Orson better.”

“Perhaps you should take me home now,” she said.

“I have enjoyed this evening, Ava, more than I expected to?”

“Why would a man bother to invite a woman out if he didn’t expect to have a pleasant time?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I am intrigued, sir. I did not take you to be a complicated man.”

“Ah, so, just how do you see me?”

“As a successful businessman, a grieving widower, a father, and a faithful son—although somewhat influenced by his mother, or dare I say, his deceased wife?” Ava added the last remark timidly. He had asked for her opinion but the insecure woman waited to be put in her place.

Instead, he found humor in her suggestion. “Oh? So, you think the women in my life have hen-pecked me?”

“Just an outsider’s speculation,” she said, attempting to hide her teasing grin.

She witnessed his face mask drop, and his gaze melted into hers. The instant connection drew her in, and if he had pulled her into his arms and kissed her at that very moment, she’d have welcomed his advances. Ava attempted to break the spell, fearing the source of her attraction had come as an old habit but hoping, by some miracle, the attraction was genuine. When her feet finally did her bidding, Ava stepped out of reach, breaking the hold of his piercing eyes and the lure of his closeness.

He cleared his throat, and she watched him summon the mask to reappear. She had no idea it had even existed before that night. It appeared as if Mr. Orson Shilling had a past replete with secrets he was not willing to share. “The night air is getting chilly. I don’t want you to catch a sniffle and take it home to your cousin. I’ll lead the way back to the carriage.”

This time, Orson did not offer his hand. He picked up the lantern from the ground

where he had set it and began the return trek. Ava followed behind him, perplexed, and disillusioned by the way her evening had ended.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 6:58 am

C H A P T E R 6

“You came in late, Ava,” Gracie said. “We retired early. I hope you didn’t mind that we were not up when you finally returned home.”

“Not at all. I don’t want to disrupt your life here, cousin, and the only reason I don’t get a job and find accommodations of my own is that I might be of service to you with the baby coming.”

“I don’t expect you to move out until you’ve found a man to support you, but I also don’t want you to feel the need to babysit the expectant mother.”

“You look tired, and I want to help,” Ava said, leading Gracie to a chair at the table. “Let me cook breakfast. You can oversee it from here.”

Ava headed for the stove, covered her dress with an apron, and turned to bow in fun. “You will never guess what happened last night.” Ava did not wait for a response. “I was offered a job to help in the dining room kitchen by the cook at Ace’s Hotel—can you believe that? I was afraid to tell him that my culinary skills were rusty, to say the least.”

“A job at the hotel is a great opportunity for you,” Gracie said, excited about the prospect. “I wish we’d had more time to brush up on skills before the offer came.”

“Perhaps when you are settled as a household of four, I will approach the chef again. By that time, I will be a pro in the kitchen. Taking care of you and your family will be great practice, and you won’t fire me if I burn something.”

Gracie laughed. “That is a great plan, Ava. I will forever be in your debt.”

“That’s my line,” Ava said. “You taking me in and giving me a second chance is more than I could have hoped for.”

“We are a great pair, aren’t we? Both victims of a lousy upbringing and bad choices in the name of survival. God never left us. Even when we didn’t know Him, He beckoned for us to come home.”

“I am looking forward to church on Sunday,” Ava said, lifting a cast iron pan onto the cookstove. “Do you realize I have only attended worship services once in my entire life? Father did not have a good experience, and he forbade it afterward.”

“He knows your name, Ava Gardner, and if your heart is open, He’ll meet you there. You be sure to listen for that still small voice.”

“I shall.” She began to speak her meal preparations aloud and watched for Gracie’s nod of approval. When done and placed on the table for the family that had started to gather, she smiled at her accomplishment. It looked good enough to eat.

“Smells good in here, wife,” Slate said as he took his place at the head of the table.

“All the credit goes to Ava, who mastered the menu alone and unassisted.”

Slate whistled as he took in the meal. “Fried potatoes, eggs, and bacon as your first attempt? You did good, Ava.”

“Thank you. I packed some lunch for you to bring to work, a mixture of any leftovers I could find in the pantry. Wasn’t sure what you generally took, but I’ll get the hang of it.”

Slate looked at Gracie, who shrugged her shoulders. “She volunteered to help me out because I can barely see my feet anymore, but it sounds more like a takeover.”

“Sounds just fine to me. You need to rest up. The baby’s coming soon, and you’ll need to be strong.”

“You think I’m so old I can’t deliver a child like every other woman?” Gracie’s voice edged on irritation.

“Now, that’s not what I said. It’s your first, and a man has a right to be concerned. Heard tell women get a might touchy just before a birthing,” Slate said. He motioned to Ava and the sleepy, new arrival Blanche, to join them at the table. “Come on, ladies. We can’t let this grub get cold on account of our staring at it.”

For five days, Ava took over all the kitchen duties, rarely putting her foot outside the door. Gracie shared tricks of the trade and recipes, encouraging her efforts the entire time as she sat in the rocker and finished mending the clothes in her sewing basket. The women also worked on some knitted garments for the baby and crocheted a warm blanket for the bassinet.

When Gracie squealed, Ava looked up from her work, and gasped at the sight of her cousin. Her face was drained of color, and she wore a look of horror on her face.

“What is it?” Ava said, rushing to her side.

“Something happened.”

“You mean with the baby—is he kicking?”

“Maybe kicking his way out, but..., oh, Ava, I am so ignorant about this entire birthing business.”

“Didn’t the doctor tell you what to expect?”

She groaned and doubled over. Ava ran to the door and yelled, “Blanche, come quickly.”

The girl arrived from her bedroom, rubbing her eyes, her sleep having been disturbed.

“Blanche, run and get your father from the barn, and then go for the doctor. Your mama is going to have a baby.”

“A baby!”

“Yes, and the little one is suddenly impatient, so hurry.”

Ava snatched the napkin from the accent table where it was lying over the plate of pastry crumbs the ladies left behind from their earlier treat, and used it to pat dry the perspiration beading on Gracie’s face.

“When Slate comes, we’ll get you up to bed—”

“Oh, Ava, I’m so embarrassed. I’ve ruined this chair, and my dress... everything is so wet.”

“Your water has burst. That’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Ava reassured her. “It’s part of the process.”

Gracie grasped Ava’s wrist, her fingernails digging into her skin. “What do you know about birthing?”

“One of the girls at the saloon had a baby,” Ava said, biting her lip, not wanting to expand on that horror story.

“Why do you look like that? What happened?” Gracie said, panicking.

“One of her past clients came and beat her up for not coming down anymore. He started the labor coming, and she was so fragile...it did not go well.”

“The baby died?” Gracie clutched a hand to her bulging stomach.

“Yes. And the mother.”

“Did you see it happen?”

“Some, but your situation is totally different. This birthing came on natural-like. It’s just your baby wanting to make a house call, is all.”

Slate appeared on the scene, looking as ashen as his wife, his white knuckles gripping the casing of the doorway.

Ava called to him. “Slate, we need to get your wife upstairs.” When he didn’t move, she said in a firmer voice, “Slate—now, before the doctor comes.”

He rushed in. “Yeah, Blanche is running for him now.” He seemed to have second thoughts. “I shouldn’t have let her go out this late. It’s dusk, and I think she only had a housecoat on.”

“Help me with Gracie, then you can run after her. Hurry, now, Slate. This baby appears to be in a hurry to make an entrance.”

Slate bent down, wrapped his arms around his wife, and scooped her into his arms. Fear must have fed his strength, for the woman’s size was a load to carry. Up the stairs and into their room, he took her without a missed step.

Ava was there ahead of him, pulling down the blankets and throwing the heavy birthing sheet on the mattress to save it. He laid her down and ran his fingers through his hair while she wailed from another cramp.

“Go—find Blanche and the doctor,” Ava ordered. “And be quick about it. I know almost as little as your wife about bringing a baby into the world.”

Slate disappeared, and when the pain let up, Ava helped Gracie out of her cumbersome dress and into a flannel nightgown. It took two attempts, and Ava feared the baby would arrive without the doctor. She ran for the crate the couple had previously packed with the items the doctor had suggested. The physician had no idea he was dealing with a houseful of uninformed people whose age should have left them better educated for such an event.

Dr. Breacher arrived upstairs, out of breath from rushing, and with Blanche and Slate on his heels. Husband and daughter stood gaping at the scene unfolding from the door, and when the doctor reached the bedside, Ava went to shoo the spectators away. “Put water on to boil, and make strong coffee. Everyone will need a cup when this is over.”

She went back to the bed. The doctor removed his stethoscope from his ears and looked up. “You’re Ava Gardner, right?” She nodded, and he continued, “I haven’t had the privilege of meeting Gracie’s cousin yet, but I heard you were helping out. I appreciate that you gave her an opportunity to rest up. That woman is hard to keep up with. Doctor Breacher is the name.”

“Is there anything I can do for you, Doctor Breacher?” she said, marveling at his casual chitchat while his patient writhed in agony in response to yet another bout of pain.

“You’ve done just fine so far. Our patient is as comfortable as can be expected at this

point. The baby has dropped, but I suspect it will be a couple of hours before the tike makes an appearance.”

“Can I bring you coffee, sir?”

“That would be right nice of you. I missed supper and almost missed young Blanche, having just come in from an emergency out of town.”

“I am grateful that you were available. I’d be lost without you here to handle this.”

The doctor laughed. “You sound near as frantic as those two downstairs. Nothing to fear here. Birthing comes naturally to a woman, and Gracie is healthy and strong. It’ll all come to pass in the Lord’s good time.”

Ava exhaled and smiled. “I’ll get you some coffee and maybe a bite to nibble on while you work.”

“That would be much appreciated, Miss Gardner.”

When Ava went downstairs, she was surprised to see Orson Shilling sitting with Slate at the kitchen table. He looked as out of sorts as the father.

He stood when she walked into the kitchen. “Mr. Shilling—”

Blanche intervened. “Oh, thank heavens for Mr. Shilling, my new best friend,” the girl over-emphasized. “He found me running down the road in my nightclothes, not wanting to take the time to dress and brought me to the infirmary in his carriage. When Doc wasn’t there at first, I panicked, but then his wife pointed to his buggy coming down the road, and Mr. Shilling raced to intercept it and tell him Mama was in labor. About that time, Papa came racing up on his horse, and all three of us followed the doc home.”

“That’s quite the tale, Blanche. It seems Mr. Shilling is in the habit of being in the right place at the right time.” She smiled at the man, and he sat down again. “Coffee, gentlemen?”

“I made some fresh. Strong like you said, Ava,” Slate said. “How is Gracie?”

“Fine, now that the doctor is here. Don’t you worry none. He says it might take a couple more hours, so I am bringing him up some coffee and a plate of food. With all his doctoring tonight, the man has missed supper.”

She went to the pantry and icebox to find food for his plate—some crackers, a pickled egg, cheese, a ham slice, and some leftover potato salad—and placed it on a tray. She poured some black coffee in the biggest cup she could find, hoping to keep the physician alert.

As she headed for the door, Orson jumped to his feet, “Let me help you up with the tray,” he offered, taking it from her hands.

“Thank you, kind sir.”

On the way up, he casually remarked, “I wondered where you were hiding out lately. Thought for sure I’d made a bad impression and had to stop myself a dozen times from coming and knocking on your door uninvited.”

“I harbor no ill will against you. We enjoyed a pleasant evening together. You need not feel it necessary to invite me out a second time.”

“Oh, but I’ve wanted to,” he said. “I suppose now is not a good time to talk about such things. I am sorry, Miss Gardner.”

“Ava, please,” she said. “The doctor has managed to calm my nerves considerably.

He might do the same for you—the tray is rattling under your shaky grip.”

“I don’t plan on going inside. Not a fan of birthing rooms,” he said, the same ashen face clouding his usual rosy cheeks.

“You will not be much help calming the father downstairs with a reaction like that, Orson Shilling.”

“Glad I was called to construction and not doctoring. I have a weak stomach,” he said.

“Well, tonight, I was reminded that this is a natural event in a woman’s life, and we need not panic. Nevertheless, we are required to wait patiently while nature takes its course.”

At the top of the stairs, he passed the tray off to Ava. “I hope the best for Gracie and her child.”

“So far, so good. There is no need for that long face.” She felt his eyes on her as she walked the short distance to Gracie’s room. Ava glanced to the staircase, smiled, pushed open the door with her hip, and stepped over the threshold, clear of his penetrating observation.

C H A P T E R 7

The baby came into the world strong-fisted, making Ava's job of cleaning the tiny fingers a challenge, while dodging kicks from the boy's ever-flailing legs. She smoothed the soft, warm cloth over the infant's head, over the thin layer of a blond mass against the scalp, defining him as Gracie's son. The nostrils turned up when she scraped out the mucus, and the lad's face contorted when the warm water lightened the purplish hue to a pale periwinkle, with hints of ivory flesh sneaking into view by the minute.

When Ava noticed the child shiver, she reached for the blanket lying on top of the grate directly above the cookstove below. She wrapped the infant in the folds with only his face peeking out, and he immediately relaxed and closed his eyes. She picked him up and turned around to look at his mother. She was grimacing at the doctor's probing. but when he announced, "Done," she smiled weakly.

"You can bring the child to his mother," Doctor Breacher said. "Looks like Slate got himself a son, Gracie. There won't be no shutting the man up or stopping him from prancing around town, strutting and puffing his chest like a peacock."

Gracie chuckled, grabbed for her stomach, and groaned.

"Now, you rest easy for a few days. Just you and the baby, no work, hear me, Gracie?"

"I will see to that, Doctor Breacher."

“Counting on you, Miss Gardner. It was a hard labor. Might have seemed quicker than some, but it was hard on the mother.”

“They are both healthy, and that’s all that matters,” Ava said, resting the bundle in his mother’s arms.

“Oh, Ava—he is perfect.”

“He certainly is. Are you up to putting poor Slate out of his impatient misery?”

“Yes. Send the father up...and Blanche if she’s awake.”

“Flaked out cold on the settee last time I was downstairs, but she wanted to be woken the moment the baby arrived.”

Ava found renewed energy and descended the steps, stopping short when she spotted Orson pouring Slate and himself some coffee. “Mr. Shilling—you’re still here at this late hour?”

“I couldn’t leave this fellow alone. He’s near worn out, worrying about his wife.”

Slate struggled to his feet. “This black joe isn’t doing the job anymore. Is Gracie nearly finished?”

“She is, Slate Yagger, and she would like you to come upstairs to meet your son.”

“My son? Slate staggered and held the table’s edge for balance. “She plumb bore me a son the first time around?”

“She did. Hurry up now, and don’t stay too long. She’s mighty tired.”

“I’ll fetch Blanche and head up now. Thank you, Ava. We could not have run this last leg of the journey without you.”

Ava watched Slate hurry from the room. She felt a hand on her shoulder. “Congratulations. Perhaps nursing is more your skillset than cooking.”

She stared at the crumbs left on the plate from pastries the men had consumed. “It seems you didn’t mind devouring my baking efforts, sir.”

“Tasty, indeed. I didn’t mean to put down the fruits of your kitchen labor; just suggesting an alternative if you were looking for one.”

“I think I will leave the midwifing for the doctor. I’ve been doing all the cooking for the family this past week and I find that I enjoy it. Not the hot kitchen, but the fruits of my labor.”

“I spoke to the chef at the hotel, and he said the job was still yours when you’ve finished up here.”

“Why would you care to do that? My future is of no concern to a man who is here today and gone tomorrow.”

“Is that what’s keeping you away from me?”

“You did say you traveled with your construction business,” she said. “I asked Slate if he knew where you were working, but he hadn’t heard of any new projects.”

“I found some choice land and ordered the wood from the mill today.”

“Is the building for a new business or a client’s home?”

“You are full of questions this late at night,” he said, and she couldn’t decide if he was teasing or not.

“Excuse me. It is none of my business.” She sighed. “Thank you for keeping Slate company. He is a fine man but a bundle of nerves when it comes to Gracie’s health.”

“He said I was a help, and I enjoyed hearing about his colorful past.”

“He is as unique as his wife. They make a wonderful couple.”

“I must agree. It was nice to hear of shattered lives making a go of it the second time around.” His gaze held her captive, and Ava feared she might reveal more than she was willing to share.

“I believe in second chances, too. In fact, I’m staking my life on it.”

He smiled, but did not dig for information, which pleased her immensely.

“Exactly what a man likes to hear.”

“Are you looking for a second chance, sir?” she dared to ask.

“Maybe I am.” His answer was short and simple, telling her nothing.

“I only mention it because you seem to be well-established and not in need of a second chance.”

“Being a widower, I suppose I do...when it comes to love,” Orson said, his startled expression hinting to Ava that he’d love to take that response back.

“I hope you find it, sir. I am sure there are women of your station who are missing

you back home.”

“Do you think me so stuffy that I’d only marry a rich woman?”

“Again, I apologize. It appears the late hour is causing me to put my foot in my mouth.”

He stood. “I should go and let the household settle for what is left of the night. Might I swing by some time and take you out to see the property? It is for a female client, so to speak. Perhaps you can give me some pointers.”

“Give me a couple of days to get caught up here,” Ava said. “By then, I will likely appreciate an afternoon break.”

“Two o’clock then, the day after tomorrow. I will pick you up in the carriage and show you what I’m up to for no reason other than to bring peace to your mind as to my reason for being here,” he said, and she caught the tease in his eyes.

“Mr. Shilling, you are incorrigible, but I shall be ready to give you pointers. Will I get a commission?” she said, adding her own brand of tease.

Orson laughed. “I daresay you shall.” He placed his hat on his head and headed for the front entrance. “Goodnight, Ava Gardner.”

The following day’s routine was totally off, but the family all pitched in where necessary, accomplishing what needed to be done. The baby received a name—Jacob Slate Yagger—and the father could not have been prouder. The Holiday gang showed up after supper to see the new arrival but did not stay so long as to tire out the new mother.

Ava served the guests blueberry pastries and received raves from Skylar. When she

heard about the job opportunity at the hotel, she advised the newcomer to take the position as the chef there was a picky man who must have seen some potential in his patron.

“I have no idea what the man might have seen in me. Orson ordered from the menu for us, and all I did was rave about how delicious the meal tasted.”

“Maybe your Mr. Shilling has some pull with the hotel,” Skylar said as she reached for a second treat. “I swear I must be with child again the way my appetite has increased. And I know the Holiday clan is not ready for a sixth family member so soon.”

“You do have a houseful; a boy from Shep’s first marriage, plus a girl and boy from your union. The way I see it, Gracie’s son could use a playmate, or if you’re feeling like a matchmaker, a future bride for young Jacob,” Ava said, hoping Skylar’s suggestion about Orson’s pulling strings in her favor had not been the case. “I’d like to think I can succeed without additional aid from any man.”

“Do I hear pride in that remark?”

“Independence was more my idea.”

“From what I see, he is a kind man who has taken a shine to you. A single woman needs to take notice of such things.”

“But what of the admirer who sends things to the house on a regular basis, leaving no clue as to his identity? If such a man were interested, do you not think he would make his presence known?”

“I’d prefer a man who is upfront like Orson Shilling, not someone who hides behind gaining your interest with intrigue and by providing things,” Skylar said.

“I suppose you’re right. I do like honesty in people,” Ava agreed. “Too much pain is hidden by secrets and sly motives.”

“Good. Then Mr. Shilling, as admirer number one, is leading the race for your heart.”

“It’s all happening far too quickly. I keep it at the forefront of my mind that contender number one is likely to leave town one day without me, so if you don’t mind, I will not give up on the secret admirer just yet.”

The girls laughed. “Oh, to have two men on your coattails is so exciting. It’s the most engagement I’ve seen in this town for some time.”

Skylar stood. “I need to go and drag my family from the parlor before they totally exhaust the new parents. You look happy here in the kitchen, Ava. I would consider the job at the hotel. It’s respectable and will help train you for your own home someday.”

“I am considering it seriously. As soon as my time assisting the Yaggers is over, I am ready to step out on my own.”

“That’s the girl Gracie bragged to me about,” Skylar said, hugging Ava. “She was so thrilled you chose to come to Blazer to reconnect with old family ties.”

“Not sure we are too eager to reconnect our past ties, but being a part of one another’s future is more than we ever hoped for.”

Skylar sighed and looked toward the other room, where noise from her children filtered into the kitchen. “Off to gather the troops. You take care, my dear, and bring your young man over to visit. We’d love to get to know him better.”

Ava frowned. “Not my young man—a friend.”

“Same thing. Bring your friend over to visit soon before he leaves town, and we miss the opportunity to tell him what a great catch you are.”

Ava ignored the remark and followed Skylar to the parlor. Within ten minutes, the Holidays had gone home. Shortly after, Slate escorted his wife upstairs to their room.

As Ava sat at the kitchen table, drinking some coffee, she thought about Gracie. That woman was a true pioneer, ready to face whatever came her way with a smile on her face and an offering in her hand for others. She claimed the source of her keeping and giving power came from God. Ava regretted that two Sundays had come and gone without her being able to investigate the church, but she debated over asking Orson if he would accompany her on the next Lord’s Day. Gracie might even be up to going out then, and they could all sit together. Church was all about family, or so she suspected. It amazed her how ignorant one could be when it came to spiritual matters.

C H A P T E R 8

Orson stopped the buggy at the gate where Ava was standing, waiting for him. He jumped down in time to assist her into the seat next to him. She smelled of lilacs, his daughter's favorite flower, bringing on a wave of homesickness. He missed Sheena, and the fact she had no mother to call her own, bothered him. Upon sitting back in the driver's seat, he stared openly at Ava, and a forbidden thought entered his mind.

"You are studying me in a very peculiar manner, Mr. Shilling."

In light of his recent thoughts, he corrected her. "Orson—shall we stick to first names?"

"Of course." The woman blushed, and he was thrilled. Could he have finally succeeded in his mission? That would allow him to go home and put to rest his bedside promise to his dying wife.

"I have a question: 'I've been wondering, have you heard anything more from that secret admirer?'"

"Almost every other day," she said, shrugging her shoulders, "but no further ahead as to his identity, I'm afraid."

"What has my competition sent?"

"Well, you know about the flowers..., then came candy, next was the chocolate, and a silver bracelet, which Gracie declared to be presumptuous on his part, but I did like

it and I hate to hide it in my room. Sometimes, I wonder if he watches when I am in public to see if I wear it.”

“It sounds like you have narrowed it down to a man,” Orson said as he continued down the road away from the town limits.

“A woman would not send such gifts,” Ava said. “Just yesterday, I received perfume, but it was not my favorite fragrance, so it was easy to put that away in my drawer.”

“I agree. The gifts are far too personal. Perhaps he is not an admirer worth your consideration.”

Ava laughed. “He truly never was. I place a man’s merit in his actions and getting to know him face-to-face. Things might have tempted me at one time, but I have been adorned with fine attire and jewelry and did not like it one bit.”

“Now, I am confused. You gave the impression you came from a poor background, but now you are saying you’ve worn fancy clothes and jewelry,” he said. Would she open up to him or remain closed-mouthed concerning her past?

“Perhaps I’ve had a taste of both worlds, sir,” she said. “Now, you must tell me about the woman you are building the house for. How can I give advice when I don’t know if she is an aristocrat or a homeless ragamuffin?”

She managed to avert the subject again, but despite his homesickness, he’d be patient and see it out. Everything so far pointed toward his desired objective.

“My client is a mix of both worlds, as well,” he said, casting her a teasing grin.

“You are a mystery. Even when I spend time with you face-to-face, I sense that you’re holding back the tide as coy as my secret admirer.”

“Life would be no fun without a bit of chance in it, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I believe in chances,” she said, and he watched her eyes pool before she turned away to take in the scenery. “I love the area, but if your lady is a city girl, the location may be too isolated.”

“I picked it for its spectacular view, hoping she would appreciate the back-to-nature solitude when she is not busy with her social calendar.”

“A city girl who enjoys dwelling with nature in its rawest form. Interesting.”

He steered the carriage right, pulling off the main road and heading down an overgrown laneway. When they rounded a corner, and the foliage opened up to a clearing, he turned to see his passenger’s initial response.

Ava stared in awe. Orson dared imagine the response was the one he’d sought. The afternoon sun glittered across the surface of the water like a lake of diamonds, and he could almost see the gems dancing in her eyes. The hills in the distance seemed to bow to the everchanging creation to make room for the spectacle of the hour, but for him, she was the main show.

Could he be falling for her? That had not been the plan, but his two previous attempts to free women from that awful saloon had failed the test miserably, while Ava sparked hope in his deadened heart. He almost expected to see Mildred Crenshaw’s buggy loitering in the shadows, watching his progress with mail-order bride number three and cheering him on. She might feel like her agency’s reputation is at stake, and although the matchmaker would be cheering for romance, she had agreed to sidestepping into helping him rescue the lost. But love? He—

Orson demanded a halt to his train of thought. No. He could not fall in love with Ava Gardner. His mother would be appalled, and his daughter deserved better.

Did he actually think that to be true? Was he that narrow-minded? He knew from experience that rare, unpolished gems could be found in the least likely of places. Perhaps this time, lady luck favored him with this one.

So many questions rippled through his brain, none of them presenting the answers he needed.

“I love it.” Ava breathed in the air and crossed her hands over her heart. “I cannot imagine that a woman exists who would not fall instantly in love with this spot.”

“Without a house?” he managed to say.

She glanced his way and smiled. “We can’t have the wood you ordered go to waste, sir.”

“Tell me the type of house you see here.”

“Colonial, with a huge, full-length covered porch facing the water. Large windows, especially on that side of the house, to brighten the inside and bring nature inside.”

“And the bedrooms on the laneway side?”

“Oh, no. Stretch out the space so every room can enjoy both views. The clearing is huge...unless you are planning a mansion. I suspect you can manage a few bedrooms...and maybe place the woman’s room on the opposite side to allow privacy from her guests or from her children should she marry.”

“I can almost picture the house, and we haven’t left the carriage yet.”

“Then, let’s walk.” Ava grabbed the basket in which she had packed two lemonade flasks and a container of cookies, before jumping to the ground and proceeding

toward the lake.

Orson caught up just in time for Ava to stop short. He could almost see the wheels turning in her mind as she surveyed the land, lining it up with the water.

“You must put a large dining room window in this section. The sun will set here later, and what better magic than to eat your evening meal while watching nature’s repeat performance day after glorious day.”

“The dining room and the kitchen behind it so she can clean up her kitchen afterward with the same evening glow on her back.”

“Or on her front. Have you ever constructed a working area to face the west and the dining room so she can be part of the chatter when she runs for dessert or more coffee?”

“Two working counters, one against the wall and one in the middle of the floor?”

“Not the middle, or she will wear herself out, jumping back and forth during food preparation. In restaurants, they have baking counters and cooking counters as they serve two very distinct purposes.”

“It does sound like a kitchen a woman would want to be in.”

“Making her family happy just to have her close instead of being shoved off in another room.”

“I daresay the idea is novel.”

“And your company will be the first to invent a house of dreams. You will be famous, Orson, especially if your client runs in influential circles. Every woman in the

country will want a replica.”

He laughed. “Now, I know you are humoring me.”

“I am optimistic. A bit of advertising and I daresay your construction business will take on an alternative reconstruction service.”

“You are surprising me with all your intuitions: a cook, a midwife, a house designer, and now, a business tycoon.”

“Now, you are humoring me,” Ava said. “A girl has dreams and a brain. She is also capable of learning skills or following procedures until she masters something foreign. I am living proof.”

She curtsied in fun. “Meet the new me.” The two of them laughed.

He reached for her hand and felt it tense, then relax under his hold. “Shall we bring your picnic treat to the lake and talk some more?”

“Yes, that would be delightful. I love the smell of fresh water and the sound of rippling waves. It is a piece of heaven here on earth.”

“You talk of heaven as if you believe, yet you say you have not sat under religious instruction,” Orson said.

“Some things you just sense in your heart. I have no trouble believing there is a God who has provided all of nature for His creation to enjoy.”

He found a grassy section close to the water’s edge and spread the blanket he’d snatched from the coach at the last minute after noticing she’d included it in the basket for their outing. At the time, he’d considered the idea of relaxing by the water

with Ava Gardner an innocent activity, a mere opportunity to gain additional information that might settle any lingering doubts as to her credibility, but now, with his heart aflutter, he wondered if he was treading on dangerous ground.

Orson was sinking fast.

When Ava discovered the truth about him, she'd consider him a worse prospect than the anonymous secret admirer—the one who did not exist, other than his sorry self. The entire adventure had started out as a gesture to honor his deceased wife's request. She felt he needed to be proactive in healing the wounds he carried like a banner. Frances's leaving a respectable home to work in a saloon had grieved his heart and disappointed her mother—seems she had loved their intoxicated father far more than he ever had. Reluctantly, his mother had given her blessing, sending him on his quest.

Orson had never expected it to be such an emotional teeter-totter.

“What are you thinking?”

“How smart women are.”

“I did testify to that very thing moments ago,” Ava said, chuckling.

“You did. You are surely numbered among the bright stars of God's creation.”

“How very poetic,” she said. A crimson flow threatened to advance from the nape of her neck into her face. How refreshing that a woman of her age and reputation could blush so easily.

Orson knew from where Ava Gardner had escaped—that same despicable saloon in Dodge City that had ruined his sister and many other girls' lives—and that knowledge presented both a victory and complication. It was a victory that his plan to

rehabilitate a lost soul had seemingly come to pass with prospect number three, the previous two failed attempts had returned to their former lifestyles and left him still needing to fulfill his promise. In Ava's case, the complication came in knowing he was falling for her—a definite, well-ordered no from his now stately mother upon his departure. His initial strategy had been to return home unmarried despite the matchmaker's involvement and find a wife of more suitable character to replace Sheena's mother.

The project had sounded so noble and self-healing..., before Ava. Now, the undertaking seemed somehow tainted by the deception the whole scheme had taken in light of her ignorance.

“Do you not like the cookies? Oatmeal is not Slate's favorite either, but Gracie and Blanche begged for a batch this morning, and I obliged.”

Orson looked at the uneaten cookie he held in his hand while he sat lost in his thoughts. “I do like oatmeal. Thank you very much for bringing them.” He nibbled on the edge and attempted to shake his head clear of the nagging doubt plaguing him. “Tell me more of your ideas for the house.”

For the next thirty minutes, he listened to details that seemed to come from her inner being, as if she had walked through her future dream home in her mind many times. She was a good girl born from bad stock, who had landed in a pit of self-destruction by choice, not by preference, as was his sister's case. His mother's second husband, had adopted the widow's children and Frances could have had anything she wanted—a king for a husband if she'd set her mind to it. Instead, she had chosen to follow in her birth father's footsteps and frequent the saloons, until its lure gripped her soul and eventually claimed her earthly life.

His mother had grieved her eternal status while Orson missed his sister. As children, they had played for hours on end, and he'd protected her countless times from their

abusive father until his death and the miracle of his family's redemption from the wealthy man who loved his mother. Would Mother remember the kindness her second husband had shown in reaching out to a desperate widow and her family when he confessed that he loved Ava Gardner? Tell the woman he must, or resign himself to lifelong bachelorhood.

"I'm afraid my conversation has lulled you to sleep," Ava said. "I tend to prattle on when given half a chance, but I fear you have tuned me out. What is bothering you, Orson? I am a good listener."

"I was reflecting on the narrow bridge that separates the aristocrat from what some might consider commoners, or those who struggle in our society."

He watched the color drain from her face.

"I'm ready to tell you a bit from my past if you care to listen," Orson said.

"I said I would listen."

"My parents didn't raise us in the Church, but Ma definitely harbored convictions: saloons were off limits. My father's bad habit of losing money at the card tables or drinking until he passed out and they had to carry him home, was enough to harden the heart of any woman, but not my sister. Frances was a daddy's girl, and she stole away on many nights to lay in wait for him, fascinated by the fancy dresses and the lure of the lively music. One night, the distraught girl put him on the back of a horse and led the animal home. They buried him the next day."

"Those are terrible beginnings." Ava sobbed. She allowed him to hold her, and he suspected she had compared the similarities in their backgrounds. When she pulled away, he dabbed her eyes with the hanky he withdrew from his pocket. "I have no idea what brought that on except that I could relate to some of it, but I never expected

a man like you to harbor such a past.”

“I was fourteen when my father died, and my sister was a confused twelve-year-old.”

“A very impressionable age.”

“Yeah, well, how my mother snagged her second husband remains a mystery to me. He was dignified, a perfect gentleman. He was kind to his wife, and he treated Frances and me as if we were his own. Unfortunately, he died young. I was twenty and a wealthy man, thanks to him. He made me promise to care for the family and keep the business afloat.”

“That was a miracle. Sometimes, the best of angels are only with us for a short while, but their impact on our lives lasts forever.”

“Did you have a visiting angel in your time of need?”

“When I was ten, the lady at the mercantile took a liking to me. Whenever I could slip away, I’d help her with some little project or other that she could have easily done herself. When we finished, she let me pick a stick of candy from the bowl to suck on all the way back...to my misery.”

“Suppose, on Sunday we could give thanks for our ministering angels.”

“I like the sound of that. Will you come with me and the family if they’re up to it?” Ava asked.

“I’d be honored to sit next to you in the house of the Lord.” She did blush then, and he squeezed her hand before lifting it to his lips for a slow kiss. “I should finish my story before I lose my nerve. I haven’t told many people.”

“I’m honored you chose me to tell.”

“My stepfather and I had a good rapport. I loved working with wood, and construction is all about lumber. Mother says I have a special knack for visualizing and creating structures that people crave based on the pictures I draw, but I have nothing in the way of design after hearing your version of the house I will build here.”

“We make a good team.” She’d said it glibly, but his heart ached at the closeness teaming up with Ava would bring. Oh, how Orson wished it could be so, but the woman would hate him once he’d unfolded the final chapter of his story.

Not today, but soon. He couldn’t stand the agony of secrecy much longer.

“I expanded the Shilling Construction Company and proudly took my stepfather’s name. My ten designs are popular and have been used repeatedly on various sites.”

“Why didn’t you just complete one of them here instead of asking my opinion?”

“Perhaps I am looking for my eleventh, but do not despair—if it reaches the potential you assume is attainable, I will send you a percentage of my monthly profits.”

“Don’t be silly. That is totally unnecessary.”

“Ah, but it will force me to stay in touch, which I am beginning to think will be necessary for my future well-being.” There. Orson had voiced his feelings and as a result, witnessed her squirm. It seemed neither of them knew if the discussion was simply the past catching up to the present or if it held something promising for the future.

“At any rate, I presently have on staff three teams who are kept busy at different sites.

Mind you, they are usually closer to home where I can oversee their progress. I am a stickler for perfection.”

“Yet here you are, miles from home, building a house for... who—a friend?”

“Yes, you could say that.”

“That is most generous of you. I know you miss your daughter,” Ava said. “What happened to your sister?”

That was the question he dreaded, but if they were to move forward, it must be told.

“Frances chose a different path to follow. She became the Queen of Hearts; dancing, singing, and entertaining in a saloon. She seemed unable to shake off the fanciful memories of her birth father.

“Frances grew distant, and it was no surprise when she disappeared from the family estate on the eve of her coming out celebration and headed for Dodge City.” He heard Ava gasp. He’d expected as much, but he continued.

“Mother forbade me to go after her, and we lost touch,” Orson said. “I married, and shortly after Sheena was born, my wife, Iris, took to her bed. My emotions became knotted up in the three women in my life—mother, my wife, and my missing sister—while the demands of fathering a baby girl at the same time all served to keep me busy. I clung to the business, where nothing but prosperity changed, but my wife saw through my facade. The responsibilities and heartache over my wife’s worsening condition almost did me in.”

“What snapped you out of the doldrums?”

“My wife’s final request, but I was too late to save my sister.”

“I am so sorry for that loss. I have heard of women who couldn’t break the habit. Dancing and singing are a distraction that can ease a troubled mind.”

He inhaled deeply, and searched Ava’s face for any sign of recognition, but her expression was closed. Only the slight gasp she’d let out earlier suggested she might have known his Frances.

Orson was unable to continue with his story, whether it be for fear of the retelling or out of fear of admitting his deception to Ava. “I’ve kept you away from home long enough. Your cousin will feel it her duty to get the supper on.”

Orson stood, and Ava joined him.

“I have a stew simmering on the cookstove, and the biscuits are ready for the oven. The preparation is nearly complete, so Gracie will not be tempted to return to her kitchen prematurely,” Ava said. “But it has been a delightful afternoon, despite the sadness of your story. I hope the memories did not dampen your spirits too badly.”

He kissed her fingertips and stared into her eyes. “How could I ever remain downtrodden with you next to me? You are an angel for a new season.”

“Oh, dear. You must learn to pick your angels more carefully.”

“I shall be the judge of that. Let’s clean up here and head home.” He bent to pick up the blanket, shook the sand from it, and folded it, watching Ava repack the basket all the while. Yes, Orson Shilling was smitten, and he had no idea how to go forward from there.

C H A P T E R 9

Ava jolted awake in the middle of the night. Frances Carpenter! She knew her. Could she be Orson's sister?

She had spoken of her rich stepfather and kidded about his name—Shilling, as in money—but her anger and sarcasm were evident in the chip she wore on her shoulder. The saloon boss loved the girl—she was his ticket to bringing in the customers. He'd kept her from going upstairs with the riffraff, saving her for the elite customers with big money who came to watch her dance. When she came up pregnant, his agenda changed, and he counted the days until his "prime real estate" could return to duty. No one wanted to see a fat woman dancing or flaunting herself with the gentlemen, and for the final few months, when girdles could no longer squeeze her tummy flat, he took her out of commission. Tom, the slob—as the girls called their boss behind his back—swore that when Frances gave birth, and the brat was given away to some hard-luck family, the woman would return to her purity, and her sole job would be to sing, dance, and entice the men to drink and gamble. Never would she mount the steps to the upper rooms again.

That had never happened. A disgruntled customer had seen to her demise. Ava had been present when the lifeless baby was excreted from her womb, and she had witnessed the sorrow in the mother's eyes before she slipped to her own death a few minutes afterward.

Orson had said he'd lost touch with Frances. If she had been his sister, dare she tell him of her fate on that horrible night? Perhaps he was better off not knowing.

The memories invading the solace of her room in the middle of the night brought her down a trail she longed to put behind her for good. She'd been grateful the owner had set aside a few of his hired women after that as "untouchable property" that he treated with golden fingers, and Ava was numbered among those he picked. Her job description was reduced to dancing in the new chorus line, filling the patrons' glasses with whiskey, and using her sly hand at the gaming tables to keep the profits in the boss's pockets and not the gamblers'. Customers enjoyed her playful disposition, and her humor kept the regulars laughing and having a good time. Never had she joined clients of any station upstairs to satisfy their sinful lust, for even an unchurched girl knew there'd be no turning back from that. Second chances would never be granted in a decent man's heart, and she'd be rendered a saloon girl until the wrinkles on her face made her useless, and she was tossed out on the street to fend for herself.

Thankfully, the secret do-gooder who had provided her with her escape money, had pushed her departure date forward, and such a fate no longer threatened her world. Consequently, her past did less to hurt her chances for a new life. Yes, Ava could do this, she consoled herself, allowing her irregular breathing to become normal, pushing the painful memories back into the dark recesses of her heart.

She lay down and wiped away the flow of tears, mourning Frances's broken life and agonizing death for the hundredth time. And now her brother, who had strangely entered Ava's life, was unaware of his sister's fate.

Wait—that wasn't true. Had he not said that his sister was deceased? Perhaps he didn't know the full details, but she was certain he had described Frances as having departed from this world. On that day, he'd said he was too late to save his sister, which could have meant from her career choice or death.

Her thoughts buzzed in numerous directions, attempting to put an order to the fragmented conversations over time. If she confronted him, it would incriminate her. He'd know she had worked at the same saloon as his sister, and that would put a halt

to his calling after her at the Yagger house. Still, he was leaving town at job's end anyway, and if Orson had any notions that she might fit the bill for his next casual romance, she'd do him a favor by nipping it in the bud right now.

Decision making seemed easier lying safely in one's bed in the middle of the night, but when the sun rose, fear replaced her peace, and Ava hated herself for her lack of gumption to do the right thing by Orson Shilling.

When Sunday rolled around, and Gracie was not willing to brave the jolting carriage ride to town, Ava and Blanche made the trek alone. Orson was there, just as he'd said, smiling and eager to sit with them for the service. Before they even went inside, Ava prayed to a God she did not know that loose ends would tie up in His grace, which Gracie claimed was new every morning. She only hoped that applied to wayward sinners like her and Orson.

The piano player was every bit as talented as any she'd heard thump the ivories in the saloon, but the melodies in the church, even songs of the lively sort, brought not chaos to the brain but a strange peace that warmed her heart. Blanche, seated on her right side, sang like an angel and she saw Orson stare at her during one of the hymns. She squeezed his hand, aware he might be remembering his sister's beautiful singing voice. The motivation for comfort, underlying the boldness in her action, backfired, and when his gaze drifted toward her, it did not let go. Uncomfortable at such gawking in the house of the Lord, she summoned her resistance to focus her attention on the preacher standing at the front, conducting the worship.

The singing seemed to prepare her heart for the message. Pastor Higgins was of a gentle spirit, and his words of admonition and love were peppered with encouragement that today was the day of salvation, and that His mercies were new every morning. Ava clung to that line, thinking that surely God had spoken directly to her. Gracie was not in attendance so she was not to blame for having prompted the minister to speak the words that had touched the fringes of her secret sins.

When an invitation to seek more of God came at the end of the service, she shook, and when Blanche reached for her hand and whispered that she would walk the aisle with her, Ava stumbled to her feet. She dared not to look at Orson's face as she passed him by, clinging to the child, who led her to kneel at the altar.

Ava was amazed that one short surrender could open the floodgates of mercy. She accepted her ignorance when it came to understanding the awesome and unearthly ways of the Lord, but inside, she acknowledged a guiding power she'd never known. It felt right to transfer some of her independence to His big shoulders.

When she and Blanche returned to their seats after prayer time, she noted that Orson Shilling had left the building. Apparently, he had not been touched by the Word or was not ready to commit to a spiritual awakening.

At home, Gracie and Slate were beyond excited that Ava had invited their Savior into her life, and the cake she'd baked for dessert at lunch was served as a celebratory symbol for things yet to come.

The Bible became her best friend in the coming week; Gracie began to share in the chores, and the family settled into a new routine. Baby Jacob was a joy, cooing his way into everyone's heart and kicking his covers off to draw attention from anyone nearby. Ava held him every sunrise and spoke the words she read from the good book into his attentive face. At sunset, she held him up to the Lord in prayer from the rocking chair on the porch, thankful that new life had showered hope on both of them—Jacob's beginning for the first time, hers a second opportunity to start again.

Orson did not come calling, and the gifts from her secret admirer ended abruptly after she had received the gold cross on the Monday morning following her trip to the altar. Ava coveted the gift. The note read, 'From the cross comes your freedom to life forevermore.' In her heart, she determined that Orson had been the admirer all along, setting up the guessing game strictly for her benefit, perhaps to make her feel as if

people had accepted her in her new surroundings. He had not bowed his knee that day, yet he still had some knowledge of the cross and its benefits.

A thought popped into her head on Saturday afternoon while she sipped tea and Gracie rested. Ava wondered if it would be presumptuous for her to visit the construction site uninvited. From his absence the past week, she took it that Orson was through with her. In one sense, relief flooded her, grateful that the dreaded conversation about his sister had never continued. Yet, the man had left a tangible void in her life, one not easily replaced.

Curiosity eventually got the better of Ava. She was interested to see if he actually used any of her suggestions in the building's design. It would be taking a chance if she went to snoop at the site, as he might be there to reopen the can of worms she had sealed shut. Still, she longed for him to experience Calvary's freedom in his life, for He could mend the broken pieces she sensed still drove the man.

Tired of the inner debate, she tossed her embroidery aside, went outside to the barn, and saddled a horse. The ride out there was quiet and restful. A cool breeze blew her hair behind her like a flag in the wind. She hadn't bothered to fuss with it that morning or don a fancy dress, her intention to spend the day in the kitchen foremost in her mind. She had gone out in public, plain and simple, praying no traveler would pass by her while she galloped along the roadway.

She turned in at the property line and noticed the laneway had been scraped level, eliminating the ruts she recalled. The birds and varmints scattered as she followed the path. When Ava reached the open space, she saw piles of lumber on the ground along the large, roped-in rectangle.

Ava tied the horse to an overhanging branch and walked toward the abandoned site. There didn't appear to be a soul around, just as she hoped. She strolled leisurely, following the rope's perimeter, noting the areas where logs lay outlining what looked

like windows and doors. She stepped over the taunt rope across the threshold and walked into the center of the space. There, she saw additional ropes sectioning off permanent walls and structures that would be built on the inside. Ava smiled when she saw the extra work counter she'd suggested. She stood on the inside, facing the west. Yes, it was perfect. Orson's client would love it.

"Do you approve?" a voice sounded from behind her.

Ava twirled toward the laneway to see a stranger standing there, ogling her. She felt instantly uncomfortable in his presence and swallowed the lump forming in her throat. "Afternoon..., Miss Gardner, isn't it?"

A sigh of relief escaped her lips. He knew her, hopefully as Orson's friend. That made her feel safer while trespassing on the man's property.

"Why, yes. Is Mr. Shilling here? I thought I'd pop out and surprise him."

"Well, now, the surprise is on you. He left for home to see his family. Said he'd be gone for a spell, but if you were still his friend, you would have known that."

Maybe letting her guard down had been premature.

"Heard tell you were looking for a secret admirer. That could be me."

The sly tone of his appeal hit a recall in her mind, and recognition struck. "You're the man from the stagecoach who drank far too much."

"That I am," he said. "Gordie Flynn at your service, miss."

"You've cleaned up some. The beard made you look older." She did not add 'and dirtier' aloud, although she doubted she would offend him.

He roared laughing. “You trying to butter me up? Too late. I know’d you didn’t like me then, and I reckon that hasn’t changed.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Mr. Shilling took pity on me. When I told him I could use a hammer, he offered me a job.”

She figured she would try to ‘butter him up’ and get out of there as fast as her legs could carry her. It appeared they were alone, and that did not make Ava comfortable in the least. “The layout appears to be serviceable. The new owner will love it. You’re off to a fine start.”

Gordie Flynn laughed again. He hit his knee robustly, but Ava had no idea what he considered so humorous. She wondered if he had been drinking in the boss’s absence. That could certainly mess with a man’s mind.

“Well, I’ll be on my way, Mr. Flynn. The family is expecting me home.” She formed a big circle around the man to avoid walking too close to him, but he moved in quickly to close the gap.

When Gordie grabbed her arm, she jerked it back and yelled with all the indignation she could muster. “Mr. Flynn, mind your manners.”

“Do I strike you as a man with manners?” His glassed-over eyes rounded, and his features turned to a hideous scowl.

Ava’s rapid heartbeat and face-ridden terror seemed to egg the fellow on. His kind was not foreign to her. She had landed in troubling situations with a man before and had easily overcome her fear to curb his unruly mindset. Maybe it was the new clothes or the new person she hoped to become, but the circumstances playing out

before her seemed too much to handle.

The lone woman was in trouble, and she wasn't sure how to avoid the misfortune she saw blazing in his eyes.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 6:58 am

C HAPTE R 10

Just as Gordie made his move against Ava, they heard pounding hooves on the gravel laneway, alerting them to a new arrival on the property. She used the distraction to her advantage, pulled away from her assailant's grip, and began to run in the newcomer's direction, but her clumsy feet caught in the hem of her dress and sent her tumbling to the ground.

Gordie was there in an instant, offering his helping hand, "Can I aid you to your feet, Miss Gardner?"

Ava cringed at the man's grimace. His scowl was hidden from the approaching rider, but it clearly sent a warning to her: 'Keep your mouth shut if you know what's good for you.' When she didn't accept the hand he offered, he reached down and yanked her to her feet. His action was swift and might appear as aid to an onlooker, but Ava felt the fingers dig into her flesh in an unfriendly manner. "There you go, miss. Best keep a steady pace next time you set off running to see whose calling." He winked at the person who stopped his horse where they stood and Ava turned to see who had unknowingly come to her rescue.

"Orson," she exclaimed, bringing one hand to her heart in relief, using the other to hook the loose strands of her hair back into place.

He slid from his saddle and was instantly at her side. "Are you all right?"

"The woman was just a mite too excited to see you, is all," Gordie jumped into the conversation.

Orson frowned at him, and he backed off.

Passing a clean handkerchief to Ava, he said, “I am excited to see you. It’s been a long week but a successful one.”

“I understand you’ve been visiting family?” she said as she wiped the dirt from her face before handing the soiled cloth back to him.

“I was. Sheena is growing so fast—I hate to miss any of it.”

“You should have brought her,” Ava said, thinking it would be nice to meet the child.

“My thoughts exactly. That is why I cut my visit short, packed her bag, and boarded the next train back to South Dakota.”

“She’s here in Blazer?” Ava looked around. The area appeared vacant, and she raised her brow questionably.

“I left the overactive girl at the hotel with the storekeeper’s daughter, who has agreed to help mind her when I have to work,” Orson explained. “She was exhausted from the trip. I never thought I’d see her tire, but the girl’s barely been twenty miles from home her entire life.”

“I can’t wait to meet her.”

“I’ve told her all about you,” Orson said, moving closer.

Ava bit her lip and glanced at Gordie, who was lingering nearby, probably making sure she didn’t spill the beans as to his misconduct earlier.

“Gordie,” Orson said, and the man stood to attention, “what are you doing out here

today? I do allow my workers the weekend off.”

“Just thought I’d do some fishing, and when Miss Gardner showed up asking your whereabouts, I was here to tell her. I wasn’t expecting you to show up today. It’s nice to have you back, boss.”

“Well, off you go, now—either fishing or to town, you take your pick. Anywhere but here, if you catch my drift.”

“Yes, sir. Think I’ll mosey on back to town. Got me some drinking to get started on at the saloon.”

They watched as he went to the tree cluster where his horse was tied, mounted the animal, and sped off down the lane.

Ava breathed easier. “I don’t like that man.”

“I don’t much either, but he can hammer a nail, and I need all the local help I can get to build this place. I can’t spare my regular teams.”

“Will you and your daughter stay until the building is up and its owner comes to claim it?”

“We shall indeed.” He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I’ve missed you.”

“You left without saying goodbye. I thought...” Ava stammered, unable to vocalize her doubts.

“What did you think? Surely not that I had lost interest in you, although I do admit my neglect in not sending you a note,” he said. “I apologize, but I got this sudden hankering to see Sheena. Mother gave a bit of a fight, saying her tutoring would

suffer, but I assured her the girl was young enough to catch up on her education.”

“I could help if you bring her around on your way to work.”

“You are busy enough without having a little girl attached to your skirt.”

“Blanche would love company. You’d be doing us a favor. She is always the first at Jacob’s crib when he whimpers.”

“Ah, the new baby in the house—Sheena would love to see him.”

“Then bring her along,” Ava said. “Maybe Monday on your way to work.”

“Perhaps I should introduce you two first. Are you available to come to the hotel dining room for dinner after church on Sunday?”

“I am,” she said, twisting clear of his captivating stare. “I was pleased to see that you incorporated my kitchen ideas into the plans.”

“I used your entire layout. I love the sketch and have labeled it ‘The Ava Gardner Design’ after you.”

“Every one of your lady customers shall consider it your best design, mark my words.”

“Do you have time for a stroll to the water?”

Ava smiled and nodded. He reached for her hand, and she tried to hide the heaving in her chest in response to his touch. For an hour, she listened as he talked of his home, but she sensed it lacked passion, for his eyes did not light up the same way they did when he’d surveyed the property.

“Would you ever consider moving?”

“I might, but I doubt my mother would be too pleased.”

“I suppose a son considers it his duty to care for his widowed mother and make her happy. It’s very commendable.”

“We had that very talk while I was home. I felt my energy decline only hours after being in the house I shared with my deceased wife. I suspect I have too many memories to bog me down there. If I must stay, I shall look for new housing when I return. Coming to Blazer has boosted my zest for life, and I wanted Sheena to have a taste of it.”

“I wonder if Slate and Gracie would let you go to the gold mine for a couple of days. Listening to them, you’d think it was a slice of wilderness heaven. They vacation there yearly.”

“The gold claim? Now, Sheena would simply wear herself out racing around there, panning for gold, and the wildlife all around her as she snuggled in her bed at night would delight her.”

“I will inquire if you’d like.”

“Would you be able to come?” he asked, then quickly added. “I’ll sleep in whatever outbuilding is on the land, of course.”

“Always the gentleman,” Ava said appreciating that the man actually thought enough of her to protect her reputation.

“I have told you all about me, and you rarely indulge anything about you.”

“You know all the good parts. Can’t we leave it at that?”

His gaze reached deep into her soul, and if she didn’t know better, she’d think he knew her as she had been in the Dodge City Saloon, working alongside women just like his sister. It was possible, yet every dream clamoring within her balked at the idea of opening that discussion.

“We can,” he said. “You should know that I don’t judge people on their past. Granted it, some folks choose their own fate, but I am not so ignorant as to know that sometimes, fate plays a bad hand. A person deserves to be recognized in the present and what they do to build their future.”

Again, he poured on that intense gaze she could not shake. Were they having the dreaded discussion in a roundabout way? Was he letting her know that acceptance, forgiveness, and love could be hers with a bit of trust on her part? She’d decided never to tell a decent man of her background, least of all the brother of the woman whose dead baby she’d held in her arms.

She had stayed away the day the family had come to pay their respects at Frances’s gravesite, for she figured her face would give away the secret dread of the infant lying in his mother’s arms under the ground. It was enough to lose Frances, but to lose her child as well? They just did not need to know.

Fate had found her and brought her face-to-face with the man while the secret still burned inside her. To make it worse, she had fallen in love with him, and the common experience she shared with his sister would destroy any chance she might have of happiness.

“I should return to the house and finish the supper preparations. The baby was a bit cranky last night, and Gracie is on edge today, having not had enough sleep.”

“Understood.” He took her hand, and they walked to her horse in silence. He boosted her into the saddle. “Let me ride back with you, just in case Gordie is hanging out.”

She looked at him sharply. “You don’t suppose I have to fear him sneaking around after me, do you?”

“I’ll tire the man out so badly before sunset that he won’t have the energy to even go for a drink, let alone bother a respectable woman.”

“How did you know?”

“A man sees it in another man,” Orson said, “but not to worry. I have my eyes on him now. His right leg is lame and a good kick would render him harmless, should you find yourself cornered again.”

“Thanks for the tip.”

“Just taking care of my girl.” He winked and headed for where he’d tied his horse.

His girl—had she heard that right? If it meant anything permanent, she’d have to tell it all, lay her whole miserable life out on a slab, and hope he didn’t slay her mercilessly.

He left her at the house and headed in the direction of the hotel. It would be nice to meet his daughter. Ava couldn’t wait until Sunday.

Orson had hoped Ava would open up during their discussion at the lake, that she’d be the one to denounce her past and usher in a future for them. It had taken him over a year to find the winning candidate. Ava had been number three and unlike the others, had given him a run for his money, not following his instructions and sending him on a wild goose chase to Blazer. Perhaps even that was a godsend. He loved the town

and the people with whom he'd become acquainted. In South Dakota, he'd found some rest for his weariness.

The entire plot had been his wife's dying wish to rid him of the demons that plagued his soul but his mother had been a harder sell. When he introduced a reputable matrimonial agency as a mediator, his mother eventually agreed to his bizarre plan to avenge Frances. Of course, her thinking was that Orson would observe his target, and play his 'games' to see if the mail-order bride would appreciate the freedom he offered.

Mrs. Shilling had been relieved to hear the interruption to their lives was nearing its end, but she was not pleased with the unexpected romance outcome.

True, Ava had balanced the scales. Since he couldn't help his sister, he felt pleased to have succeeded in rescuing one lost maiden from the clutches of saloon life. This third candidate seemed willing and eager to turn her back on the past. Her final gift from him would be the home on the lake. The start-up money, the few gifts from the secret admirer, and getting acquainted had been the easy part—but the fact that he had fallen in love with the ex-saloon girl, had surprised even him and managed to make his mother crazy. They had argued heatedly, but Orson would not back down.

He knew what he wanted—Ava—and if she'd have him, they'd marry, and the success rate of Mildred Crenshaw's matrimonial service would remain intact.

His first two candidates had failed miserably, and the matchmaker had insisted this new woman would be the last prospect she would entertain under her agency's umbrella. She had taken a risk in supporting his strange mission, but in giving in to his pleas, she had caught the fire of his pursuit for the betterment of mankind. Understandably concerned that its reputation was in jeopardy due to his previous failed attempts, the agency had offered up Ava Gardner as his final redemptive opportunity.

The girls of his choosing were sent to a town, thinking their groom awaited them. That ended the initial set-up involving the Crenshaw Matrimonial Agency. From there, Orson set off on his own agenda, testing the lure of sin against the righteousness of mankind. Separating the two eased his emotional pain and the ache in his heart. His search for closure was nearing its end, and he did not regret shedding a few dollars for the sake of satisfying his principles.

It was by chance that he was in Dodge City's train depot the day Ava had purchased her ticket, not to Crater Valley as instructed, but to some location in South Dakota, many miles from what remained of his beloved family.

He sighed. It had been a challenge.

The Ace Hotel came into sight, and he rode to the back and put his horse up for the night. He could use some rest before he got to work finishing up Ava's house. She'd be surprised when he'd give her the key. Secretly, he hoped she'd invite him to share the home with her—him and Sheena. It was a family unit he sorely missed. He worried that the secrets on both sides might put an end to any chance he had of keeping the mail-order bride of his choice.

C H A P T E R 11

The next afternoon, Ava sat on the chair Orson pulled out for her. The little girl across the table giggled and shifted excitedly on her chair. It made her feel like family just sitting down to Sunday dinner with a man and a child. Her heart warmed at the thought, and she was almost at the place of believing it could happen.

“Sheena, stop your wiggling,” Orson said, “and wipe that silly grin off your face. Do you want to scare the lady away?”

“No, sir,” she said quickly. She turned to Ava. “You’re not scared, are you? Papa says I fidget too much and my chatter leaves the birds wondering if there’s anything left to chirp about.”

Ava smiled. “I am not scared. In fact, I enjoy wiggly little girls who aren’t afraid to speak their minds. You never have to guess what they’re thinking.”

“See, Papa, she likes me.”

Orson rolled his eyes, as he unfolded his linen napkin and placed it on his lap. “This is your first full day in Blazer, and you just came from Sunday service,” Sheena’s father chastised gently. “You do realize your grandmother would be appalled at your lack of discipline?”

The child made a motion with her hand of buttoning her mouth closed, placed her napkin precisely across her lap, and cast a playful grin at her father. The adults burst out laughing at the girl’s antics.

“It’s easy to see you are your father’s pride and joy, Sheena.” The child puffed out her chest proudly, and Ava smothered a laugh.

“You’re right there, Miss Gardner,” he said, his eyes misting over as he rested a fist on his heart. “And the lassie knows it.”

“Do you like school, Sheena?” Ava asked.

“It’s all right, but mostly I like recess in the schoolyard.”

“A splendid reward for all the hard work done inside. I liked it as well,” Ava said.

“She gets good grades in most subjects, but I think she’s the teacher’s pet, so I am not sure how accurate her grades are.”

“I am not, Papa. That Jimmy Jake gets away with everything.” Sheena looked at Ava. “Did you ever know someone with two first names? Can’t imagine hooking up with a fellow like that. Mrs. Jake sounds downright ridiculous.”

“Sheena!” her father scolded. Orson received a lopsided wink for his effort, and his face suddenly relaxed. He did shoot his daughter a warning glance, suggesting to Ava that the child was not considering matrimony for herself but perhaps her father.

The child confirmed that assumption by turning her attention to Ava. “I like my last name. Shilling...it makes one think of money, and what woman isn’t interested in being associated with wealth? I shall hate to give it up someday, but some lucky lady will inherit it when they marry my father. A right good catch, if you ask me.”

“No one asked you, Sheena,” her father said. “Before the waitress arrives, why don’t you tell me what you crave in the food department?”

“I was hankering for some ham. The preacher got my tummy rumbling when he talked about that sheet full of food that came down from heaven in a vision.”

“Does that mean you are feeling a bit rebellious? Determined to show that Jewish man in the Bible story who never ate the forbidden food that you can?”

“Why, Papa, you must think me terribly spiteful. The thought never entered my mind.” She laughed and reached for her water glass. “Here the pretty lady comes now. Ham, with lots of vegetables is my choice. This northern air is making me extra hungry.”

“Good afternoon,” the server said. “What can I get you from the kitchen?”

Orson looked at Ava, who was scanning the dinner selections. “I think I will go with the ham steak plus all the vegetables of the day and a side of applesauce.” She glanced at Sheena, who grinned from ear to ear.

“Oh, Papa, I like Miss Gardner a whole lot,” Sheena blurted out unreservedly. The girl passed her menu sheet to the lady, who stood at the ready with a pen and a pad to continue documenting their order. “Make that two ham plates, please.”

Orson sighed, and Ava wondered if he thought the two females at the table were ganging up on him.

“I think I will try the beef steak—grilled with just a touch of pink in the middle—with today’s vegetables, please.” He took Ava’s sheet from her and handed their menus to the waitress. “Bring milk for my daughter and two coffees, as well.”

The meal progressed well. Sheena was delightful entertainment. That girl reminded her of Blanche. The two would get along famously. They made arrangements for Sheena to come to the Yagger house at nine the following morning.

As they were finishing up their berry pie, the chef appeared. “I hope you enjoyed your meal.”

“Excellent, as usual, Chef Platie. This is my daughter, Sheena, who will be staying with me here at the hotel, and you remember Miss Gardner,” Orson said by way of introduction.

“Welcome, little one. If you have any favorites you’d like me to whip up, please do not hesitate to suggest it.” He turned his attention to Ava. “I do recall your companion, Mr. Shilling. I also recall that I offered her a job some time ago. Did you find employment elsewhere?”

“I did not. I’ve been brushing up on my culinary skills and planned to come and see you.”

“Ah, so you are serious, then?”

“I will need funds to get my life started here in Blazer, sir, and an opportunity to learn from such a skilled chef is a dream come true.”

“Really?” Orson said. “I never heard you mention that particular dream.”

“I don’t share everything with you.” She bit her bottom lip at her slip of the tongue and hastened on. “When I was Sheena’s age, eating whatever my unskilled mother could scrounge up from her weedy garden or the woods, I imagined sitting at an elegant table, enjoying all the tastes of fresh food cooked properly. A girl has many hidden dreams waiting to be awakened, Mr. Shilling, as you shall find out as your daughter grows.”

“Touche,” he said looking up toward Chef Platie. “You heard the lady. I believe the new mother at the Yagger household has recovered enough to resume her tasks,

leaving her guest some time on her hands.”

“Not tomorrow though, Papa. I am going to spend the day with Miss Gardener, remember?”

“How could I forget?”

“Why don’t you come in on Tuesday for a few hours over lunch? You can dirty up an apron and see if you like sweltering in my hot kitchen.”

“That is a very kind offer.” Ava’s brain was working overtime, but it always came back to the reality that she needed employment, and a position in a restaurant would be considered a respectable hire. “I shall be here at ten so I can help you to prepare your lunch menu. Or you can leave the clean up from breakfast, and I will start there,” she added quickly, hoping not to sound presumptuous that she expected to assist the chef when maybe all he needed was a dishwasher.

“Perfect. I look forward to working with you, but my wife will thank you abundantly. She says I will surely die in this kitchen from being overworked.”

Ava stood and offered her hand for him to shake as all good business people solidified agreements. His grip was powerful, and she hoped some of his strength would wear off on her.

Seated, she brought a hand to her mouth. “Oh, dear. Look at me, Sheena—doing business on a Sunday. Your grandmother would think we both could use a trouncing.”

Sheena laughed. “Granny wouldn’t discipline you, Miss Gardner, you being a grown lady. A skinny youngster like me would sure appreciate some of that puff on my skirt when she leaned me over on her lap.”

“Which rarely happens, apparently,” her father said, dabbing his lips with the napkin before placing it on the table. “Are you ladies ready? We should get Miss Gardner home so she can rest up for tomorrow.”

The Shilling’s escorted her to the Yagger’s door. They said their goodbyes, and Ava lingered on the porch to watch the two head back to town, the child holding her father’s hand as she skipped merrily at his side.

Ava dared to dream the impossible dream.

When Blanche called out from inside the house, she turned and went inside, bursting at the seams to tell the family about her new job at the hotel’s restaurant.

The next day was filled with the unexpected. What Blanche could not think of, Sheena filled in. The two hit it off wonderfully, just as Ava had anticipated.

Sheena gingerly ran a finger along infant Jacob’s cheek while he rested in the cradle downstairs.

“Do you like babies?” Ava asked.

“Oh, yes,” she said dramatically, “but Papa is so slow to get married again, I fear I will miss having a brother or sister altogether.” Ah, ha! Ava recalled the girl’s statement from the day before that had hinted she might be eager for her father to find a wife.

“Your father is still a young man. He has lots of time.”

“But I don’t,” Sheena said. “Why, my grandmother says I’m growing so fast, she can hardly keep up with my wardrobe.” The girl studied Ava, and she dreaded what might come next from the girl’s affluent lips. Whatever had caused such a study expired

when Sheena bit her tongue to suppress her mouth from vocalizing it.

“Do you like fine clothes?” Ava asked, interested to see if she thought the wardrobe made the person.

“I like dressing up for special events, but I tire of changing outfits designated for school, play, dinner, and even church clothes—dare I wear the same outfit two weeks in a row?”

“That is a lot for a young girl to consider every day,” Ava said, placing the last of the necessary ingredients for chocolate cookies on the working counter. “Are you ready to bake?”

“Yes, Miss Gardner. I never get to mess around in the kitchen. This will be such fun.”

“A girl should know how to bake her favorite cookies. Leastways, your father told me you loved all things chocolate.”

“Oh, yes. He was right about that.”

Ava passed her an apron just as Blanche came in the room. “Did I hear we were making cookies in here today?”

“You did, and we girls could use your expertise. I know chocolate is a particular favorite of yours as well.”

“You must be Sheena. Miss Gardner told us all about you last night.” Blanche grabbed a clean apron off the shelf and tied the straps as she studied the ingredients spread out on the counter. “This is Mama’s recipe. It’ll be the yummiest you’ve ever tasted, Sheena.”

“Even better than Sammy can bake?”

“Does Sammy work in your kitchen at home?” Ava asked, beginning to feel out of her league; even imagining that Orson Shilling might be attracted to her for the long haul.

“He is our cook, and he does a fine job at baking, but my grandmother brings in a lady twice a week to do up the fancy stuff.”

“All those people in your kitchen just to feed the three of you?” Ava could hardly fathom such a waste of money while the lady of the house sat idle and issued orders.

“Papa entertains a lot of boring business people when he is home. I can’t talk when we have company unless spoken to. Granny is a bit of a stickler for that rule. She says one day, when I am the mistress of my home, I will appreciate knowing proper etiquette.” Sheena rolled her eyes, suggesting she did not care one way or the other.

Maybe there was hope for Ava after all. She immediately chided herself for allowing her thoughts to even go there. She had no right, now or ever, to sit at a gentleman of that caliber’s table. Tomorrow she would start a job, sharing her newly-acquired kitchen skills and learning to be content in that station. It certainly topped her previous employment, and it would provide the sense of worth she longed for.

Tears filled Ava’s eyes when Sheena came over, wrapped her arms around her waist, and tightly squeezed. In a smothered voice hindered by her mouthful of Ava’s apron, she mumbled, “This is the best day in my whole life, Miss Gardner.”

C HAPTE R 12

Time marched on and Ava's life took on a new outlook. Each day, she worked at the hotel from ten until three, helping with lunch and preparations for the supper meal. She marveled at the food she produced while apprenticing under the skilled tutor. From the occasional slip of the tongue, she drew the conclusion that Orson had encouraged the chef to give her a chance, and after meeting the cook briefly that first day in the restaurant, the man had agreed. Chef Platie must have somehow seen the hidden genius Ava possessed but never knew she had. The meals she turned out from tried-and-true recipes, in addition to the new ones she experimented with, became the talk of Blazer. Patrons flocked to the hotel to eat, and Chef Platie gave Ava the credit, saying they were an excellent team.

Even though young Sheena could be a handful of mischief at times, she took on the role of clearing the tables after customers had left the diner and washing their dirty dishes. She was a joy to have in the kitchen, passing the time while her father worked feverishly to complete his construction project. Each Sunday afternoon, Orson would take Ava and Sheena to the site to show them the latest developments. The structure was taking on a massive and showy form, and Ava considered the full, covered porch that faced the lake to be its finest feature. The buyer was certainly getting her money's worth, and Orson seemed thrilled at the new design Ava's dream house had helped him fashion. Each week, Sheena and Ava would throw in another detail to further enhance the house, and it soon became a fun project involving the three of them.

The regular picnics there by the lake, watching Sheena play in the shallow water while she and Orson dipped their feet in and splashed each other as if they were

children, were the highlights of Ava's week. She was falling in love with the Shilling family, and there was nothing she could do to prevent the heartbreak when they moved back home.

It was Wednesday and the lunch crowd had filtered out of the dining room. Sheena and Blanche were gathering dishes from the tables while Ava stirred up the batter for a lemon cake when the sound of shattering dishes reached the kitchen.

Ava put up her hands to stop the chef from joining her to see which of the girls had caused the clatter. "I'll go. I feared the youngsters might load their trays too full and have an accident with the dishes one day. Please, take the price off my wages."

Ava hurried from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron as she fled the room to investigate the clatter. She stopped dead in her tracks when she witnessed an older woman holding a stunned Sheena by the ear and twisting it until the child's knees buckled, and she squirmed in agony. The tray of broken dishes lay scattered at their feet.

"Let her go," Ava shouted after the shock of viewing such behavior in the hotel had diminished somewhat.

The woman whirled around and glared at Ava, who stood her ground.

"And who might you be?" she stated, releasing her hold on the child.

Sheena shifted out of harm's reach and spoke; "That's Miss Gardner. Me and my friend Blanche, are helping her out in the kitchen." She ducked from a swat that nearly missed the back of her head.

The woman was abusive, yet Sheena appeared to know her.

“The Miss Gardner your father praises?” the woman asked the child.

“Yes, Granny. She’s the one Papa loves.”

Ava gulped down that unexpected piece of information. Apparently, he’d vocalized his feelings to his daughter and his mother, but he’d forgotten to tell her.

The woman came closer, and her study of Ava grew quite uncomfortable. “You work here? ”

“Yes, I do. Would you be Orson’s mother...in the flesh?” Ava said, determined to keep control.

“I just came in on the stagecoach. Such a horrid trip,” she said, wiping invisible dust from her gown. “My dress is now only fit for the rag bag.”

“I’m sure it can be cleansed back to its original beauty, Mrs. Shilling.” Ava said, annoyed at such a fuss. “The hotel has a laundry service.”

“Thank goodness this tiny town offers at least some of the comforts of home.” She turned to her granddaughter while pointing to the mess on the floor. “See? This is why children should not dabble in grown-up affairs. Apologize to Miss Gardner, then take me upstairs to our suite.” She gave Ava one final glance before grabbing the child and walking out the door. “Put this breakage on Orson’s bill,” she said and then was gone, half dragging a reluctant Sheena by the arm. The girl glanced back and shrugged her shoulders. Ava took it to mean that Granny’s presence had come as a surprise. Ava wondered where that would place her in the mix. It was clear the woman liked to rule the roost, and she appeared to have a strong hold on her son and his daughter.

Orson stopped the buggy in front of the Yaggers’ and jumped down from the driver’s

seat. It had been a good day at the job. The new roof had closed in the bulk of the house to protect it from any bad weather.

Ava answered his first knock, came out on the porch, and shut the door behind her. “Your daughter is not here.”

“Oh? Did you leave her with the sitter at the hotel?”

“I left her with her grandmother at the hotel, and reluctantly, I might add.”

He was confused. “My mother would not set foot in South Dakota for anything. How do you know it was her?”

“Sheena introduced us.”

He noted that her responses were short and standoffish in manner. “And leaving Sheena with her grandmother upset you?”

“I do not wish to badmouth anyone, particularly your mother, Orson, but her conduct with Sheena did not meet my approval. Which, of course, I realize does not matter, but I have known control in my lifetime, and that woman has it in spades.” She inhaled and bit her lip nervously. “I am concerned for your daughter; which, I daresay, is also none of my business.”

“Mother can get a bit overzealous at times, but you must understand that she sees Sheena as the next debutant in training.”

“Perhaps you should ask Sheena how she views herself. No one should force another to be who they were not meant to be.”

“You speak as though you’ve worn those shoes...perhaps in the past?”

“We are not discussing me, Orson. Sheena’s future is in the making, and she should have a say as to which direction it will take.”

“She’s but a child—what does she know about hardship?”

“Nothing if you continue to pamper her. God has created us each with special giftings, and if we are lucky, the opportunity to use them will come to pass.”

“Like you in the kitchen? You love it there, don’t you?”

“I do. It’s like a world that has been created just for me. It’s a perfect fit,” she said. “It took me a while to get here, and I have my benefactor and you to thank for the journey. Sheena deserves to make the same choices without the scars.”

“Thank you for your insight, Ava,” he said. “I suppose I should go and confront the woman to see why she made the trip.”

“To check up on the woman her son apparently loves, a fact which you have not bothered to voice,” she blurted out, unable to hold back the secrets between them—at least some of them. “I am glad to have met you, but I will never belong in your world. Goodbye, Orson. You probably shouldn’t call on me anymore.”

She went to the door and disappeared inside before he could digest the rejection he had just received.

All the way to the hotel, Ava’s face taunted him. She did belong in his world—their world—however that unrolled. How could he make her see that? Better yet, how could he make his mother see that?

His family had known poverty in its early years when his father was still alive, but his wealthy stepfather had erased that from his mother’s soul, and her new affluent

lifestyle had become like a god to her. Why hadn't he seen that before? Orson had enjoyed watching her dabble in the rich man's world, relieved that her days of sorrow had ended. His own success in the man's business had influenced him for the upper-class life he led, but now he wondered if it held him captive to some degree.

But the childhood scars were nevertheless there, as mere scratches in the polished silver of their hearts. He recalled the piercings he, Frances, his mother, and more recently, Ava Gardner had experienced. How did one go back to redo it all, putting the healthy parts into place to bring into the future?

Young Sheena was ignorant of it all, her grandmother and mother insisting that knowing the pain suffered in her family's past would hinder the molding of the darling of society she was destined to be. That day, while riding down the main street of small-town Blazer after a full day of physical labor, it all sounded so egotistical. His life had become superficial, and he hadn't even noticed the transition.

He could, however, pinpoint the moment the gray lines had washed away from his soul, and that moment was now.

Tears pooled in his eyes as he fought the inner battle to accept the Lord's forgiveness and the strength to move forward. He had run from the message that Sunday Ava had gone forward at church, figuring his trip home to unleash the partial truths that had sunk in would settle his account with the Good Lord and his mother. And he thought it had, but in truth, it turned out to be just one step in the process of surrendering. He fell to his knees in the horse stall and gave his life, his money, his family, and Ava over to the one who knew the secrets of their hearts better than they did.

He stored the wagon in the utility shed behind the hotel, unhooked the team, and brushed them down, all in the hope that caressing the animal's exterior would somehow embrace his inner heart.

It became clear that even him rescuing the saloon girls from their destructive paths was tainted with ego, and for once, he understood Frances's need to escape her stepfather and a lifestyle she never understood. She and Orson had both made choices on different sides of the balance scale, but both had left scars.

Granted, Orson saw nothing wrong with wealth in and of itself, for his stepfather had been gracious and giving, with no hint of ego in his walk. He was also aware that Slate had a lot of it stashed away, but not a single dime of it was allowed to rule their family. That was the key; knowing if the man owned wealth or the wealth owned him.

That day he knew the answer and shook free of its hold.

He did not owe Frances any restitution for the life she had chosen, nor did he love Ava simply because she needed help getting her life together, as his mother had, once upon a time. He loved Ava as his stepfather had loved his wife, and welcomed the son and daughter she brought into the marriage unconditionally. For what was a person's life? Everyone was equal in God's sight.

Orson brushed off his clothes, knowing that would be the first thing his mother noticed when he entered the hotel room, and made his way inside. The clerk shouted a friendly "Good evening" his way, but he did not mention the arrival of the hotel's latest guest.

As his hand touched the doorknob, Orson inhaled and exhaled, long and hard. This was his turning point, and whether his mother agreed or not, he and Sheena would live the life they were destined to live.

"Orson," his mother gasped when he stepped inside. Her hand went for the handkerchief she kept tucked up her sleeve and she brought it to her nose, as if the smell of hard work was offensive. "You are filthy. Do you not have an office set up at

the construction site?”

“I don’t need an office, Mother, but the locals need guidance. I want this house to be perfect.”

The woman groaned. “Yes, a perfect dwelling for an imperfect occupant.”

He went over and kissed her cheek, and stood with arms open for Sheena to jump into. Orson chose not to let his mother’s disgust shadow his homecoming or steal his joy. “And how is my sweet Sheena? You must have been very surprised to see your grandmother show up today.”

“Did you know she was coming, Father?”

“I did not, but I am pleased to introduce her to our little town of Blazer.”

“Our little town?” his mother shrieked. “Surely, this place cannot hold a candle to our vast city.”

“Both have different qualities, Mama, but to answer your unasked question, I love Blazer, and I love who I am in this town.”

“I do too, Papa,” Sheena said excitedly. “Did you see Miss Gardner? I missed out on a knitting lesson this afternoon.”

“But you did get the chance to catch your grandmother up on what goes on here, I hope.”

“I don’t want to know,” his mother said. “The child blabbers on about nothing. It shall take me months to undo the damage this visit has caused.”

Orson held Sheena out, met her gaze, winked, and set her down on her feet. “Why don’t you scat downstairs and ask Chef Platie to set up a table in the dining room for us? Tell him we’ll be down in about an hour. Perhaps he has a few dishes in the sink for you to do.”

When the door closed behind the girl, whose face had shone as if she were escaping jail, his mother wailed from behind him. “Really, Orson? Dishes? Like a commoner? I thought better of your good sense.”

He turned slowly. It was time. “Please, Mother. Sit. We have much to discuss.”

C HAPTE R 13

Later that evening, a note was delivered to Ava. “A response is expected, Miss Gardner,” the young boy said.

She opened it and could not help but smile. “ I ask for one final chance to redeem myself, Ava. Would you accompany me on an early morning ride? I promise to have you to work by ten. I await your response, as I do not wish to tread where I am not welcome.”

Ava folded the sheet and put it back in the envelope. “Tell Mr. Shilling I will be ready after sunup.” She had no idea what the man had meant by early, but she figured that the timeframe she gave would sufficiently cover it.

“Yes, miss.” The lad touched the brim of his hat with his fingers and raced off in the direction of town to deliver her response.

It all seemed so romantic, the message and the invitation, and she was forced to rub her arms to erase the goosebumps at the thought of the rendezvous. There were likely no romantic connotations to the request at all. More than likely, it would be a reprimand for her bold statements regarding his mother. Still, there appeared to be loose ends that needed to be dealt with, and she was all for not leaving anyone hanging, including herself. Even after forbidding the man to call on her, she still felt the draw. She loved him despite all her efforts to remain realistic, despite all her misgivings that they were not a good match. In the end, Ava could not deny that she loved Orson.

It was late, and she needed rest. Tomorrow would be what the Lord intended it to be, and she would deal with his anger or his appeal as it came.

She was up before the sun, donned one of her better work dresses, and fashioned her hair the way Orson liked it, in waves cascading down her back. She would tie it back with a ribbon later when she arrived at the restaurant. It helped if she looked her best and her mind was prepared for the news. Good or bad, she would not allow Orson to intimidate her either way. Free from the low self-esteem she'd known before coming to Blazer, her confidence had grown stronger every day, and her future, whatever it might hold, was secure. She had a good job and would soon be able to leave Gracie's home and find a place to rent on her own.

Ava poured some fresh coffee into flasks, tightened the lids, and wrapped two sweet buns to take along on their early morning ride. The hotel restaurant would not be open that early, and Orson might appreciate a hot beverage. Jacob was beginning to stir, and the family would soon be awake.

When she heard the wagon drive up the road and stop at the gate, she hurried outside to avoid Orson's having to knock. She passed her bundle to him and climbed up on the other side of the driver's seat.

"Conversation goes better with coffee. Thank you very much, Ava."

"Can't have you fainting away from hunger before you get back to the hotel," she said, trying to keep the greeting casual. "Where are we headed?"

"To the construction site. The workers won't be there for a couple of hours yet. We might even catch the sunrise."

"It is already touching the horizon, so I suggest you get these horses going and stop staring at me as if I was on display."

He hit the lines on the back of the team. When they were underway, Orson turned to Ava. “I was not staring at you as if you were on display if you meant that to be derogatory.”

She blushed when she noticed the mirth hiding behind his eyes. “This is my best dress, sir.”

“And it is gorgeous. The color brings out those delightful specks in your eyes, and matches the ribbon in your hair—and I do love the way it flies out behind you in the breeze.”

She inhaled deeply, knowing her nervous remark had misfired. It was not her intention to have him compliment her. Ava looked off to the side at the passing scenery. “Please, don’t make our parting any more difficult than it already is.”

“Parting? Is that what you really want?”

“It’s best for you and Sheena.”

“Sheena only cares what’s best for me.”

“Which is not me.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” he said. “Shall we save the talk for after we stop? I have lots to say, and I don’t want you to be within running distance from home.”

“Secrets, Mr. Shilling?”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps I have some to share, as well, if we are going to lay our cards out on the table.”

“I don’t believe a man and a woman should enter into a relationship with secrets between them.”

“I share your conviction.”

Silence fell between them, making the trip to the construction site seem to take forever. Would she weaken? She had wanted him to leave Blazer with pleasant memories of their times together, not ones tainted by the knowledge of her past.

When they had rounded the corner of the laneway, and the house came into sight, Ava exclaimed, “You have a roof.”

“We do,” he said, and she could hear the pride in his voice.

“You are enjoying this project, aren’t you?”

“Believe it or not, it’s been a very long time since I’ve actually felled a tree, pounded a nail, or framed such a masterpiece with my own hands. Seems there is always paperwork or another site that needs overseeing, and there’s never the time to do the hands-on work. There is a special feeling that comes along with that.”

“I’m glad,” Ava said. “Is that the verandah I see under those columns stretching from the ground to the roof?”

“That’s where it will be. The full length of the house, facing the water, just like you suggested. Just needs a floor and some steps.”

“Can we sit under there to tell our secrets?” Ava held his gaze. “A porch with chairs to daydream on has always been my fantasy. It might even soften the straight talk that needs to be said.”

He pulled on the wagon brake, jumped down, tied the lines to a low-hanging branch,

and went around to help Ava. She waited for him, wanting the memory of a gentleman's touch to cherish in the days to come.

When face to face, time seemed to stand still. He held her gaze with his. "I need you to know that I have fallen in love with you, Ava Gardner, and nothing that is said today will change that."

"You are scaring me," she said, knowing he could not top her confessions.

"That is not my intention." He reached for her hand, and they walked to the uncompleted porch area.

A row of large tree stumps lined the front of it and she smiled. "Seems others also like this spot."

"The fellows enjoy having their lunch here and watch the action at the lake."

"Action?"

"Yeah, the birds in the trees and in the water put on a mighty fine show for those who like nature."

"Does that Gordie fellow still work for you?"

"Turned out he's not such a bad guy when you give him a reason to stay sober. The fellows call him Old Dad."

"Really? The first miracle of the day."

"But not the last, I hope." Orson pointed at one of the make-shift seats. "I'll go first."

She agonized with him as he related his anguish over his first family; his drunkard,

gambling father, and the influence he had over his sister Frances. “When my father died, Frances withdrew into herself and wouldn’t let any of us in.”

She heard the sorrow in Orson’s voice as he spoke of his mother’s dilemma, having no money to feed her family, and the joy that replaced their sorry existence when a nobleman appeared out of nowhere and asked her to marry him.”

“What a wonderful blessing for her,” Ava said, her voice breaking as she dared to put herself in his mother’s place. Orson had given Ava a reason to rise from her lowly station by claiming to love her, just as the nobleman had lifted Orson’s mother from her poverty.

“At first, I wondered about his motive—he could have scooped up a woman of his station without trying—but he was kind, and he took on me and Frances as if we were his own. I learned to accept the change, whereas my sister refused our father’s replacement. As soon as she could manage it, she ran away and my mother forbade me to look for her and drag her back.”

“I knew your sister.” It spilled from her mouth as natural as sap flowed from a tree.

He appeared taken aback, but he said, “It’s not your turn yet.”

His tale continued.

While his wife lay dying, he promised her he’d do whatever he needed to free himself of the hold it had on his life and raise their Sheena up to be a fine lady. Of course, his mother had compensated, trying to raise Sheena to be the person her own daughter was not.

“I suppose that’s why she expects so much of the child,” Ava said. “I must apologize again for overstepping—”

“You have nothing to apologize for. My eyes were opened last night when it came to what I’d tossed away by not being up front with you. It’s been too long, and I fear you won’t have it in your heart to forgive me.”

She placed her hand over his and smiled. “The morning is young, the sun has risen, and His mercies are new every morning.”

“Is there mercy for a man who paid you to leave the saloon and urged you to start over so he could gain some sort of absolution for his sister?”

“You were my benefactor?”

“But you never followed the mail-order bride’s instructions, and you went your own way. It was only by chance that you came to purchase your train ticket while I was at the depot. I stayed clear of you the entire trip until I joined you on the coach to Blazer.”

“You followed me?” she said. “I suppose you were my secret admirer as well.” She suspected as much but needed to hear him say it.

“I needed to know if you were like the others, swept away by pretty things and spending the gift of freedom I provided them for their betterment.”

“You set us up to appease your conscience because you held back from rescuing your sister from the house of ill repute?” Ava needed clarification. She wanted to understand why a man would spend his wealth for a dead sister.

“Mama hated my going, but she agreed to watch Sheena. I missed my daughter, being so far away and I went home after that Sunday service. I did my best to make them understand that I’d fallen in love with the third mail-order bride that the agency had set up for me. You have made me a believer that one can rise above their circumstances and start anew.” He took both hands in his. “I’ve worked behind your

back to satisfy my grief, and in doing so, have given you cause to hate me.”

“Hate you? How could I hate the man who rescued me from a life I had not chosen, but was forced upon me,” she said. “Like your sister, I made the choice during my time of need to take any available work, but unlike her, I hated the lifestyle and prayed to a God I did not know, that he would pluck me out of my mess. How could I hate you for being the one He sent to deliver me?”

She stood, walked to the column, and hung on tightly, dreading her confession, especially regarding his sister. “Is it my turn?”

“I suppose.” She heard the clatter of pebbles and knew he’d moved in behind her. Ava turned and his eyes bore into hers. “I am not fit for a gentleman of your caliber. If folks found out or recognized me from Dodge...” She saw the question in his eyes. “Yes, I knew your sister Frances. She let few people into her confidence—a private person who lived it up every night and drank too much.”

“I was under the impression you went to work there later, after her death.”

“I was with her the night she passed away. I held her hand while the tears rolled down her cheeks. She wanted me to tell her family that she was sorry she’d disappointed them, but I chickened out. When no one showed up at the saloon asking questions, I pushed her plea to the back of my mind.”

“I came too late to save her.”

“Frances asked me to have them write ‘The Girl Who Loved Her Father’ on her tombstone. I managed to do that for her—paid for the engraving myself.”

“Then it was you who left the note with the coroner? I asked him. He never gave a name as to who ordered the work done, but he did see that the request was granted. Saw the inscription on her stone in the graveyard outside the city myself. Frances was

buried with a bunch of strangers, but I cried when I read what had destroyed her. That she loved her father, the one who'd ruined her life by example."

"Did you know she lost the baby when her customer pushed her down the saloon steps in a rage because she was fat? Called her Baby Fat as if it were a crime to lose one's shapely figure."

"No one mentioned a baby."

"She didn't want the nameless stillborn acknowledged, but they buried the little boy with her. He had fair hair like you."

"Frances had a baby." Orson shifted to lean against the wooden column.

"It never lived in our world, but I believe the Lord instantly whisked his spirit to Heaven and that he runs and plays with all the children who have passed before their time."

"Thank you for being there with Frances. It helps to know she was not alone."

She sighed and started to trek to the water. He followed, and when she stopped at the shoreline, he took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. "Now that all the secrets have been laid bare between us, can you believe that I have fallen in love with the girl I wanted to give a second chance? Do you believe that is possible?"

"Only if you can believe that I've fallen in love with the man who befriended the new girl in town without asking questions I could not have answered at the time."

He pulled her closer. "Ava, will you marry me? Can Sheena and I move into this house with you and be your family, as you are already mine in my heart."

"This house? What of your client?"

“There was never a client. I would have left the keys on your doorstep when I left town as the final gift from your secret admirer. That was the plan if you proved yourself willing to make a fresh start.”

“You let me help you plan this home believing it was for a client?”

“You were not ready to receive such a grand gift at the time,” he said. “Still, I hoped I could give it to you in time; that it would somehow ease my conscience, knowing I never went to drag Frances from the same pit you were stuck in. I thought it would release me from the regret I’ve lived with. You were the one who rose to face the challenge and won my heart in doing so. I hadn’t banked on that, but I am thrilled it happened that way.”

She leaned into him. “Orson, your mother will not approve of our union.”

“I have tried to reason with her, but you’re right. She will go back to her society and live out her days happy in the life her second husband provided for her.” Orson kissed Ava’s fingertips as they lay against his chest. “But my daughter is another story. She can’t wait to see if I am able to snag the best catch in all of Blazer, if not the entire world.”

Ava smiled. “She said that?”

“Her words exactly.”

“I’m glad. Her acceptance is very important,” Ava said moving one step closer. “Ask me again, Orson, now that the playing field is clear.”

“Will you marry me, Ava Gardner? Would you rescue me and Sheena from a life of loneliness and give poor Mildred Crenshaw from the Westward Home and Heart Agency some relief, knowing we finally picked a match that led not only to redemption but to marriage.”

“My mail-order husband—how convenient that you followed me,” Ava said, grinning. “I will be forever grateful for your persistence. Yes, I will marry you, Orson Shilling and we will build a future on the ground where we stand. Welcome home.”

Ava raised her lips and he met her halfway, passion spilling over them with the force of their unexpected love.

The End