



Cade's Quest (The McIntyres #1)

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Category: Historical

Description: Family meant everything to Cade McIntyre—until murderous raiders tore them apart.

The violence that took his parents' lives also scattered his brothers and sisters to the four winds. Now grown, Cade vows to reunite them. A wanted poster naming his oldest brother as a member of a notorious outlaw gang horrifies him but Cade refuses to believe it.

When he discovers a clue about his older sister, the trail leads him to a quiet Texas town—just in time for a bank robbery. Cade locates his sister there, but before they can leave, a vigilante sheriff learns his name and believes he and his brother made off with the loot. All reasoning falls on deaf ears and Cade is forced to flee with the law hot on his heels.

At his hideout, Cade encounters a young Comanche woman who's just escaped the cruelty of an Indian boarding school. In the forced solitude they find comfort in each other and unexpected romance.

But with danger closing in and the past refusing to stay buried, their chance at love may be as fleeting as dust in the wind.

Total Pages (Source): 25

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Chapter One

A fly buzzed around a powerful roan's face, finally alighting on his eye.

The gelding shook his head to shoo it off, the muscles on one flank twitching.

The worn saddle leather creaked as Cade McIntyre adjusted his weight in the saddle, his gaze riveted on a dilapidated farmhouse that he'd once called home no more than three hundred yards away.

Nothing moved except the pesky fly and a lonesome windmill's blades turning lazily in the breeze provided the only sound.

The fly continued to buzz around, turning attention to Cade. When it finally settled on his arm, he swatted it good, then flicked the dead pest off.

Memories swirled around Cade and deep sadness took root.

He pined for the happy, carefree life he'd known as a boy and for the parents who'd brought him and his five siblings into the world.

He closed his eyes for a moment and he could almost hear them running and playing in front of the home they'd had.

Another memory surfaced. The door squeaked and their mother called them to supper as their father hurried from the barn to wash up.

It all seemed so real and with a jolt, he had to remember everyone was gone.

Cade cleared his throat of the lump blocking it and touched a heel to the roan's side to nudge him forward.

They rode up to the house that looked as broken as Cade felt inside.

He dismounted, wondering why he'd bothered to come back.

It had been four years since the raiders had swooped in, murdering his parents on a blustery fall day.

They stole everything they could find, took the herds and rode on, unconcerned about what their actions could do to six children and how their lives would never be the same.

Maybe the longing inside for family drove him back. Everyone yearned for a place to belong and people who loved them, but Cade felt it all the way down to the soles of his feet. He'd been named Cadence McIntyre after a great grandfather who'd come over from Ireland and he wore the name proudly.

The morning of the raid, the oldest of them, Jess, had ridden over to Tascosa to buy some more horses to increase the size of their herd and to pick up some things for their mother.

Sixteen-year-old Summer had taught at the Donley one-room schoolhouse, filling in until they could hire a new teacher.

Cade, twins Logan and Lucas, and Ashland, the youngest of their brood, had been at school only to come home to the sickening horror.

The twins wailed, clinging to each other and Ashland sat down next to their mother in the gore and sobbed.

The smell of blood still seemed to linger in the air as it had that day.

Four years hadn't been long enough to forget staring into their mother's face frozen in death and seeing a fly on her cheek.

Stunned and in shock, Cade rode for help, fear and hopelessness in his throat so thick and black he couldn't swallow.

He'd had to stop and empty his belly more than once and when he reached some men, he could barely get the words out.

Glass crunched under his boots and mice scurried to hide as he stepped inside, his throat still blocked by that blackness.

Destruction lay in every direction. Broken dishes scattered about amid the few toys.

Tears bubbled in his eyes, and he swallowed hard.

His beautiful mother would be equally horrified to see her dishes covered with silt and a layer of dust littering the floor.

Their lives had been torn asunder in the senseless killing.

However, theirs wasn't the only place the raiders stopped.

He'd heard the men talking about a string of them, one after another, on the marauders' bloody rampage.

In fact, five of the neighboring spreads had also caught the brunt of the savagery.

They'd even burned one house to the ground in the senseless violence.

Then, if that wasn't enough, a tornado had apparently finished with what was left. The plow had gone through the roof and a large section of the shingles had been ripped away.

Wiping his eyes on a sleeve, Cade scanned the room, spying a piece of red fabric sticking from the mess of broken dishes.

He bent to pick it up and pulled out his little sister's doll.

The sudden recollection of Ashland wagging the doll everywhere she went was too much.

The deluge broke as he clung to the doll, sobbing.

Everything they'd known and loved had been stripped from them in the blink of an eye.

Gone.

Cade hurried out the door and collapsed on the porch. "Why? Why?"

Where were his brothers and sisters now? What had happened to them?

Well-meaning do-gooders had immediately split them all up, even the twins, saying it was best. Cade vaguely remembered a couple on a wagon train taking one of the twins—Lucas, he thought. But where?

They'd told him nothing. By the time Jess had returned home, he must've been greeted by this same emptiness where once a close-knit family had lived. What had his older brother thought? Had he even tried to find them?

Except for Jess, the siblings had stood in a line in front of the church pulpit and folks claimed them one by one like they were cattle to be sold. No one offered to take all or even two. The twins had clung to each other, crying, yet it had done no good.

Nor had anyone listened to Summer saying she and Jess were old enough to raise their siblings.

A man, stinking to high heaven, had latched on to Cade's arm and took him down on the Red River to his camp where they built a home out of cedar.

Tom Abernathy treated him kindly for the most part.

But the times when liquor had stolen the man's senses were terrifying, precipitating the need to hide until he'd sobered. The man had passed on a month back.

Now Cade was older and wiser. The dangerous country made it necessary to wear a gun, which he'd become expert at using. For all his flaws, Tom had taught him how to stay alive and to trust no one.

Cade sat on the broken steps and looked out over the wide expanse that used to be home to a good-sized herd of cattle. But the mustangs had been their father's real pride. All stolen.

Buck, his gelding, lifted his head curiously for a moment then returned to nibbling on some sprigs of buffalo grass. The roan probably wondered if he'd lost his mind.

Other than the plaguing memories, Cade was fine.

The past was a strange thing. It could make you happy or sad or both at the same time. Of late, the immense loss had occupied most of his heart. He didn't know how long he sat there, but the sunset was one he was glad he hadn't missed.

Wide bands of deep pumpkin and plum colored the sky with the fading sun blending it all in a dizzying kaleidoscope of color. He'd never seen anything so beautiful.

It had to be a sign of something.

A slamming door behind brought him to his feet with a spurt of hope. "Jess, is that you? Are you back? Jess?"

But only the creak of the windmill answered. Dejected, he sat back down.

A sudden decisive thought filled him. He had to find his siblings and bring them all back together as a family. They were still the McIntyres.

Though the murdering raiders had slaughtered their parents and stolen everything they could carry, they couldn't take the name that meant so much.

McIntyres stood for determination and strength of Irish blood running in their veins, and pride burst inside him.

He'd find a way to restore most of what was stolen. Somehow.

"Wherever you are, I'll find you if I have to go to the ends of the earth," he muttered through gritted teeth. "I 'spect it won't be easy, but I'll do it."

He'd once heard a man say that the past was in his head and the future in his hands. There was something about having a future to hold onto that made living worthwhile and maybe when the McIntyres were back together again, Cade would know certain

satisfaction.

But four years was a long time. Jess and Summer might've found a mate and settled down.

They'd both be somewhere around early twenties.

Maybe they even had some children. Likely, they wouldn't be interested in getting back together.

If so, he'd gather the three little ones.

They needed to know they were loved and wanted by their own kin.

For years when he lived on the Red River, he'd dreamed of Jess coming for him. Only he hadn't.

Plans circled in his head as he climbed into Buck's saddle and pointed the horse toward town. At least it was a place to start.

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Chapter Two

Clarendon was quiet when Cade rode down the main dirt street bathed in the colors of twilight.

He bypassed the general store and other establishments that had locked up, reining in at the Methodist church where he and his siblings had been doled out like so many pieces of licorice at the mercantile four years ago.

The cowboys on the ranches surrounding Clarendon called it Saints Roost due to the abundance of churches and no saloons.

These good Christian folk split up his family without one thought.

He guessed they hadn't cared how it affected them then and they might not be too receptive of him now since he hadn't cut his hair in a good bit.

Cade removed his hat, smoothed back his hair, and dusted off his clothes before opening the door. He removed his hat and stepped into the vestibule thinking he probably should've gone to the parsonage first.

A black-clothed older gentleman at the front called, "Can I help you?"

"Yes, sir. I hope so. I'm Cade McIntyre and I'm looking for my brothers and sisters. We were split up four years ago and all went to different places."

"Ah, yes." The preacher came toward him and stuck out his hand.

“I’m Reverend Timothy Hadley. That was the worst time of chaos and terror this town had ever seen.

We not only lost your parents, but four other farm couples, leaving orphans everywhere.

You might be on a fool’s errand, son. We had your five plus eighteen other children to do something with.

What will you do if you find your siblings? ”

How could he be so callous and not recognize the lifelong trauma his actions caused? Cade was in no mood to be friendly.

He ignored the outstretched hand and stared Hadley in the eye.

“We’re a family, sir, and I’m going to get us back together under one roof.

” He paused then added, “If it’s humanly possible.

” He took a deep breath, gripped his hat tighter, and stared into Hadley’s face.

“I was fifteen at the time, but I knew what you did was wrong. Jess and my oldest sister could’ve raised us and kept us together, but you wouldn’t even wait until Jess got back home from a trip.

Why wouldn’t you wait? Why rush? My sister could’ve taken care of us until Jess got here. ”

Hadley held up a palm, his eyes flashing. “Wait a minute. We did what we thought best for you kids.”

“Sir, I don’t want to get into an argument, I just need a little help. Some names.”

“Really, Esther Baker would know more than I do. She kept a list of where all the children went. You should talk to her.”

Cade clutched his hat tighter. “Where can I find her?”

The man pulled out his pocket watch and flipped it open.

“She should be at home. Probably sitting down to eat about now which is where I need to be, or the missus will have my hide. Miz Baker lives in the big, whitewashed house with green trim the next street over. You can’t miss it.

I wouldn’t disturb her this evening though.

Best to wait until morning. She gets a little cranky when bothered while she’s eating.
”

“Much obliged, sir. You and Mrs. Hadley have a good evening.”

Outside the church, Cade closed his eyes and inhaled a lung full of evening air. It had taken everything he had to be there in the place where his siblings had been split up and his hands trembled as he untied Buck.

Glad to have a name, he got into the saddle.

He’d just go by the house to acquaint himself with the location before he found a café and then a bed.

Thank goodness he had a little money. When Tom was on his deathbed, he gave directions to the hiding place where he’d buried his lifesavings.

It was only around fifty dollars but a fortune to Cade and he was grateful to have it.

The house was easy to find, and he could see a lone, white-haired woman seated at a table through the window.

He couldn't think of anything sadder than for someone to be alone, a feeling he'd become well acquainted with after Tom died.

But he wouldn't knock on Miz Baker's door.

Didn't want her cranky when asking a favor.

He went on to an eating place called the Dancing Goats Café.

The eatery was packed but customers were doubling up at the tables and Cade sat with a group of elderly men.

"Say, can one of you tell me how this place got its name?" Cade asked, settled in.

His tablemate scratched his long beard. "You must be new. The owners used to keep a bunch of goats in the back. Those were the funniest critters. Pranced and danced like fools."

"Sounds like a sight to behold." Cade squinted at the blackboard across the room, trying to see the specials. Looked like this was pot roast night. His meal decided, he turned his cup up for the waitress to fill it, then placed his order.

Once the woman retreated to the kitchen, Cade turned to the four men. "Do any of you recall the McIntyres who lived outside of town?"

"Sure do," answered one wearing a faded red bandana around his neck that hadn't

been washed in a month of Sundays. “I knew Ronan McIntyre very well. A shame what happened. And they never caught the murdering bunch either.”

“I’m his son, Cade.” He leaned toward the man. “I was just a kid and sent to live with Tom Abernathy. All of us kids were split up and I’m trying to find ’em. There were six of us.”

“Son, folks hereabouts don’t talk about that. Let sleeping dogs lie.” The man’s white eyebrows curled in forty different directions. “That incident struck fear in the hearts of this town and still does. So much that they don’t turn their lamps down at night. Folks are still wound up.”

A silent one of the group said quietly, “I heard Jess turned outlaw.”

An outlaw? His brother?

“Is that fact or just rumor?” Cade’s heart twisted. That couldn’t be true. Their father taught them to respect the law.

“Cain’t recall where I heard it. Not sure about anything much ’cepting I have to get my crop of peaches in before it hails on them. These summer storms are fierce and can beat a crop plumb to death.”

A murmur of agreement went around the table.

“I seem to recall that the oldest girl went to live with a doctor and his wife over at Eagle Flat in the Red River Valley. Don’t know her name though.” This came from the fourth man, a burly fellow who was bald on top but had long sideburns and a mustache.

“Summer McIntyre?” Cade asked. “She was my oldest sister.” He tried to picture her

in his mind and it took a lot of concentration but an image finally took shape.

Beautiful red hair and blue eyes and her mouth turned up at the corners.

She wore an infectious smile. “Eagle Flat?” he asked the fellow.

“Yep. Hope you find your kin. Why do you want this after so long?” Baldy asked.

“We’re still family and I feel the need to get us back together.” Cade sipped on his coffee, thinking. Eagle Flat was quite a distance, but he’d gladly make the trip if it meant there was hope of finding Summer.

“Well, good luck to you, son.” The gentleman with the long beard lifted his hands for the waitress to slide his plate in front of him.

Soon they lapsed into silence, focusing on eating.

No more was said about his family. Outside the café, Cade thanked the men, and they went their separate ways.

The stables beckoned and he rode Buck to them and went inside.

With no saloon in town, everything had closed up tighter than a widow woman’s pocketbook.

He wouldn’t have to watch his back here.

The gentlemen at the table had given him something to think about. He scanned the street and noticed lights in all the windows. What had happened that day four years ago had indeed struck terror into the hearts of all who lived here.

The guy at the stables accepted Cade's money to board Buck and charged nothing extra for oats in the bargain.

"Is it okay if I sleep with my horse?" Cade asked.

"If he don't mind I don't reckon I do either." The man cackled at his own joke and went off to bed.

The night passed without incident and Buck never complained about Cade's snoring. He washed up and returned to the Dancing Goats for breakfast. This time, he sat alone gathering his thoughts about what he planned to say then he called on Esther Baker.

She answered his knock right off and turned out to be almost as old as Methuselah, but she was friendly and eager to help.

He stepped into the house and it instantly seemed to engulf him.

Tall stacks of books, clothing, and other things lined a narrow walkway.

He'd never seen such a sight. He followed her into a room that was just as cluttered.

"You just sit right here in the parlor with Mr. Whiskers, son. I'll look for the paper where I listed each of your brothers and sisters along with the people who took them.

I'm not sure exactly where I put it, but I know it has to be here.

" She put on some spectacles that made her eyes look huge.

"A lot of the orphaned children had relatives who came to get them. But you didn't have any relatives that we could find. "

“No, ma’am. We have none.” Cade glanced around the parlor. “Can I help you look?”

“You wouldn’t have a clue what that paper looked like. Just sit.” She gave him a smile.

He eyed Mr. Whiskers and his evil stare from a perch atop a teetering stack of periodicals. “Ma’am, me and cats don’t get along much. Maybe I best wait outside.”

“Nonsense, young man. You just sit down. I won’t be long.” Esther whisked out of the room.

He could hear her talking to herself and shuffling papers as he cleared a chair and sat down. Mr. Whiskers, a strange-looking tabby with one eye, promptly jumped into his lap then proceeded to climb around his neck before curling up. The furball soon began to snore.

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Finally, Cade could spare no more time. He extricated the cat from his neck and rose. The cat promptly let out a loud hiss and bit Cade's leg.

"Miz Baker?" He hobbled out of the parlor holding his throbbing leg.

The old woman appeared. "Yes?"

"I really need to get on the road. Last night, some men told me where I might locate my oldest sister so I'm going to head to Eagle Flat. When you find your list, hang onto it and I'll be back."

"I know it's right here somewhere. Wish I had a better memory," Esther said. In the next instant she was waving a paper. "Here it is."

Relief swept through him. He took the list and was quickly let down. "I'm sorry, Miss Esther. This is a list of Bible verses."

"I wondered where I'd put those." She took the paper from him. "I just don't know where your list is. I'm sorry."

"Thank you for doing your best. I'm going to run along but I'll be back. Keep looking." Cade limped outside as fast as he could before the old lady and her blasted cat could delay him longer. He was anxious to get to his sister.

The trip to Eagle Flat would take five days so he headed for the mercantile for supplies.

Tom Abernathy had taught him a lot about keeping certain things in his saddle bags because you never knew when you might need a cup of coffee or to cook a rabbit so he kept a small skillet and coffee pot handy.

But he needed a few essentials to get him through those five days of travel.

“Make sure you keep your money hid good,” Tom had advised. “There’s men happy to kill you for a nickel. I like to bury mine and you would do well to remember that.”

A sudden a memory of his father putting money in a jar and burying it swept into his head. Those raiders wouldn’t have bothered to look for that. As soon as he got back to the homeplace, he’d dig up the money. If Jess hadn’t beaten him to it.

Where was his brother? Had he turned into an outlaw like that man in the café said?

How could he look into that? Clarendon had a marshal.

He would know. Four years without family had instilled a deep longing inside.

He needed Jess. His brother would be a big help.

For a moment, tears smarted his eyes. He blinked hard and wrangled his thoughts back to the present.

Taking a deep breath, he strolled toward the jail.

But a sign on the door said the marshal was out. He’d have to come back so he turned toward the mercantile. The owner of the establishment had been a good friend of his father’s.

Todd Jameson looked up from behind the counter. “McIntyre? Which one are you?”

“Cade, Mr. Jameson. I’m the third oldest.” He strode to the counter and shook the man’s hand. “It’s sure nice to see a friendly face.”

“Where have you been, son? My wife and I have been so worried about you kids.” Jameson leaned on the counter looking much older.

His hair was streaked with silver and he had lines around his mouth and eyes that he hadn’t had before.

“We wanted to take you kids in or at least a few of you but my wife was ill and going through a bad time.”

“That’s okay. I’ve been living up on the Red River with a man named Tom Abernathy, sir. He passed on and I’ve come back looking for my brothers and sisters. Do you know where any went, Mr. Jameson? I’d sure be obliged if you do.”

“Your baby sister was taken by the McMasters family. A year later, they left town. Said family needed them up in Indian Territory around Fort Gibson.” Jameson rubbed the back of his neck.

“Thank you. That’s a start. I’ll search for her up there.” He wondered why neither Preacher Hadley or Esther Baker had mentioned this.

“That was sure a shock,” Jameson went on.

“They never caught the men who killed your parents. I heard Jess is riding with outlaws now. Sure made me sad to hear it. I remember how he rode in here after the ladies in church split all of you kids up. I saw him at the cemetery at your parents’ graves later as I went home. ”

“He was asking about us?” That news brought joy. Maybe Jess had tried to find them.

“Yep. He got downright irate, and the marshal had to ask him to leave. He rode out and hasn’t been back as far as I know.” Jameson laid a hand on Cade’s shoulder. “It’s sure good to see you. You favor your dad more than the others. I really miss Ronan. He made the McIntyre name what it was.”

“It means a lot to hear you say that. I miss my father more each day.”

“What do you need? I gather you didn’t come in for conversation.” Jameson reached for his pad and pencil.

“I’ll take some ground coffee, salt pork, jerky, matches, and a little flour.”

While Jameson gathered his list together, Cade reached for a box of cartridges for his rifle and added them to his growing stack.

Once his order was filled, Jameson put it all in a burlap bag. “Put your money away, McIntyre. It’s no good here.”

“Much obliged, sir. It was sure good to see you.” Cade shook Jameson’s hand and left.

On the road out of town, he stopped at the cemetery and dismounted.

He found his parents’ grave and stood with head bowed.

“I’m so sorry. I wish we’d all been killed that day.

It would’ve been far better than never knowing where everyone went.

I’m trying to get us back together though.

” He rested a hand on his mother’s tombstone.

“I love you, Mama. I miss you and Dad so much.”

After paying his respects, he glanced around at the other graves.

There were all their neighbors that bore the same date of death—the Glovers, the Trumans, the Wyatts, and the Carters.

All struck down on the same day. The magnitude hit Cade.

For so long it had seemed as if the McIntyres had been the only ones.

Finally, he climbed into the saddle. Buck seemed anxious to be in the fresh air. That night, he camped beside a stream and gazed up at the stars.

And as he slept, he dreamed of being back with his siblings and happiness bubbled from his heart.

A noise awakened him and he sat up. “Jess? Is that you, brother?”

But the only reply was the cry of a lonesome coyote.

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Chapter Three

On the fourth day on the trail, Cade made camp under a rock outcropping. He started to stop at one of the four stagecoach way stations, but it looked crowded, and he preferred the wide open spaces. Tomorrow he'd be in Eagle Flat. He prayed his sister would still be there.

He gathered some mesquite wood for a fire and hid his money pouch under a rock. His gut whispered a warning that trouble was near, so he took no chances. Listening to every sound, he made coffee and ate hardtack and jerky instead of hunting game for his supper. It was best to stay close to Buck.

He couldn't say exactly what spooked him other than the glimpse he caught of riders following. He was glad he wore a gun. That made him feel a little better.

Darkness had fallen and he was preparing to crawl into his bedroll when a voice hollered, "Hello, the camp!"

Cade pulled his Colt. "Come on in."

Three riders walked their horses into the camp. The flickering light illuminated an older man and two younger ones. All wore hard faces.

"I have some coffee if you boys want some. Got a cup?" Cade slid his Colt back into the holster.

"We're obliged. Thanks." The speaker opened his saddle bag and removed a cup. He

was tall and skinny with pimples covering his face. "Name's John."

"Hi, I'm Cade. I was just about to turn in."

The other two sauntered to the fire and filled their cups, emptying the pot. They introduced themselves as Joe and George. Fake names for sure.

"Where you boys headed?" Cade asked.

John glanced over his cup at the older man who appeared to be the spokesman for the group. "The Waggoner ranch. We plan to hire on."

Cade untied his bedroll. "Do you have experience?"

"Don't need any." This time the speaker was young Joe. He tied his dirty hair back into a ponytail that went halfway to his waist.

"I see. We're going close to the same place. I have business in Eagle Flat." The trio's faces suddenly changed at the mention of business and John began to edge closer to Cade. It was time to listen to his gut. "You know, I think you boys had best ride on. I've changed my mind about companionship."

"I don't think so." John pulled a weapon and brandished it. "Hand over your money."

"Yeah, make it fast," Joe snarled.

"Who said I have money?" Cade demanded. Could he draw and shoot before John pulled the trigger?

George, the older man, snickered. "We know you got money if you have business in Eagle Flat."

“I’m going to find my sister,” Cade insisted, wondering if he could get any of the three to see reason. “That’s my business. My sister. She’s been missing. You come into my camp and I’ve been hospitable, offering you coffee. But it’s time for you to ride on.”

“Well, we’ll just see about that. We think you’re lying,” George said, raising his voice.

“Shoot him, John!” yelled Joe.

Cade dove to the ground, firing his Colt on the way down.

Someone shouted they were shot as a bullet tore into Cade’s shoulder.

He dropped his Colt. Pain shot through his body as he fought to stay conscious.

The trio was ransacking his saddlebags and everything in his camp, getting angrier by the second.

One of them stomped over and began kicking him. The others soon joined him. Cade’s eyes filled with dirt and he was blinded. Someone came down on his head with a heavy boot and blackness descended on Cade.

When Cade came to, the trio had left, and Buck was nudging him with his big head.

The campfire had gone out and the contents of his saddlebags littered the ground.

Dragging himself to a sitting position, he spat out a mouthful of blood.

His entire body was a throbbing mass and sand stung his eyes. He couldn’t see. They’d blinded him.

It didn't improve after wiping the blood from his eyes. He patted Buck's muzzle. "Good horse."

At least he wouldn't have to go looking for the faithful roan. Standing, he bent double for a moment, sucking in a deep breath against the pain. Slowly he gathered what he could of his belongings and stuffed them back in his saddlebags. He picked his Colt from the dirt and stuck it in his holster.

When he finished, he lifted the rock hiding his money. Now to find a doctor.

With an injured arm, he had no way to put his saddle on Buck's broad back. He'd have to leave it. After pulling his saddle behind some rocks, he added the saddlebags. He'd have to leave them for now. Grabbing a handful of mane, he pulled himself up on the horse.

The sun came up before he'd gone too far, and the day heated to a fine fettle. With each mile, Cade had a harder time staying on Buck. Once, he caught himself an inch from the ground. The day wore on and at times he wasn't sure he was going the right direction.

Finally, sundown came as Cade found himself entering a town. Which one remained to be seen.

A man saw him and came running. "What's wrong, mister?"

"Doctor," Cade mumbled. "Shot."

"Give me your reins and I'll walk you to Doc Perkins just down the street."

He wanted to say thanks and ask the name of the town but it proved too difficult. Whatever place this was didn't much matter at the moment. It had help.

Before he knew it hands were lifting him down and carrying him into a room. Relief flooded over him. He made it.

They laid him on a bed and a man leaned over him. “Cowboy, I’m Doc Perkins.”

“Don’t let me die.”

“Well, I’ll do my best but you might test my skills.” He turned to a woman. “Nurse, we’ll have to get this blood off him.”

“Yes, Doctor. I’ll get water and cloths while you undress him and wash out his eyes,” the nurse said.

The man of medicine got scissors and went to work on his clothing. He tried to object but couldn’t get his tongue to work. All he could do was moan. Finally, the doctor draped a sheet over him. Then he went to work washing the grit from Cade’s eyes.

“I need to take care of my horse,” Cade mumbled.

“Relax, someone already did,” the doctor answered.

“Good.”

“To save your vision, I’m going to have to wrap your head with gauze to keep out the light,” the doctor said.

“You mean I’ll be blind?”

“Only for a few days. I feel certain this is the best way to save your vision.”

Sometimes the only way didn’t mean easiest, but Cade guessed he had little choice.

“I understand. Do what you have to, Doctor.” Cade touched his arm. “Can you please tell me what town this is?”

“Eagle Flat.” The doctor chuckled. “The town without a frown.”

“Thank you.” Satisfied, Cade relaxed and let the doctor work.

The nurse returned and gently started bathing him. Her touch was like an angel’s. He wished he could see her. He knew she must be quite pretty.

“Looking for...sister,” he managed to get out.

“Mister, I sure hope you find her,” the nurse murmured, washing an arm. “She must be awful worried about you.”

“My horse?” Cade asked. He couldn’t remember if he already had or not.

“Someone took your horse to the stables, remember?” the doctor asked.

“Oh, yeah. I’m having trouble remembering things.”

After the doctor finished wrapping his head, he bent to Cade’s ear. “I’m going to give you something to ease your pain and will remove the bullet. You’ll feel a pinprick.”

A moment later, Cade found himself drifting into blessed sleep where there was no pain, no blood, and no lost siblings.

The nurse stared down at the young cowboy with the bandaged head on Doc Perkins’ table. He’d sure gotten a raw deal. From what she could tell, he appeared to be quite a handsome man.

Working for the doctor had given her a lot of experience for which she was extremely grateful but she longed for family.

However, she had little hope. This northern part of Texas was wild and occupied by a lot of bloodthirsty men.

That would all change as soon as towns hired more sheriffs and marshals.

But for now, people did the best they could to get by.

She rested a palm on the patient's chest. What was his name and more importantly what was his story? How did he end up in such pitiful shape?

Tears trickled from the corners of his closed eyes. She tenderly wiped them away, her heart aching for him. He'd mumbled that he was looking for his sister. Even unconscious, he continued to worry about something. His fingers kept moving on the sheet.

With gentle fingers, she touched his dark hair that had settled in waves around the layers of gauze. He needed a barber. Dark growth covered his jawline. He hadn't shaved in a while.

Dan Bodine, the town deputy knocked lightly on the door then entered. "I took the stranger's horse to the stables."

"He'll appreciate that. He seems like a nice kid." She gave Dan a smile. He'd been kinda sweet on her and she thought he might be leading up to a marriage proposal only she'd told him from the start that she wasn't looking for a husband. It hadn't seemed to make any difference though.

Maybe one day she'd think differently but for now she was content with her life as it

was.

“How is he?” Dan asked.

“I think he’ll make it if infection doesn’t set in.” She gazed at the stranger who tugged on her heart. “I hope it doesn’t make his situation worse. He seems a decent sort but crossed paths with some bad people.”

“No name yet?”

“The only thing he said so far is that he’s looking for his sister. No name for her either.” She picked a bloody cloth from the floor and put it into a bucket. “Is town quiet?”

“So far and I think it’ll stay that way unless those cowboys from the Waggoner ranch ride in to blow off some steam.” Dan gripped his hat and shifted his weight. “Can you come out in the hall for a minute?”

“Sure.” She followed him out. “What do you need?”

Dan glanced down the hall that led to the doctor’s living quarters. “Will you go with me to my brother’s wedding day after tomorrow? They’ll have quite a party with lots of dancing.”

“Yes, I’ll go with you. It sounds fun.”

There was a slew of Bodine brothers. Ten to be exact. Their poor parents couldn’t have anything but boys. Those boys toed the line though and were all hard workers. The oldest was getting married after sweeping the banker’s daughter off her feet.

“Great.” He slipped an arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. “You’ll make me

quite a lucky man.”

She smiled, patting his chest. “Just remember, you promised to take me on a picnic Sunday. You do remember that? Don’t you?”

He chuckled. “How can I forget? You make the best fried chicken.”

“Food? That’s all you can think about?”

“Well no.” He wagged his eyebrows. “Plenty of other things occupy my thoughts too.”

“Remember our agreement to just be friends for now.”

“I know. I know. I keep wondering why I agreed to such a thing. Must’ve been out of my mind.”

At the sound of gunshots in the street, he released her. “I’ve got to go. Duty calls.”

“Be careful, Dan. Doc Perkins is busy enough tonight without having to dig bullets out of you too.”

He hurried out and closed the door. She returned to her patient who was stirring.

“Hi there, cowboy,” she said softly. “Glad you woke up.”

He tried to sit up but was too weak and fell back onto the bed. He lifted tentative fingers to feel the gauze around his head. “My horse.”

“It’s been cared for. The deputy took it to the stables. You don’t have to worry. The stable owner will take good care of it.”

The patient relaxed. “Good.”

“Do you know who assaulted you?” she asked.

“Only first names. It was an older man and two boys about my age. All I heard was George, John, and Joe. No last name. I got the feeling they weren’t from around here, but they said they were on their way to the Waggoner ranch.”

“Well, I know the foreman there and he wouldn’t hire people like that. They run a top-notch outfit.” She filled a glass about halfway. “Would you like a drink?”

“I sure would. Do you know what happened to my horse?” Cade sure hoped Buck was being looked after.

“Your horse is at the stables, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

She helped raise his head and put the glass to his lips. He gulped the water, draining the glass. “You were thirsty.”

Delicious aromas drifted into the room. “Something smells really good,” he said.

“The doctor’s wife is cooking supper—meatloaf I think. Are you hungry?”

“I sure am. Must be my lucky day.” His wide grin took her breath.

To think he was lucky seemed odd given the shape he was in. But someone had taught him to be grateful and who was she to dispute that?

Chapter Four

That night, the nurse brought Cade a tray and fed him. He'd discovered there was an upside to being blind and looked forward to meals. He leaned toward her voice. "This sure tastes good. Give the cook my compliments."

"I will, cowboy." She wiped his mouth with a napkin.

"When you're not working, what do you do for fun?" he asked.

"Fun? What's that?" She laughed. "I like to read."

"Me too. What kinds of books?"

"Wuthering Heights, The Count of Monte Cristo, Jane Eyre . That kind of thing. How about you?"

"Ivanhoe is a favorite and Treasure Island ." He sighed. "I sure hope this blindness isn't permanent. I don't know what I'll do if it is."

She patted his arm. "The doctor thinks you'll be fine. Trust him. Want some more of your meal?"

"I think I'm finished. Thank you."

"Then you don't want your dessert?"

“Of course, I want it. I never turn down dessert.” He couldn’t stop the big grin. “What is it?”

“Chocolate cake.”

“Oh man! Bring it on.”

She fed him the cake then took everything away, pausing at the door. “Get some rest. The doctor will check on you in the morning.”

“Thanks.” Cade turned over and was soon dreaming he was back home and everyone was there. Their mother cooked a ham and made a delicious pudding with strawberries for dessert. It all seemed so real. He woke and touched the gauze around his eyes. “I have to see. I just have to,” he whispered.

He listened to the sounds in the doctor’s office and residence. The low mumble of voices, boots on the floor, the delicious smells coming from an oven. Home. Not his home, but a home where people were loved. Cade offered a prayer of gratefulness and hope that his ordeal would soon be over.

The doctor came in the next morning. “How are you, son?”

Cade really liked the warmth that exuded from the country doctor. Perkins made him feel like everything was going to work out.

“I’m fine, Doc. Slept good. Dreamed of my mother and home.”

“Those kinds of dreams really lift our spirits.” Perkins moved the sheet aside. “I need to change your bandage over the wound, but I won’t disturb the gauze around your head yet. The nurse will bring your breakfast in a little bit.”

“Thank you, sir.” He broached the subject that meant so much to him. “When will you take the bandage off my eyes? I need to know if I can see.”

Doc Perkins patted his arm. “It must be hard on you not seeing. How does day after tomorrow sound?” He paused and Cade could feel him laying something out on the bed. “I want to let your eyes rest a little more.”

“That’s fine, Doctor. I was just wondering.”

The doctor moved his nightshirt aside. “Oh dear. I’m afraid this will hurt. Blood has soaked the gauze and dried. Getting it free is going to be a challenge.”

“Just do what you have to. I’m used to pain.”

“I try to be gentle with my patients,” the doctor murmured. “It sounds like you’ve had more than your share of trials. I recognize the voice of experience.”

“A few years ago, a mountain lion attacked me and I thought I was a goner. Laid me up for a good while. The man I was living with doctored me but he didn’t have your skill.” Cade gritted his teeth as the doctor tugged on the stubborn bandage. “I know you’re doing your best.”

“Thank you for your vote of confidence.” The doctor pulled a bit harder. “There. It’s off. “Are you always so agreeable?” Doc Perkins asked.

“I try to be. No use complaining. That sure don’t help nothing.”

“That’s a good outlook.” The clock ticked as the doctor applied ointment and a new bandage. “I’ll check in this afternoon.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“What is your name? Do you have family we should notify?” Perkins asked.

“I’m Cade and I don’t have any family.”

“Cade it is. That’s a good solid name.”

Judging from the sound, Cade pictured Perkins gathering his things.

The door opened and the kind nurse burst in. “Forgive me but did you say your name is Cade?”

“Yes. Cade McIntyre.”

“Oh my goodness!” Her voice trembled with excitement. “Doctor, this man is my brother.”

“You don’t say?”

“Cade, I’m Summer. Your sister.” It sounded like she was crying.

“Don’t cry, Sis.” He fumbled for her hand and gripped it. For a moment, Cade was too overcome to speak. He took in a shuddering breath and found sudden tears soaking the gauze that blocked his vision. “I...is it really you? You’re not something my mind conjured up?”

“I’m as real as I can be. After you came in yesterday, I began to find you very familiar but I was almost afraid to hope. It’s been so long.” Sniffling, Summer perched on the side of his bed. “I’d given up on anyone coming for me. I didn’t know what happened to my kin or even if they wanted me.”

He squeezed her fingers. “I came as soon as I could. An older man in Clarendon

mentioned that a doctor brought you here to Eagle Flat. But I had no assurance you were still here. The same man told me that a local couple took Ashland in, but they moved shortly after.”

“I’ve waited so long for someone to come. Tell me everything, little brother. Where have you been?” Summer asked.

For the next half hour, Cade told her about Tom Abernathy and his life on the Red River. Sometime during his recap, the doctor left the room.

“Look at the time,” Summer exclaimed. “You need your breakfast. I’ll be right back.”

She left and returned a little bit later with a plate of eggs and ham with a cup of coffee. “How about getting out of this bed? Let’s move you to a chair.”

“Sounds perfect to me.” He swung his legs over the side and sat up. The room spun for a moment. Then she helped him into a chair.

“Here you go.” She covered his lap with a sheet and handed him his coffee.

“Oh man, this tastes good.” He leaned his head against the high back of the chair. “I almost feel like a human again.”

Summer rose and her footsteps sounded as she moved around the bed, smoothing it up he supposed.

“I think I remember that about Ashland, but I was in so much shock. We all were. I tried to get them to let me look after you and the others until Jess returned home but they weren’t having it.

I wish I’d tried harder.” She paused and Cade wished he could see her.

“I wonder what happened to Jess. Have you seen him, little brother?”

“No. But a group of men in the Dancing Goat Café told me Jess had turned outlaw.”

“The Dancing Goat?” She laughed.

“I swear that’s the name of it. The food is excellent. But back to those men, they said Jess’s name is on a wanted poster.”

“Well, I don’t believe it. That doesn’t sound like the brother I know.” Summer sat back down and fed him the eggs and ham. “Our papa taught Jess, taught all of us, to obey the law. A piece of paper won’t convince me otherwise.” She wiped his mouth. “What are your plans, Cade?”

“I’m going to try to get us all together again under one roof. When I’m well enough, I’ll go back and fix up our homeplace while I keep looking for the others.”

“Cade, that sounds good. Do you remember when we were kids and berry picking the time that wild hog got after us?” She laughed and he joined in.

“That hog ran me up a cedar tree. I was hanging on for dear life when Jess finally heard us screaming and shot it. He sure saved us.”

“Yes, he did,” Summer agreed. “And remember the time the twins got the bright idea to float a homemade raft down the creek near our home?”

“I sure do. I had to dive in and pull Lucas out. Logan went under and Jess had to jump in and save him.” It felt so good to reminisce. It was the first time he’d had anyone to talk with about home and family. “I’m thrilled that I found you, Summer. I wish I could see you.”

Before their world had come to a tragic end, Summer had a wealth of beautiful red hair and the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. She had to be even prettier now with an infectious smile.

"Soon, little brother. Don't wish your life away."

He chuckled. "That's one of our papa's sayings. Will you stay here? I'm sure you've probably put down roots. Are you married?"

"No." She adjusted the sheet covering him. "Cade, I don't know what I'll do. Doc Perkins and his wife have been very kind to me and taught me a lot about medicine and nursing. The doctor bought me a house. It's going to be hard choosing."

Disappointment set in. He knew it had been a longshot but after finding her, he really wanted her to go back to Clarendon. "I understand. I just thought there was a chance."

"And there is, brother." She rushed to his side. "It's just not that easy to pull up stakes and move. Four years is a long time but there wasn't a single day that I didn't think about everyone and wonder where they'd gone."

Cade handed her his empty coffee cup. "I was so lonely for family. At night, I'd look up at the stars and wonder where my brothers and sisters were living. Tom was as kind as he knew how which lacked a lot, but he wasn't a McIntyre."

"That's for sure. No one can ever take our parents' place," Summer agreed. "Sometimes when I'm all alone and feeling blue, I hear Mama's voice telling me to be brave."

"I hear Jess quite often and think he's come for us. Why do you suppose he hasn't looked for us?"

Summer patted his hand. “Maybe he tried. There is so little to go on coupled with the passage of time. The years have changed us all.” Silence dropped between them. A moment later, she said, “You’re going to be laid up for a bit here. You have to heal before you can go anywhere.”

“Well, I don’t anticipate it taking more than a week to sit in the saddle again.” He’d leave as soon as he could, with or without Summer.

“There’s room for you in my place when you’re able to leave here in a few days.”

“That solves one problem. I’d love to take you up on that. Thanks.”

Footsteps sounded outside the door and the doctor stuck his head in. “Can you come help me with another patient, Summer?”

“Sure, Doctor.” She turned to Cade. “I’ll be back in a bit.” She went out and closed the door behind her.

Sleep overtook Cade. He leaned his head against the tall back of the chair and dreamed of Jess again.

His brother was riding with the Baxter gang. “I’m not really an outlaw,” Jess whispered. “It’s just pretend. Remember how we used to play like we were outlaws? That’s all this is.”

“I’m glad, Jess. I don’t want to see you hang. It would kill me and Summer.” There was a pause and Cade said the words that had bothered him. “Jess, why didn’t you come for us? Summer and me have waited for a long time.”

Jess’s deep voice sounded. “I looked until it seemed there was no point. You were all with new families and trying to go on with life. What right did I have to rip your lives

up and give you yet another thing to deal with?”

“But, Jess, we wanted to be with you.”

“Sorry, Cade. Gotta go. I’ll ride your way sometime.”

Cade woke up to new tears. “It was just a dream,” he whispered to himself. Jess didn’t mean he didn’t want them. “Only a dream. Nothing more.”

The day wore on and it was noon before Summer returned to his room with a lunch tray. Cade told her about his dream and what Jess had said. “Do you think he was trying to reassure us?”

“I don’t know, Cade. Dreams aren’t real so I wouldn’t put a whole lot of stock in what he said.” Summer fed him a bite of potatoes. “I have good news.”

“I can sure use some.”

“Doc Perkins said you can leave here this afternoon and go to my little house.”

As the words sunk in, Cade slowly smiled. “Oh man. I’d sure like that.”

“Then, I’ll make it happen. I have a bed on my screened porch where you can sleep in the open air. I think it’ll do wonders for you.” She gave him a bite of green beans and creamed chicken. “I have a wedding to go to tomorrow, but I think you’ll be fine by yourself for a little while.”

“Thanks, Sis. This is the best news I’ve had other than finding you.”

After finishing with the meal, Summer took the tray and pulled Cade to his feet. “I want to hug you. I have to feel your breath. It’s the only way I can believe you’re

real.”

She put her arms around him, and he held on to her for all he was worth. He’d found part of his family. It was a start on a long and winding road into the unknown.

Chapter Five

Later that afternoon, Cade left the doctor's little clinic with Summer. When they stepped outside, he stood there for a long moment, letting the sun warm his face. "I didn't realize something so simple could feel so good."

"Take all the time you need." She tightened her arm around his. "What would you like to eat for supper?"

"Surprise me."

Summer laughed. "I guarantee that after Mrs. Perkins's food, it will be just that. I'm not the cook she is. I do have a pretty good garden, though, so I'll pick fresh vegetables to go with the pot roast Mrs. Perkins sent."

"I'd say you have it under control, Sis. I'm ready to go now."

"My house is just a short distance, and we don't have to cross the street."

Cade laughed. "I'd say that's good news judging from the passing wagons and horses."

"Yes, it is. I've never seen it this busy in a while. The stagecoach is just coming into town. The driver is as blind as a bat, so we'll stay out of his way." A little groan escaped Summer's mouth. "I'm so, so sorry, Cade. I didn't mean you." She released another groan. "I need to just shut up."

The stage created a loud noise when it passed with all the horses and jangling of harnesses.

“Sis, don’t feel guilty about that. I am as blind as a bat right now.”

“Remember what the doctor said. This is only temporary,” Summer reminded him.

“Maybe or maybe not. Those sharp grains of sand could’ve shredded my eyes.”

“I don’t even want to think that way. Whatever you’re left with, we’ll face it together and figure out what to do so stop thinking about it.”

He stopped. “Are you shaking your finger at me?”

“No. But I should be. We’re passing an interesting house right now. Two old maid sisters live there. One paints landscapes and the other recorded a written history of all the town’s settlers. I love chatting with them.”

“I wish I could read a copy sometime. I love town history.” As Cade took the next step, the toe of his boot caught on the uneven sidewalk. He would’ve fallen if Summer hadn’t grabbed him. “Thanks. I’m clumsy.”

“No, you’re not. You have a good excuse, and I think you’re doing a great job.”

“I haven’t fallen on my face yet but just give me time.” They went on and he was more careful. His thoughts turned to their growing up years. “You were always a stickler for keeping things tidy, so I imagine your place is spotless.”

“I still like an orderly house. I suppose you still cling to your sloppy ways.”

He gripped her arm tighter, sliding his foot forward. “Of course, I am. And four years

of sleeping under the stars didn't provide much opportunity for change. Tom was a bigger slob than me."

"What did he want with a kid?"

"He was crippled from a horse accident and couldn't get around too good. I was his 'fetch and carry.' Tom treated me okay until he got in the bottle. Then I stayed out of his way until he sobered up. Like everyone else, Tom had his good side and bad."

"I'm glad he wasn't mean. If you keep going straight for another block, you'll find the church and if you go the other way past the doctor's place, you'll see the jail. The stables are across the street. Everything is pretty simple."

"Sounds that way. Thank you for giving me a picture of the town."

They took a few more steps and Summer stopped. "This is it." She opened a gate and led him through then into a house that smelled of honeysuckle.

"It smells like a flower garden in here."

"When we get your bandage off, I'll take you outside. Honeysuckle grows solid on the side of the house. It's really beautiful." She led him to a sofa. "You can lie down here while I pick some things from the garden. But first, I'm going to rearrange the furniture so you don't trip over anything."

"Do whatever you have to and don't worry about me."

But she was already scooting furniture around. He sat on the sofa feeling helpless.

At last, she sat down beside him. "Let me explain the layout of the house. I have a parlor, kitchen, and small bedroom."

“Sounds compact. I think I can manage not to get lost.”

“Oh, and the outhouse is beyond the kitchen door. I’ll stretch a rope from the house to it so you can find your way.”

“That would be most appreciated.”

“Okay, I’ll get you a pillow.” She rose and came back in short order. “Stretch out now.”

“I confess I am a little tired.” He lay down and she lifted his legs up onto the sofa. “There’s so much I want to talk about. I hate to waste it sleeping.”

“Only a short nap and you’ll feel better. You lost a lot of blood.”

“Is that what you tell all your patients?”

“It is. And they listen.”

“Hmp! Must be your bedside manner.” Cade didn’t think he was sleepy but before he knew it, he was out.

He awoke to delicious smells. Cade got to his feet and cautiously felt his way to the kitchen. “I hope I didn’t miss supper.”

The sound of birds chirping brought his head around. “Are those inside or out?”

“Outside. I have the window open. I love to hear the birds singing. I guess I take after Mama. Except in winter, she always had the window open so she could hear the birds.”

“I remember.” He chuckled. “I can’t seem to find the table.”

“Let me help you.” She took his arm. A chair sounded against the floor. “Here you go. Sit down. You’re not late. You’re just in time. I was about to wake you.”

The squash and turnips were excellent with the pot roast. Cade insisted on feeding himself and didn’t make too big a mess he hoped.

He started thinking about their childhood and laughter tumbled out.

“What’s so funny?” Summer asked.

“I was just remembering the time when we were kids and you had that little baby carriage for your doll.”

“How can I forget.”

“Jess got one of our baby pigs and slipped it in there with your doll. You hollered loud enough to wake the dead and started chasing him all over the place. Everyone except you laughed so hard.”

Summer chuckled. “I could’ve killed our brother. That was a rotten trick.”

“Yes, but it was funny. Even Mama laughed.”

“I miss those days, Cade. We felt so safe and always knew we were loved. Doc Perkins cares for me, no question, but it’s not the same.” She squeezed his hand. “I want to go back with you to the homeplace, but I do owe the doctor for these four years. I don’t know what to do.”

“Sis, I’ve found that when a decision isn’t clear, don’t do anything. Just let it sit for a

while. The thing is, I know where you are now and can come see you anytime. It was the not knowing that really got me down.”

“That’s wise advice and I think I’ll just let a decision sit for now until a way forward presents itself. Are you getting tired?”

“A little I guess.” He yawned. “But like I said, I don’t want to waste our time together sleeping.”

“Stop. We have lots of time together. Doc Perkins isn’t going to take the gauze from your eyes for a while yet. Are you in such a rush to get back?” she asked.

“Not a rush, but I do want to get started fixing up the house now that I’ve set my mind to that.

And hopefully, Miz. Baker will have found that paper where she jotted who took the rest of us and where.

I sure hope the twins and Ashland are okay and being treated right.

I really worry about that. What if they’re with mean people? ”

“We’ll find them, Cade,” Summer said softly, covering his hand. “If it takes us a year, we’ll find them. And Jess too.”

They talked a little more before turning in. “I’m looking forward to sleeping in your screened-in porch. It’ll seem like I’m back at Tom’s camp. He never bothered to build a home.”

“That’s odd but I guess it takes all kinds. He sounds like a mountain man.”

“I guess he kinda was.”

“I’m relieved he treated you well.”

“As much as he knew how. He wasn’t very big on social graces but he taught me a lot of practical things.”

“I’m glad. Take my hand and I’ll show you the bed on my porch.”

Cade loved the fresh breeze on the screened-in porch. As the warmth of the sun faded into night, a cricket began to chirp then another. Soon, he had a whole chorus of the little chirpers and put his hands over his ears.

But a big smile formed. He’d found Summer so he was making progress. Hope lodged deep in his heart. Maybe he’d fail at finding everyone, but he was sure going to try to right this wrong done to them by those murdering raiders.

Cade awoke the next morning to the smell of coffee on the stove.

Summer was already up. He stood and stretched, feeling the best he had of late.

Carefully, he felt his way through the house to the kitchen using the path Summer had created for him.

So far, he hadn’t broken anything. Give him time though and he surely would.

He felt his sister’s presence. “Good morning,” he said, feeling his way to the table.

“Morning, Cade,” she said brightly. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Nope. It was the birds chirping in my ear.” He sat down in a chair. “For a moment, I

thought I was in a forest.”

“A forest would be nice. Here’s your coffee.” She moved his hand to the cup. “Remember, I have that wedding to attend today. The ceremony is at ten o’clock this morning. I hope you’ll be all right until I get back.”

“Don’t worry about me, Sis. I’ll manage just fine.” He sipped on his coffee. “This is sure good. Sorta tastes like home.”

“I think so too.”

From the direction of her voice and banging of pans, she must be at the stove. “What are you doing?” Cade asked.

“Taking up the salt pork and fixing our eggs. Why?”

“No reason. I’m just not used to being blind, so I try to figure out things for myself. Hope I’m not going to make you regret bringing me here.”

“Not a chance. Cade, I’m so happy you’re here. I could hardly go to sleep last night because of the excitement bubbling inside.”

“Me too.” He cautiously took another sip of coffee. He’d made it to the outhouse and back several times with success. “What else would I find if I go out the back door other than the outhouse?”

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“It’s pretty shaded and I don’t think the ground is too awfully uneven. There’s a nice place to sit under the trees. Often when I get home from work, I sit out there and relax in the breeze.”

“Sounds great. I might check that out later.”

“The sunshine will do wonders for you.” She was at the table now and she set a plate in front of him. “Here you go. Do you want me to feed you?”

“Let me try doing it myself first.” He felt for the fork and found it. “This smells so good.”

“Eat up then and you can have more if that’s not enough. You look too thin.”

Cade laughed. “So your job is to fatten me up?”

“Sort of.”

They ate and he managed just fine feeding himself.

A while later, a knock sounded at the door. “Sis, you want me to get that?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s probably Dan. He’s the deputy here in Eagle Flat and my date for the wedding,” she answered from the bedroom.

Getting to his feet, Cade felt his way toward the knock and opened the door. “If you’re Dan, come in.”

A male voice answered. "Yes, I'm Dan Bodine. Nice to formally meet you, Cade. I saw you at the doctor's place, but you were kind of out of it."

"Come in. I'm sure Summer will be ready soon. Have a seat." Cade returned to his chair and assumed Dan found his own.

"I guess you're enjoying being with your sister." Dan's voice sounded next to Cade.

"I sure am. We've been talking a lot about old times when we were growing up." Cade paused. "I didn't know if I'd ever see Summer again. Only now, the doctor wrapped my head in all this gauze and I can't see anything."

"Gotta be rough," Dan agreed. "I took your horse to the stables."

"That's a load off my mind. Thank you. I worried about that but Summer told me."

"Do you think you could recognize the guys who beat you, Cade?"

"Without a doubt. It was an older man and two young ones. I think the older man must've been their father.

They thought I had some money and wanted to rob me.

I guess the joke was on them." He thought back to that night.

"All three had shifty eyes and I got a bad feeling. I told them they had to ride on. Shortly after that, they attacked me."

"Come by the sheriff's office when you get your head bandage off and look through the wanted posters."

“Thank you, Dan. I will.”

“I’m ready.” Summer entered. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“You’re breathtaking. Cade, you’re missing out. I’m such a lucky man.” Dan’s boots sounded on the floor.

Cade wished he could see her. It had been a long time.

“Thank you, Dan.” Summer put a hand on Cade. “See you in a bit, little brother.”

“Have a good time, Sis.”

Cade felt his way outside and sat in the cooling breeze for a while. The trees seemed to form a canopy over him so he didn’t feel much sun. Wagons went by and horses clopped. Voices seemed to come from all around. Towns were awfully busy, and he longed for the country. Much quieter.

His condition weighed heavily on his mind. What if the doctor was wrong and he was left like this? How would he live? And where? One thing for sure, he wouldn’t burden Summer with his care. But seeing to the needs of a blind man would be difficult for anyone.

Finally, he went inside and sat at the table drinking a cold cup of coffee. He was pondering whether to pour it out or finish it when he heard the door creak followed by whispers.

“He’s by himself. The girl left. Remember, he can’t see us. We’ll get those plans if it’s the last thing we do.” The whisper sounded like a man.

Another answered, “We have to, or we’ll be dead when we go back. This is the

biggest job we've done in a while. I didn't like the way Jess looked at me. He scares me."

Jess? What would his brother have to do with these idiots? Maybe it was a different Jess.

"If we could just remember what time we were to meet up at the junction," whispered a third.

Was it the men responsible for beating him? They sure seemed to remember Cade.

"Shhh, you morons."

Cade pictured their locations in his head from the sound of the voices. He could feel them staring at him. His voice was cold. "You're trespassing. What do you want?"

"You have something of ours and we want it back." The speaker sounded older. George?

"Like what?" Cade asked. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"It's a piece of paper," snapped the speaker. "Don't play dumb."

"Shut up, John!" George snarled.

"What makes you think I have it?"

"You have to. We went back to the campsite and didn't see it. You must've picked it up."

"McIntyre, give us the paper and we'll be on our way. If you don't, we're going to

shoot your knees.” The voice belonged to George.

“That sounds painful,” Cade managed, swallowing hard. “Do you have to do that? You already shot me once.” Cade pushed his chair back from the table and got to his feet. Where was his gun? He tried to think. What if he just rushed them? But no, they had guns.

How long had Summer been gone? He thought it had been quite a while ago. Maybe she’d return soon. But as soon as that thought came, panic washed over him at the thought of them harming her. No one was going to fix this except himself.

And if he got hurt, it was much better than Summer running into them.

Sudden clarity filled his head. This was the only path open to him. He prayed it worked.

Despite the panic and fear, his voice never wavered. “I’ll get your paper for you, gentleman, so you can be on your way.”

Chapter Six

Cade prayed this would work. When he got to the doorway between the kitchen and parlor, he grabbed the door facing and sagged against it. “I’m not feeling too well. I think I might pass out.”

“You better not,” snarled George. “No tricks.”

Cade pushed the gauze the tiniest bit from his eyes so he could see. His vision wasn’t clear, but at least he could see the shadows of his adversaries. In the flash of clarity, he remembered Summer saying she’d placed his gun belt and weapon in a drawer in the parlor.

“I might have to have help. Can you lend me your arm? The room is spinning. And I’m blind, thanks to you and your boys.”

“Quit your whining. You’re not very tough.” George ordered, “Joe, give him your arm.”

“But, Pa.”

“Do it.”

Joe moved beside Cade and he clutched his arm, leaning heavily. “Oh, my head,” Cade groaned, barely moving his feet. “I have a feeling you’re planning something bad. Why couldn’t you have left me in peace? I’m a very sick man.”

Cade moved his head slightly and he saw the table where Summer said she put his gun belt and weapon in the table drawer. But could he get to it before they filled him full of lead? He needed a distraction.

“Would you mind if I sit down for a minute? Just until I can go on?” Cade’s voice wavered, weakening to go with his acting.

“Stop this! No, we want that paper, and we want it now. Stop fooling around.” George’s face had turned red and he looked like he’d bit into a sour persimmon. He stuck the barrel of his gun into Cade’s cheek.

“All right, all right. I’m getting there,” Cade protested. He had to get this over with.

A vase that Summer had filled with roses and honeysuckle gave Cade an idea. He stumbled into the small table, knocking the vase off. Shards of glass, water, and flowers scattered everywhere.

Cade himself went down onto the table that held his Colt. With one hand, he slid the drawer open and yanked out his gun. Simultaneously, he jerked the gauze off his head and dove behind the nearest overstuffed armchair.

At first, everything was one big blur. Blinking helped and after two or three times, his vision started to improve. He could at least see where the shooters were.

The cold steel of the Colt filled his hand. He aimed and fired from his position.

Pimplly-faced John went down, screaming. “I’m hit! Pa, help me.”

“Help your own self. Be tough. Be a man!” George shouted.

Cade made himself as small as he could and swung the Colt on Joe, but the bullet

only grazed him. Both men returned his fire. Cade timed his shots. He couldn't afford to empty all six bullets before he neutralized the group, and he only had four shots left.

The chaos of shattering glass and men's yells filled the house. Cade crawled behind a chair, using it for a shield. From there, he caught Joe when he tried to run for the door. John was down from his wound. That left George.

"Give yourself up, George!" Cade yelled. "You have nowhere to go."

"Wanna bet?"

A volley emptied into the chair shielding Cade as George raced outside.

"Don't leave us, Pa! Please, come back!" John begged. "Why are you leaving us?"

But their father was gone. Some parent.

A commotion outside drew Cade from behind the chair. Keeping his weapon on the two boys, he glanced through a window. He assumed the man with Summer was Deputy Dan and he was holding his gun on George.

"Cade, are you all right in there?" Summer shouted.

Cade went to the door. "I'm fine. These other two aren't so lucky."

"Thank goodness!" She hurried through the door then hesitated just a minute to take in the parlor they had wrecked beyond belief. She rushed to him. "Your bandage."

"I had to see, Summer, or I'd be dead."

“Don’t worry. The doctor does need to check your eyes after we get these men to the jail.” She seemed to want to hug him but wouldn’t give the two on the floor an opening so she stared at the mess, releasing little sounds of dismay.

“Sis, I’m sorry about your little house.” Cade turned when Dan came inside with his prisoner. “I’ll help clean it up.”

“Cade, stop.” Summer hugged him now that Dan had control of the situation. “I’m just happy you’re okay. I couldn’t bear to lose you now that we found each other. How much can you see?”

“At first, I could only make out shadows but it’s improving.” He couldn’t take his eyes off her since he could finally see. “You’re so pretty. Four years has changed you into a woman. Your hair is a much deeper shade of red and even your eyes look bluer. You’re the spitting image of our mother.”

“I thought you said you were going to be fine. Don’t worry, you said.” Tears bubbled in her eyes. “I could’ve lost you for good this time.”

“Aw, don’t cry, Sis.” He draped an arm around her. “You haven’t lost me. Besides, I had little choice in the matter.”

Dan finished tying the last of the three lawbreakers’ hands. “Summer, I’m going to march these men to jail, and I’ll be back. Cade, I have questions for you when I return.”

“I’ll be here,” Cade answered. “Look on the bright side, Deputy. I don’t need to look at any posters. These are the men who beat me at my camp.”

“Perfect. Even more to charge them with.” Dan prodded the old man in the back with the barrel of his gun. “March and don’t stop until you reach the jail.”

“You can’t prove anything, Deputy,” grumbled George. “We was only checking on McIntyre to see if he was okay.”

Dan chuckled. “You have a funny way of doing that. Plus, you shot up Miss McIntyre’s house. What do you have to say about that?”

Evidently, an answer escaped George. The outlaw stood there sullenly. Dan marched the lawbreakers, two of whom were bleeding, down the street, probably much to the astonishment of passersby.

“I need some tea.” Summer took Cade’s arm. “How about you, little brother?”

“I could drink some coffee. Never was much of a tea drinker.”

Later in the bright kitchen at the table, Summer took a sip of tea. “I’m dying to ask questions, but I’ll wait until Dan gets back so you only have to tell it once.”

“That might be best. I’m sorry about the mess they caused.” Cade cradled his cup between his hands. “I’m just sorry about everything we broke.”

“Stop that. I only care about you, not my vases or flowers or anything else.” Her bottom lip quivered. “You could’ve been killed.” She rested a gentle hand on his jaw.

“Summer, those men mentioned Jess’s name.”

“Oh no! What did they say?”

“They said they didn’t like the way Jess looked at them and that he scares them. Do you think they were talking about our brother?”

“I don’t know, Cade. But if Jess does happen to be in an outlaw gang, they could

certainly mean him. Maybe Dan will find out what gang they belong to and that would help us find him. Would you like a refill?"

"I'm fine. Where's your broom?"

She gave him a suspicious glance. "What for?"

"Now, what do people normally do with a broom?"

"Cade, I'll do the sweeping." She got up and pulled a broom from a closet.

"If you don't let me do that, I'll help pick up." He pushed back his chair and went into the parlor with a waste basket.

For the next hour, they cleaned up the mess and set the room back to rights. They were admiring their handiwork when Dan returned. When Summer mentioned coffee, Dan suggested they sit at the kitchen table to talk while he drank some.

Finally, Dan shared that George and his boys were members of the Alonzo Dakota gang. "But I can't understand their obsession with you, Cade."

"They kept wanting me to give them a piece of paper with a map and the time they were supposed to meet up at some junction. Evidently, it fell out of one of their pockets and they thought it was at my campsite. So when they couldn't find it, they assumed I had it.

I took George to mean they were doing a job, but I don't know if it was a train or a bank.

They never said. They were really in a panic about missing it.

” Cade didn’t mention Jess. That had nothing to do with these men.

And even if it did, he wasn’t going to say anything that might get Jess locked up.

“They said they went back to the campsite and the paper wasn’t there. ”

“I see. I can imagine their fear of someone finding it.”

“Or worse, Dan. The fear of being in deep trouble with their boss was more like it.” Cade could only imagine. Most outlaws killed at the drop of a hat anyway and especially if they thought someone was not trustworthy. “I hope they didn’t find my saddle and saddlebags that I hid in the rocks.”

“Maybe we can rent a buggy and ride out there to find out. I’d sure hate for you to lose those, little brother.”

“I can’t afford to buy more. But that’s a good idea.” He changed the subject. “Sis, you didn’t say how the wedding went.”

She glanced up and smiled. “It was nice. I danced with Dan several times then with each of his brothers.”

“Yeah, all nine of them,” Dan said sourly.

“You can’t blame me for that. I was just standing there. Besides, they would’ve been upset.” She patted Dan’s shoulder. “This way, everyone went home happy.”

“Except me. But I did get to arrest those three outlaws.” Dan kissed Summer’s cheek.

Cade watched their interaction and realized they were more than friends.

Maybe much more. Guilt swept over him for asking her to leave her life here. She deserved every bit of happiness she'd found. Dan was a good man, the kind you didn't find often. And so was the doctor.

"I've never heard of the Alonzo Dakota gang, Dan. What do you know about them?" Cade asked.

"Best we can figure, there are about six of them on average. Pretty small potatoes. However, they took some gold in a train robbery worth a fortune and that got the attention of the Pinkerton's.

But they only got away with a little over four hundred dollars during their last job in Round Timber; that's in southeast Baylor County.

Seems the robbery was foiled by an alert sheriff. "

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 1:41 am

“Only four hundred dollars? Not much to risk being hung for.” In fact, that was pitiful little. Cade rubbed the back of his neck. He couldn’t help wondering if Jess had been in on that.

Dan chuckled. “Crime doesn’t pay much at times.”

“Nope, it sure doesn’t.” Cade rose to look out the window. Now that he could see again, he wanted to look at everything. Two blue jays were fighting over a worm.

“Dan, what’ll happen to George and his boys?”

“They’ll go before the judge next week. He could choose to fine them and send them on their way or throw the book at them. It just depends.”

“Will you need me to give testimony?”

“You’re not thinking of going back this soon,” Summer protested.

“I have things to do at home, Sis,” he answered quietly.

“But you’re not well,” she spluttered. “I don’t know what Doc Perkins will say.”

He turned. “They have doctors in Clarendon.”

“I know.” She rose and stood beside him. “We need to go over and let him check your eyes and the wound on your shoulder.”

“I will in a few minutes. Dan, will they need me to testify?” Cade asked again.

Dan finished his coffee and set the cup down. “Not until the trial if there is one.”

“I can always come back if I need to.”

“We’ll have to see what the judge says.” Dan rose and set his cup in a dishpan. “I need to be going. With the sheriff out of town, I should check on the prisoners.” He gave Summer a quick hug. “I’ll see you later.”

Dan left and Cade brought up a question he’d been pondering. “Summer, what do you think about me trying to talk to George about Jess?”

“I think that’s a good idea. Of course, he might not tell you if he’s mad about being arrested, but it’s worth a try. I could make them something to eat.”

“Butter them up?” Cade laughed. “I’ll tell you anything if you make me a pie.”

“Apple, I think. Mrs. Buchanan told me she had a bushel of apples set aside for me. I can make several. Can you help peel them?”

“For a pie, I’ll walk barefoot across a briar patch under a blazing sun.” He couldn’t help the grin. He hadn’t had a pie in such a long time.

“You’re such a beggar.” She put their cups in the dishpan with Dan’s to wash later.

They were walking down the street toward the doctor’s within a few minutes.

Doc Perkins glanced up when they entered his door. “Cade, I heard about the shooting. Come and let me examine your eyes.”

“I’m sorry, Doc. When the bullets started flying, I had to see.” Cade sat down on an examining table.

“I understand.” Doc Perkins reached for a magnifier and asked Summer to hold a lamp up close. “I’d much rather work on a live person than a dead one.”

Perkins was silent as he peered into first one eye then the other. Finally, he stepped back and returned the magnifier to the table.

Cade willed him to speak, to say what he found, but he didn’t. Was it so bad he hated to break the news? “Doc, I can take whatever it is,” he said softly. “If it’s not good, I’ll find a way to live with it. I always have.”

He met Summer’s grim face. She reached for his hand and squeezed hard as though willing everything to be normal.

Cade held his breath, watching the doctor’s facial expressions. He had to see. He just had to. He looked down to see white knuckles as he gripped the edge of the table. Slowly, he forced his hand to open.

“Your eyes look surprisingly well,” Doc said at last. “Let’s find out what you can actually see. Nurse, stand over by the door and hold up these numbers.”

When she was in position, he told Summer to hold up the first one.

“That’s an eight. I feel sure that’s right.”

On the next number he studied it for a long moment. “I think that’s a one...no, a seven. It looked like a one at first, then I saw the top.”

“Correct. Next.”

“A six.” When Summer flipped another card, it threw Cade. “That’s not a number. That’s an A. You were trying to trick, me, Doc.”

“Can’t fool you, can I?” The doctor chuckled. “Cade, your vision is still coming back. Is it blurry?”

“A lot but not so bad I can’t see what I need to.”

“We’re going to leave the bandages off your eyes, but I want you to rinse them twice a day. I’ll check them again day after tomorrow.” Perkins gathered up his things. “How is the shoulder?”

“It’s fine, sir. No pain, but it’s sore when I move it.”

“Perfect. I think you’re doing well to have survived the shooting.”

“Thank you, Doctor.” Cade glanced at Summer. “Are you ready to go bake a pie?”

She nodded. “Let’s go make one.”

They made their way home and a while later, carried the apple pie to the jail.

Dan glanced up when they opened the door. He got to his feet. “What are you doing here?”

It was time to tell him.

Cade took the lead. “When those three in the cells were at Summer’s house, George and his boys were talking and mentioned our older brother’s name—Jess McIntyre. We’re looking for him and we want to find out more.”

Summer straightened and added, “We really need to find Jess and if they know where he is, I’ll bake a hundred pies.”

“Jess McIntyre?” Dan held up a wanted poster. “You need to see this.”

Scowling, Cade took the poster and held it so Summer could see. It stated that Jess had been involved in a train robbery with the Dakota gang and there was a five hundred dollar reward out for him—dead or alive. “Those men in Clarendon hadn’t lied.”

The name was right, but the drawing of Jess was very poor quality.

“Oh, Cade. Breaks my heart. It sure doesn’t look much like him,” Summer remarked.

“But it’s good enough to tell it’s our brother.” And now, they needed more. Cade laid it on the desk and pointed to the cells. “Can we see the prisoners now?”

“Guess it won’t hurt to see what they say.” Dan lifted the ring of keys and they followed him through the door into the row of cells. “This is your lucky day, gentlemen. You have visitors.”

“We don’t want—” George’s attention went to the pie and his eyes widened.

“It’s a pie, Pa,” John whispered loudly.

“I can see, boy.”

Summer stepped closer and Cade put a protective arm around her and said, “We’ll give you the pie in exchange for information about Jess McIntyre.”

George closed one eye and gave them a suspicious side-look. “Jess? What’d you wanna know about him?”

“Where can we find him?” Summer asked. “This pie is baked to perfection, and it

smells absolutely divine.”

The three men crowded to the bars, staring and licking their lips.

Anticipation stretched like a rubber band. Cade held out the wanted poster. “He’s our brother and we need to find him.”

Chapter Seven

George wiped his gray beard and tried to reach through the bars to snatch the pie.

Summer held it away from the father and his sons. “No. You get the pie when you give us the information we want.”

Dan chuckled. “She’s a tough one.”

John pressed closer and whined, “We don’t know much. The gang don’t tell us nothing. They send us on piddly little jobs while they do the big stuff.”

“That’s right.” George eyed the pie. “Jess, he just comes and goes when he wants. We don’t like the scary way he stares at us.”

“Is he the boss?” Cade asked.

“Lord, no. The boss is Dakota and meaner than a snake, but he gives us our share of the take.” George paused. “Last month, he killed Mahoney. Shot him dead. Gave no reason ’cept to say he was breathing too loud. Dakota is crazy in the head.”

“He gives us our share sometimes, Pa. Remember that time a month ago when he didn’t give us nothing? Don’cha, Pa?” Joe tried to reach through the bars only to have John slap his arm.

“Where does Jess go when he leaves the group?” Summer asked.

“Who knows? We’ve never heard him say and no one asks.”

Summer exchanged a look with Cade. “A lady friend, maybe?”

“McIntyre, we don’t know,” John said impatiently. “He don’t talk about it.”

“Where does the gang hole up?” Cade asked. “Is it nearby?”

“Nope. It’s up in Indian Territory where the law cain’t find us.” George spat on the floor. “Enough questions. We want that pie.”

They really hadn’t gotten any real information about Jess.

“What do you think, Summer?” he asked.

She started to hand the pie over but stopped. “Does Jess have a scar?”

“Sure does,” George replied. “A long one on his cheek. Never said how he came by it an’ we don’t ask.”

Cade nodded. “Give it to them, Sis.”

She handed the pie to Dan who gave it to George. All three in the cell dove into it with their fingers.

“Ready to go?” Dan asked.

At their nods, they went back into the office.

“Thank you, Dan,” Summer said quietly. “We didn’t get much about Jess, but the scar confirms he’s our brother. I made you a pie also. Come by the house later.”

“I sure will. Thank you.” Dan hung the key ring on a hook. “I was about ready to take that pie away from George in there.”

“Bet there’s nothing left of it by now,” Cade replied. “It’s a shame they don’t know much. They’re sure a talkative bunch. No wonder the gang doesn’t tell them anything.”

“Yes, and it’s a shame we got stuck with the dumb ones.

” Dan moved to the chair behind his desk and sat down.

“I’ll wire the towns around here to see if anyone knows anything about Jess.

Don’t get your hopes up, though.” When he leaned back the chair squeaked loudly.

“I have a marshal friend up in Indian Territory. I’ll see what he knows. ”

Cade shook Dan’s hand. “Thank you. I sure wish I knew what Jess was up to. If he’s in a gang, why?”

“That’s a question no one is able to answer. Those buffoons in there can’t say.” Dan turned to the door when it opened and a little boy hurried in with a stack of papers under his arm.

“Deputy, want a paper?”

“Sure, son.” He fished a nickel from his pocket and gave it to the kid.

“Thanks, Deputy.” The kid nodded politely to Cade. “How about you?”

“Sure.” He paid the boy and took the paper. The boy promptly left out the door. “I’m

needing to lay down, Summer. I'm as weak as a newborn calf."

"I'd best get you home." She took his arm, and they told Dan bye.

Cade was silent on the walk, pondering what they'd learned about Jess and the Dakota gang. While it was helpful to know where Jess might be, he wasn't sure what to do about it.

They reached the gate to Summer's home before she finally spoke. "Cade, what are you thinking?"

He held the gate for her. "I'm glad we might possibly know where Jess is, but I won't go up there right away.

I need to get the house fixed up and make myself a home base before I can think about traipsing off on what could turn out to be a wild goose chase.

" He opened the door for her and they went inside.

"I need to try to find the twins and our baby sister first. Jess is..." Cade let out a worried sigh.

"I...well, you know how Jess is. He can take care of himself." A wry smile formed.

"I hope anyway. But the younger kids might be having to endure horrible situations."

Summer removed her light shawl and laid it at the end of the sofa. "I agree. Are you hungry? I think we missed lunch in all the excitement."

"I ate a large breakfast, so my belly isn't protesting. Just something light to tide me to supper."

“I’ll slice some of my fresh bread plus cheese and some of the apples.”

“Sounds good.” He went to her and gave her a hug. “Please don’t make a fuss over me.”

She placed her palm against his jaw, her eyes searching his. “Little brother, I haven’t gotten to fuss over anyone in four years so let me do it now. I’m just so happy that we’re reunited. I never thought to see this.”

“I know and I feel the same way.” He cleared his throat of the sudden blockage and blinked hard. “There were many nights I stared up at the stars, hoping and praying to find you and the others. Whether you go back with me or not, we’re family. We’re McIntyres. Don’t ever forget that.”

“Yes, we are. Mama and Papa are smiling.”

“I have no doubt.” Arm in arm, they walked into the kitchen. Cade sat at the table. “Bring me some apples and I’ll pare them while you sliced the bread and cheese.”

In short order, they were munching on their light fare.

Cade eyed the two apple pies that were covered with a tea towel. “I hope one of those is for us.”

“Relax, brother. Yes, one is ours and the other is for Dan.” She chuckled. “Do you remember the time you stole one of Mama’s pies and she caught you in the barn eating it?”

“Boy, do I. Papa tanned my hide, and I never did that again.” He took a bite of apple. “You know, reminiscing about the past makes me feel alive again.”

She wore a dreamy look. “It sure does. It’s almost like they’re alive and waiting for us.”

He had to get back home soon. “Sis, I need to ride back to my campsite and see if my saddle and saddlebags are still there. If they are, I need to get them. I’ll be leaving in a few days.”

“I know and I’ve been giving it a lot of thought. I’ve decided to stay here for a while longer, then I’ll catch the stage for Clarendon. There’s talk of the train coming through but right now it’s only a rumor.”

“Sure would be nice though. It’d make the trip much faster.” He ate a piece of cheese. “Sis, I understand. You need time after I appeared from the blue.”

She laid her palm over Cade’s hand. “I’m glad you understand that I can’t just up and leave the doctor.

He and his wife have been really good to me.

They’ll need some time to get used to the idea and Doc will need to hire a nurse to replace me.

And then there’s Dan. I really care about him. You know?”

“Absolutely. When I set out, I held no expectations. I knew it was a longshot.” He squeezed her fingers and reached for a napkin. “Are you about finished?”

Summer laughed. “You haven’t changed a bit. Go ahead and cut into the pie. I’ll probably wait until later.”

“Thanks.” He did as she said and declared it to be the best pie he’d ever eaten.

Once he'd devoured the last bite, he went out to the porch and lay down. A soft breeze was blowing. Now that he knew his plans, he was itching to get back to the homeplace and make it livable again.

The following day, he washed his eyes per the doctor's instructions then rented a horse for Summer and they rode out to his campsite.

Buck seemed happy for the exercise and Cade was thrilled to smell something other than medicine.

Each day he got stronger and his bullet wound was healing.

They pulled up at the former camp and found cans of pork and beans, whiskey bottles, and other trash scattered around.

Summer remarked, "They won't get high marks from me on neatness. Your buddies left a big mess."

"Hey, they aren't my buddies. This seems typical of George and his boys.

" Cade dismounted and hurried to the boulders where he'd stashed his things.

He didn't want to lose the saddle. Not because of the cost of replacing it, but a bigger reason.

His father had given it to him on his twelfth birthday and had McIntyre tooled in the soft leather.

He crawled over some smaller rocks and breathed a sigh of relief. There in the space between two large boulders were his saddle and saddlebags. "They're here, Summer."

“That’s good news.” She hurried to take the saddlebags from him. “You’re lucky, Cade.”

“I sure am.”

Before they left, they picked up the trash and dug a hole, covering it up. It was best they could do since they had no sack.

Cade wasted no time in putting the saddle on. “This’ll sure ride better.”

She glanced up from where she bent to pick up something. “I imagine. Look what I just found.”

“What is it?” He hurried over. “Is that the paper George was looking for and thought I had?”

“Looks like it.” She handed it to him.

Someone had drawn a crude map with the time ten o’clock inside a circle and a date written in the corner—August 15. That was in two days. The map had an X near what appeared to be two roads.

“Where was this?” He glanced up.

“It had blown up against a rock, lodging there. I noticed a speck of paper sticking out and if I hadn’t been curious, I wouldn’t have seen it. Dan’ll want to see this.”

“I agree. He has time to get up a posse and be there.” Neither of them mentioned Jess, but their brother was definitely on Cade’s mind. What if Dan arrested him? Or worse yet, what if Jess was shot? Killed.

To think of the brother he worshipped dead brought a deluge of pain similar to finding their parents lying dead in the dirt.

His trip home just got delayed—he'd be at the rendezvous point.

Chapter Eight

It turned out Cade really needed the two extra days to recuperate that he wouldn't have gotten had he ridden back to Clarendon.

Lying around and dozing through those two days had worked wonders.

He felt energized. Or maybe it was the thought of finding Jess that brought this renewal of body and spirit.

After a hearty breakfast on the second day, he and Summer talked about a plan.

"I'm going to ride ahead of Dan and the posse." Cade glanced up at his sister as she refilled his cup with coffee. "I want to get the lay of the land so I'm going to ride out in just a little bit."

He didn't tell her that instead of finding a place to hide until it was over, he intended to slip into the posse, hopefully at the back where he wouldn't be noticed.

Summer sighed. "I sure wish I could go with you, but the doctor needs me this morning."

"I know. Some things can't be helped, Sis." Actually, he was relieved that she couldn't accompany him. There could be lots of shooting and blood loss and while her nursing skills could come in handy, he wouldn't put her in that kind of danger.

"Wouldn't it be wonderful if you get to talk to our brother? I can't think of anything

better. Just to hear how he's doing would be really nice." She took up his plate and carried it to the dishpan. "I pray this talk of him being part of the gang is just a rumor."

"Me too. But there's a little part of me that believes it's true. I don't know if I can watch Dan arrest him."

"I can see that because I feel the same way."

"If you talk to Dan, please don't tell him my plan. He'll only stop me."

She turned and dried her hands. "I'll keep your secret.

" Summer took a seat at the table, worry lining her face.

"This is really dangerous. The gang could kill you or you could get caught in a crossfire." She bit her lip.

"Cade, the sheriff returned late last night so he'll lead the posse, not Dan. "

"What is he like? The sheriff I mean."

"A total opposite. Luther Jones is a bit cold and it takes him a while to warm up to anyone but I've never heard him be cruel.

Maybe a little harsh though. A while back, his wife up and left him and took their son back east. She mentioned in confidence that she simply couldn't live with him another day.

He never hit her, but he yelled a lot. Even Dan says he's intimidated by the man. "

The picture forming in Cade's head was not pretty. It was even more crucial now that he be there to call a warning if Jess did happen to show up.

"He sounds hard to get along with."

"According to some but he's never been anything but civil to me. He's just a little different and he likes order."

Civil was a strange word to use and it didn't imply friendly.

"I guess I'd best be on my toes around him then." Cade finished his coffee. "Don't worry, Sis. I plan to stay as quiet as the dead and if bullets start flying, I'll duck. I promise."

She rose and pushed her chair in. "I lost you once. I don't want to lose you twice."

He stood and kissed her cheek. "You're still a worrywart but I love you for caring."

"Okay, I need to go to work. We'll talk later." She put on a hat and got her things.

The door had no more than shut behind her than Cade hurried to the stables for Buck.

Not a cloud dotted the sky. Good. Cade set out across the countryside toward the junction that was marked on the map. His mind raced with all the possibility of things that could go wrong.

Please let me find Jess. Let him be here. And let us have a conversation.

The prayer on his lips, Cade urged Buck into a gallop, anxious to see this junction and where best to slide into the posse. He settled into the saddle and tried to calm his worries.

The only thing that was important was finding his family and putting it back together.

The pain in his shoulder for the last two days was gone and his vision was clear, for which he was grateful. No one could do much if they were burdened by pain.

At last, he reached the junction where two roads converged.

He reined Buck to a halt and glanced around.

Everything was quiet. A check of his watch showed nine-thirty in the morning.

He scouted around and was dismayed to find the ground flat.

Pretty wildflowers and cacti provided a saving grace to the boring landscape and his heart sank.

There was no place to wait for either the posse to show up or the Dakota gang.

Not even any bushes to block him from view.

The familiar scent of Texas sage reached his nose, and he took a moment to admire the purple blooms on a few barrel cacti. Prickly pear blooms had long disappeared. How he loved this land and the multi-faceted vistas.

Eyes were watching him and he fidgeted. The gang or Jess? He couldn't hazard a guess.

A sudden gust of wind brought a large tumbleweed down from a rise. Buck tried to bolt and it took a firm hand on the reins to hold the horse steady. "Whoa, boy. Easy."

Buck grumbled and did a nervous dance, sidestepping and snorting.

But he stayed put. After looking everything over, Cade decided to go back down the trail a little ways where the road cut through some rolling hills.

There would be a place for him there to wait.

He prayed Sheriff Luther Jones wouldn't catch sight of him or there would be hell to pay.

He didn't relish going to jail and having all his plans be for naught.

A few minutes later, Cade pulled up behind a thick curtain of mesquite and cedar. He didn't have to wait long before a group of riders, about half a dozen, came into view. He recognized Dan. They went past but a few minutes later, returned.

"Everyone, stay with your mount and get out of sight," ordered the one wearing a badge. Luther Jones.

Cade stared at the hardness in the sheriff's face. Jones was probably early forties and six feet with meaty arms and a thick waist. Cade hoped he would never have to fight him.

When Dan came his direction, he shrank farther into his shield.

They were still close enough to see the junction and Cade noticed the dirt cloud rising from galloping horses coming at a good clip.

"All right, men, here they come." Sheriff Jones hunched behind his protection still seated on his horse. Time clicked by and finally, Jones signaled to ride, hard and fast. "Don't let 'em get away."

Everyone burst out behind him. Cade got in the saddle and slipped into the tail end of

the posse.

All of a sudden, the approaching riders must've sensed danger. They spun around and headed back where they came from. The sheriff and his men raced toward them, firing a blistering volley of shots.

One minute Cade was riding with them and the next he'd become separated, finding himself alone. His gaze swept the riders they were chasing. A woman's dress billowed out in the wind.

A woman?

What would she be doing with the Dakota Gang? Neither George nor his sons had mentioned a woman. Strange. But maybe they didn't know about her. Cade had gotten the impression that no one trusted them.

A man once told him blabbermouths didn't have many friends and that was true.

Sheriff Jones set a searing pace, and Cade continued to fall back keeping his gun holstered. Curiosity drew his gaze to a ridge just ahead where a rider pulled to a stop. He wasn't close enough to make out any features, but he could tell the horseman was tall in the saddle.

The posse mounted a hard chase of the main group which allowed Cade to focus on this single rider. He was probably twenty-five yards away when the man lifted an arm and waved.

Cade's heart raced as he waved back.

Jess? He swallowed hard. Was that his brother?

Before he could get closer, the rider turned and disappeared on the other side of the ridge. Biting back bitter disappointment, he pulled up.

Suddenly, Sheriff Jones was beside him. “What on earth are you doing? Who are you? I didn’t select you for my posse.”

A slow turn in the saddle let Cade gather himself. “I had a run-in with the three prisoners in your jail, sir. I wanted to ride along in hopes of catching the gang.”

“Without permission?” Jones glared.

Thank goodness the brim of Cade’s hat hid his eyes. He kept his voice even. “I didn’t have time, sir. You were away until late last night. I’ve become well-acquainted with Dan and I didn’t think there would be a problem. I just wanted to see justice done.”

Dan rode up just then. “Sheriff, I can vouch for Cade. I just haven’t had a chance to fill you in about the three men in the jail. They attacked Cade here and almost killed him.”

“I see. Thank you, Deputy.” Jones swung back to Cade. “It looked like you were waving to that one on the ridge.” The statement was accusatory at best.

“Blocking the sun from my eyes, sir. I could barely make that rider out for the sun’s glare.” Cade nodded his thanks to Dan for sticking up for him.

“Are you sure about that?” A sharp edge colored Jones’s question. “Why is your gun holstered? You gonna catch them with your hand?”

“Sir, I was biding my time. And I didn’t want to interfere with the posse’s glory.”

Jones didn’t smile and Cade didn’t know if the man bought his story or not. Without

more, Jones turned to collect his men.

Cade didn't wait but took off toward town on his own, his thoughts in a jumble.

If that was Jess on the ridge, he knew Cade was there.

And the only way he could've known was if he'd been to Eagle Flat and saw him.

Or it was reasonable that Jess could've sent one of his friends.

Maybe they were checking on George and his boys to find out if they were singing like a canary.

Somehow, it gave him a warm glow to think that Jess might be watching over him and Summer.

But why hadn't he tried to talk to them? It would be easy enough to slip into town under cover of night and come to Summer's house without being seen.

A thought hit him. Maybe Jess was in danger and didn't want to bring it to them. That made sense even if little else did. He thought about his dream.

"I'm only pretending to be an outlaw," Jess had said.

But why would his brother do that?

For every question that formed in Cade's mind, there were a dozen more.

Chapter Nine

In the early afternoon, Summer was helping the doctor close a deep gash on the hand of a young boy named Timmy when a burst of gunshots rang out followed by a myriad of loud voices.

Timmy's father ran to the door to look and reported, "The bank's being robbed! They're shouting that it's the Dakota Gang."

Oh dear! Was Cade back yet?

"Sorry, Doctor. I need to look out." Summer didn't wait for a reply. She hurried to the front window in time to see four men rush from the bank and leap on their horses.

Something told her this had been planned. They'd drawn Sheriff Jones and Dan out of town leaving it wide open. Were George and his sons just playing dumb? That scrap of paper that sent them to the junction might've been a ruse.

Her thoughts swung back to Cade, and she worried about his safety. Anything could've happened.

The robbers, wearing bandanas over their noses and mouths, galloped past the window. She stared, praying none was Jess.

"Summer," the doctor called.

"Yes. I'm sorry I left you like that, doctor." She resumed her place and held Timmy's

arm still.

“Was the bank really robbed?” Timmy asked, looking up at her.

“Looks that way,” she answered. “I counted four of them and they went right past the window.”

“Aw, shucks!” he replied. “All the good stuff happens when I ain’t there.”

Doc Perkins grinned. “Timmy, sometimes it’s a blessing to miss certain crimes. You could’ve been caught in a crossfire.”

Timmy’s father returned. “That’s right, son. You could’ve been hurt. Or trampled by the horses.”

“Aww, shoot, Pa. You take the fun out of everything.”

The boy’s father laughed. “One day you’ll have some kids of your own and they’ll say the same thing to you.”

Summer gave a chuckle then became serious. “I just hope no one got hurt.” She watched Doc finish closing the wound and tying it like he’d done countless times.

“I guess if they did, we’ll know about it soon enough,” Doc said, reaching for the gauze.

Timmy could barely sit still, itching to be out there with his friends. “Wonder how much money they took. Do you think they got Pa’s?”

“Depends.” Doc Perkins pulled on the knot he made to hold the bandage. “You’re free to go.”

“Oh boy! Thank you, Doctor.” Timmy tugged his newsboy cap on and hurried to the door before his father could stop him.

Summer’s thoughts raced as she helped Doc Perkins clean up. She was as anxious as Timmy to see if Cade was back. Could George have been filling them with lies? It didn’t seem possible in light of the bumbling act and yet if it had all been untruths, they’d been expert at convincing them.

As soon as Perkins dismissed her, she hurried home. Her heart sank to the pit of her stomach like a boulder at no sign of Cade. Instead of settling down to wait, she hurried to the bank.

A crowd had gathered outside so she weaved her way through and went inside. The clerk was sitting with his head in his hands.

“Excuse me, Mr. Turner. Was anyone hurt?” she asked.

Turner glanced up at her with worried eyes. “I don’t think so. It all happened fast. They were in and out in a few minutes. They knew Sheriff Jones and Deputy Bodine had left town. One of them laughed about it.”

“Did you recognize anyone? Or did they mention a name?” She crossed her fingers.

“No on both counts. They wore bandanas to hide their faces but one was as skinny as a toothpick and one was squatty. The other two waited outside with the horses. The squatty one had a hard time getting in the saddle. He coughed a lot which tells me he must be sick.”

Summer touched his shoulder. “Do you know how much they got away with, sir?”

“Everything that wasn’t in the safe. Mr. Waggoner had just deposited a good deal of

cash from the sale of cattle, and I hadn't had time to put it in the safe.

They seemed to know that." Turner stood, running his fingers through his thinning hair with a trembling hand.

"I don't want to be the one to tell him. "

"No one will blame you, Mr. Turner," Summer assured him. "You didn't have anything to do with it."

"Doesn't matter. It was stolen on my watch. Excuse me. I need to splash some water on my face." Turner moved through a door unsteadily, holding to the frame as he went through.

Turner wasn't a young man, and he took his job extremely serious. He'd been at the bank for six years and had proven to be a dedicated employee. She admired the pride he took in his job.

Pushing through the door and the crowd, she went home to wait for Cade.

Cade rode into town, left Buck at the stables, and went straight to Summer's place. She met him at the gate.

"Some men robbed the bank while you were all gone. I can't wait to hear what you found out after you left here." She opened the gate for him.

"Wait until we're inside," he said, following her. A bank robbery? Was that part of the plan? To get them all out of town then hit the bank?

Questions grew, tripping over each other inside his mind.

Once in the parlor, Cade collapsed onto the sofa. "I'm beat." He glanced up at her with a grin. "But I saw Jess from a distance."

"Oh, that's wonderful." She clasped her hands to her chest. "Tell me every detail."

"I saw him up on a rise about 200 yards away. He'd separated from the main bunch and was alone. He waved at me, Summer."

Surprise lined her glowing face. "Cade! This is the best news."

"I waved back and that's when the sheriff saw me. Thought my goose was cooked but good. I made some lame excuse about the sun being my eyes but now after the bank was robbed, I think he'll pull me in for questioning."

They were silent a moment as everything sank in.

Finally, Summer took his hand. Her voice was quiet. "He has no proof."

"I'm a McIntyre and that's all the proof he needs if he's seen the wanted poster for Jess."

"But neither of you were here in town."

"Doesn't matter. He can say we set it all up, that we got men to come in and do it after the coast was clear. How much was stolen?"

"I don't really know for sure but Mr. Turner, the clerk, said it was a handsome sum. The Waggoner ranch had just brought in money from a cattle drive." She lifted a trembling hand to push back a strand of dark auburn hair. "Maybe you're making too much of Sheriff Jones, Cade."

“You didn’t see his face and that was before the bank incident.” Cade couldn’t forget the anger, the naked suspicion in the sheriff’s face, the hardness and accusations in those dark eyes. “No, I’m in trouble. He’s going to think my wave was a signal of some sort. How much do you want to bet?”

“I can’t bear the thought of that.” Summer rose, biting her lip. She reached for her shawl. “I’m going to talk to Dan and see what he knows. I’ll be back soon.”

Cade offered a smile even though he didn’t feel much like it. “Be careful, Sis.”

After she left, he wandered into the kitchen and shook the coffee pot. It probably had enough for two cups. He got a fire going, set the pot on the iron plate to warm it, and soon sat down with a cup to ponder the events.

For sure, the Dakota Gang was responsible for the bank robbery. But had George and his sons fed them a load of bull? Had they known the bank would get held up?

Cade went over their visit to the man and his sons in the jail.

Finally, he decided they were too dumb to trick anyone.

They just were and that couldn’t be an act.

The gang had intended to send George and his boys into a trap at that junction.

Either the gang was going to kill them, or they counted on the sheriff being there.

They wanted to rid themselves of the trio.

Except the three were arrested and thrown into jail after trying to kill Cade.

All over that slip of paper with the map and time on it.

By the time he finished the second cup of coffee, Summer returned.

“The sheriff is on a rampage all right.” She sat down at the table.

“You were right. Dan has never seen him this angry. He tried to explain things to his boss, but Jones wouldn’t listen.

He’s convinced you were in on the bank robbery and the wave was a signal. ”

“What does Dan think I should do? I don’t want my face on a wanted poster. Or to wind up in jail with our friends. Or Jess.”

“About that...Jones does think you were in cahoots with George, and you had a falling out. What happened to you was nothing but a disagreement that spilled into violence.” Summer met his gaze.

“Cade, I think you need to get out of town before you’re arrested.

Jones is not going to listen to any explanations at this point. ”

“Run?” He’d never run from anything in his life. He released a loud sigh. “Maybe it is the best solution. For now, anyway. But I’ll be on a wanted poster along with Jess. That doesn’t sit well, Sis.”

“I know. What else can you do, though?” She placed her palm tenderly against his jaw. “Dan said you can explain until you’re blue in the face, but Jones isn’t going to listen to you.”

They lapsed into silence, jumping at each noise.

Finally, Cade spoke. “I trust Dan to know best. And I want to protect you most of all. I’ll get Buck and leave under cover of darkness.”

“I agree. You can’t wait until morning. It’s too dangerous. In fact, go get Buck now and put him behind Doc Perkins’ house until it gets dark. That way, Jones can’t arrest you at the stables.”

“That’s a good idea.” He paused and a bird chirped outside. “Once I’m gone, I think you’ll be safe.”

“Don’t worry about me, Cade. I have Dan to help.”

“Since they’re probably watching the house, I’ll go out the back and circle around to the stables.” He had no supplies for the five- day trip and that was a problem especially since he couldn’t go to the mercantile.

She slid an arm around his waist. “While you’re gone, I’ll put together some supplies.”

He kissed her cheek. “You read my mind, Sis. I was just wondering what I’d do.”

“Leave that to me.”

He went out the back door and kept under cover all the way to the stables. The owner was gone so Cade left money for Buck’s stay and hurriedly left. It took no time to leave the roan behind the doctor’s place and return to Summer’s.

“It’s done,” he said, laying his saddlebags on the table.

She glanced up from the pile of things she’d collected. “Good. You’re all set. Now we wait for night.” She paused and added, “Little brother, I hate to see you go. It’s

been heavenly having you here and reminiscing about our family. You don't know what it meant to me."

"I think I do because it has to be similar to how I feel." He pulled her into a hug and rested his chin on top of her head. "I wish you were going with me, but I understand that you have things to do here."

"I'll be there soon enough." She glanced up at him with tears in her blue eyes. "I can't wait to see the homeplace again."

"You don't want to see it now, Summer. It's a wreck. I hope to have it all fixed up by the time you come."

"Just don't work too hard. Leave something for me to do when I get there."

He grinned. "Like slop some hogs? Or clean the outhouse?"

"No! That's not what I meant, and you know it." She matched his grin. "But thanks all the same."

"I had to tease you." He released her and glanced out the window. "It's almost time."

A noise out front reached them and Summer hurried to see the cause. She ran back, her face white. "The sheriff is coming with a bunch of men. Hurry."

She helped him stuff his saddlebags. "I'll tell them you reinjured your shoulder and are at Doc Perkins'."

One more hug, and he hurried out the back just as someone pounded on the front door.

It was still daylight, but he couldn't help it. He lost no time getting to Buck and swung into the saddle. They wound through the yards and behind homes until they reached the edge of town where he set the roan into a gallop.

The sun hung low in the sky, a big orange ball.

He couldn't help but glance back at the place where he'd found his beautiful red-haired big sister. Hot tears lurked behind his eyes and he blinked hard. It seemed he'd found her just to lose her all over again.

"She'll come home," he said into the wind. "She'll come."

This wasn't the end. They were McIntyres and where there was a will, there was a way. Determination was in his blood.

He urged Buck into a gallop to put distance between him and the steely-eyed Sheriff Luther Jones.

Chapter Ten

Cade rode under the cloak of darkness then at daybreak squinted against the bright morning sun. He rubbed his eyes and pulled the brim of his hat lower. He'd find a secluded place to stop where he could eat and get a few winks, but he wouldn't stop for long. He had to keep moving.

The sheriff would take his sudden departure as proof of his part in the bank robbery, but he already seemed to think it anyway so what was the difference.

Cade didn't relish being a wanted man and was a little glad his parents weren't alive to see this.

Two of their sons on wanted posters. He snorted.

Jess was probably just as innocent, truth be known. He sure itched to talk to his brother.

He scanned the walls of a high cliff and found a shallow limestone cave. Perfect. He nudged Buck inside. A little creek running to the side would provide water. It should be safe.

After seeing to Buck, Cade sorted through the items Summer had packed and decided a cold biscuit and a piece of ham would do. He made coffee over a small fire and sat cross-legged on the dirt floor of the cave to eat. He'd hunt for some game and have a hot meal another time.

When he finished, he spread his bedroll and stretched out. God, it felt good to close his eyes. It was dangerous to ride at night due to the fact he couldn't see any holes Buck could step in and break a leg, so he offered a prayer of thanks for making it safely.

As a result of his grueling pace, every muscle and tendon was knotted and ached. Only three more days until he'd be with people who knew him—and Jess. He'd find help.

He awoke with a start sometime later. Someone had called his name. He jumped to his feet, his pulse racing.

“Who's there? Speak up. Jess?”

But no one answered. He cautiously peered out the cave. What had just happened? Was he crazy? The wind kicked up outside. Maybe that explained it. The wind could play tricks on a man. Or it could've just been another dream. He blinked hard and released a weary sigh.

After several minutes, he saw nothing to cause alarm. Buck whinnied, calling for attention so Cade patted his withers and took him to the creek to drink. His pocket watch showed ten o'clock in the morning. Time to get moving. He began gathering up his things.

As he made his way toward Clarendon through the morning and afternoon, he spotted other travelers but avoided them. He didn't need a repeat of George. He also avoided the way stations for the stagecoach. Sheriff Jones would search there.

At last, after five days, he reached Clarendon about suppertime, road-weary and starving. He needed about a month's sleep. Buck headed straight to the sheriff's office, seeming to know Cade needed to explain the situation to someone who would

listen. A friend.

The lawman looked up when Cade entered the office. “I need a word, Sheriff.”

“What is it, McIntyre? Heard you were back. Everyone was happy to see you but then you disappeared.” Robert Maxwell wasn’t a tall man, and he had a slight frame but there wasn’t anyone around who could fight harder. He’d been a good friend of Cade’s parents. “What’s it been now?”

“Four years, sir.” Cade twirled his hat between his hands, waiting for an invitation to sit.

Finally, Maxwell spoke. “Don’t just stand there, boy. Take a seat and talk.”

Cade sat and told Maxwell everything, not leaving out a single detail. He released a long breath of relief to finally have someone listen to him. “I had nothing to do with that bank robbery, but I guess I’m a wanted man now along with Jess.”

Maxwell lit a pipe and puffed on it a minute. “I got a telegram from Jones over in Eagle Flat. But I won’t arrest you. I know you and know your story. Folks in town told me you’re driven to round up your lost siblings.”

“Yes, sir. I found my sister, Summer, in Eagle Flat. That’s why I was there.”

“That’s real good. Is she well?”

“Working for a doctor and loving it. She has a lot of things to straighten around before she can come, but she plans to as soon as she can.”

“So, what are your plans?”

“I’m going to fix the homeplace up and keep looking for the rest of my siblings. Miz Baker here in town kept a list of where everyone went but she can’t find it now.”

Maxwell laughed. “I’m not surprised. What would be really astonishing is if she located anything in all that mess of papers that are piled to the ceiling. One day, she might lose that cat underneath it all.”

“I agree. The cat bit me the day I went there.” Cade chuckled. “Luckily it didn’t have rabies.”

“That cat is a menace. Bites everyone who dares invade his space.” Maxwell placed his pipe in its holder. “You must be tired.”

“Yes, sir. I can use a bed and a bath.”

The sheriff stood, a sign he wanted to wrap this up.

Cade hurried with a final question. “Before I go, can you tell me what you can about Jess?”

The sheriff scratched his head, coming around the desk. “I wish I knew but I just can’t figure him out. A big part of me wants to believe he’s not riding with that gang. Your parents would be worried sick. Yet, people change. Maybe Jess got in too deep and can’t get out.”

“I want to believe he has a good explanation. In fact, I have to believe that. It felt good to see him on that ridge by himself and his wave was a balm to my heart.”

“Then keep believing in anything that brings hope, son. If I find out more about Jess, I’ll let you know.” Maxwell put a hand on Cade’s shoulder. “And don’t worry about Sheriff Jones. I’ll take care of him. We’ve tangled before.”

The relief washing over Cade weakened his knees. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate it. It’s nice to find someone to confide in.”

“One thing about Luther Jones, he’s about as stubborn a man as they come. He won’t give up, McIntyre. He’s going to hunt you down. You need to hide out somewhere until I can talk some sense into him.”

Hunt him down? Fear snaked up Cade’s back along with a grim realization. Men with right on their side had been hung before.

He swallowed hard. “I guess I can do that. But I need to speak to Miz Baker first.”

“Son, she’s took bad sick and is in bed. You won’t be talking to her this week. Maybe not next week either according to the doc. She has pneumonia and pleurisy.”

His luck was really bad all the way around. Except for finding Summer. Everything had been worth that.

“Guess there’s no use sticking close to Clarendon then.” Cade stood and put his hat on. “No use at all.” He’d have to postpone fixing up the homeplace. In fact, he’d have to postpone his life while he was at it. “Guess I might as well eat supper.”

But he wouldn’t tarry. He could feel that rope already tightening around his neck. He stuck two fingers inside his collarless shirt and loosened it a bit.

He and the sheriff walked out together, and Cade glanced toward the Dancing Goat. “Have a nice evening, Sheriff.”

“You too, McIntyre.”

They shook hands and parted ways. Cade ate some supper then nixed an idea to get a

room at the hotel.

Depending on how close Jones was behind him, he shouldn't let the thought of a soft bed entice him.

He untied Buck and rode out toward his former home, his thoughts in a turmoil.

Never had he been on the wrong side of the law.

This upset every plan he'd made, and he had no inkling where to hide out.

Then an idea popped into his head. When they were boys, he and Jess used to ride the five miles to an old buffalo hunter's dugout where they'd stay for several days and hunt game.

It had provided quality time with his brother that still lingered in his mind.

How they'd talked and laughed. It hadn't mattered that Jess was two years older. He always made time for Cade.

Once again, he rode into the night. He owed Buck a real long rest after this.

A wanted man? He couldn't banish the thought. What if Sheriff Maxwell was wrong and he couldn't convince Jones that Cade had nothing to do with the bank robbery or the Dakota Gang? In light of all these doubts, he was glad he hadn't told Maxwell about his hiding place.

Darkness had long set in, and a half-moon winked overhead. Cade picked his way across the landscape. At least it was rocky, so he didn't have to worry about leaving tracks. Nothing would be left for anyone following. He skirted the shell of a home where he'd grown up and turned north.

His nerves began to settle by the time he reached the dugout half hidden by a grove of cedar and juniper. A coyote commenced howling to its mate when Cade swung off Buck. It sounded too close for comfort but as long as the animal was courting a lady love, it wouldn't mess with him.

Cade pushed through the wild growth to the entrance to the dugout, thankful it still had a door although it needed a little work when morning came. He led Buck inside with him. However, the horse wasn't too thrilled to be enclosed in such a tight space, but it was best.

"You'll be fine," Cade said removing his bedroll, the saddlebags, and saddle. "Just make yourself comfortable."

Buck snorted loudly in protest.

"I know. I hear you and I understand." Cade patted Buck's withers. "I have to say you're a mite ungrateful. I could let the coyotes have you if you'd rather."

The headstrong roan pawed the floor a bit more before he quieted.

Cade made a fire and hauled water from a stream a few yards from the dugout. In a short time, he had coffee boiling then he pulled out the rest of the supplies Summer had packed. He nibbled on a piece of jerky and shared an apple with Buck.

Satisfied that he was safe enough, he stretched out on the bedroll and took stock of his situation. No matter which way he turned, everything carried risk. But first, if he didn't get some sleep, he wouldn't be able to think straight and would play right into Jones's hands.

The following morning, Cade made coffee and was sitting there drinking it when the dim light revealed something on a small shelf on the wall that hadn't been there

before. He rose and went over to it. His breath caught in his throat and tears filled his eyes.

He held his mother's beautiful cameo locket, still on the black velvet ribbon that attached around her throat. With shaking fingers, he pressed the latch to open it. A picture of his parents in their wedding finery stared back at him.

But how did it get here? His mother had never visited the dugout.

His knees gave out and he sank to the floor. Who brought this here?

Had it been Jess? Somehow, he knew his brother had left it and he wanted Cade to find it.

The overwhelming longing to talk to his brother washed over him. Just to see him for a moment, to tell him how much he loved him, would make everything much better.

But he couldn't.

For the next four days, Cade gathered food and scouted for signs of Sheriff Jones.

One afternoon, he ventured down to the homeplace, just wanting to be near the spirits of those he loved.

The money jar of his father's crossed his mind, and he took the shovel to where his father kept it.

But after digging under the corner of the porch, Cade found it empty. Jess had evidently taken it.

He was scooping up some glass when he heard a horse's whinny. He cautiously

peered out through a broken window.

Jones was easy to recognize with his square jaw and scowl.

Cade ducked down, his heart hammering. The man just wasn't going to give up.

It appeared Maxwell hadn't had much luck in getting through to him.

Dismounting, the hefty sheriff strode to the door of the dwelling.

Cade hurried to a corner of the kitchen and raised a trapdoor.

It was difficult to see unless you knew it was there.

Their secret room had sheltered them during storms and from attack in the earlier years.

It still puzzled him why his parents hadn't used it when the raiders had come.

But maybe they hadn't viewed them as a threat.

Cade made himself small, not making a sound.

He was glad he'd hidden Buck. Jones stepped into the house then shuffled into each vacant room.

As the man moved about, Cade huddled in his secret space with gun drawn. If it came down to it, he would shoot. Finally, Jones left, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

The day drew to a close and the sun had sunk below the horizon when Cade returned to the dugout and dismounted.

Alarm swept over him at the sound of a child's cries.

Or was it an animal? They sounded similar.

But the thin ribbon of smoke coming from the flue on top of the roof said someone had made themselves at home. With his stuff.

Had Sheriff Jones found his hiding place?

He slid his Colt from the holster and advanced slowly. The sound grew louder and came from the dugout. He threw the door wide, his finger tightening on the trigger.

A young native woman grabbed a small child, pulling it behind her.

The long, fringed skirt and beaded deerskin blouse said she was probably Comanche.

While her wide eyes reflected panic, she didn't make a sound as she slipped a knife from her cloth belt and held it in front of her in a threatening manner.

"Put down the knife, lady," Cade barked.

The child began to cry.

"What's your name?" he asked. "I'm Cade."

After a long moment, she replied, "Rain." She lifted her chin in defiance.

He took in her long, shiny braids and slim figure. She was pretty. He judged her to be somewhere around his own age. What was he going to do with her and the kid? Life just got a whole lot more complicated.

Chapter Eleven

“Rain, I won’t hurt you or the child.” Cade put his Colt away.

“I’m supposed to trust you? I’m a savage, you know.” She flung the words at him like they were venom-laced arrows.

“I don’t see any savages here.” He held his hands out. “Where did you come from?”

Rain said nothing, keeping the child who must be around four years behind her.

“You speak excellent English. I am a friend. What are you doing here?”

Again, only silence filled the space.

“I’ve been living out of this dugout for a week. We can share it. I killed some quail and will cook them for supper.” He kept his voice gentle and low. Thus far, she hadn’t moved a muscle. “What is the little one’s name?”

“Ten Bears.” She returned her knife to the sheath attached to her belt and pulled the boy from behind her. Ten Bears shyly buried his face in the woman’s skirt. “He was my sister’s boy, but she and her husband died of the fever a week ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Where will you go?”

The shrug said she hadn’t a clue.

“Well, I can help you figure that out if you’ll let me. A word of warning. There’s a dangerous man nosing around so be careful. He might hurt you. We’re safe enough here I think, but try to keep the boy quiet.”

“I will help you prepare a meal.” Rain stated that as though he had doubts she would cut his throat in his sleep.

Cade nodded and added a smile. “Your help is welcome. How old is Ten Bears?”

“Three years.”

“Ah, the age of curiosity. Are you and the boy hungry?”

“It has been a while since we ate.” She tenderly caressed the boy’s hair. Ten Bears smiled up at her with so much love Cade had to look away.

He knelt to add a piece of wood to the fire. “You speak English well, Rain. Where were you taught?”

“An English school for us poor, heathen Indians.” Bitterness laced her statement. “They tried to civilize us. Mine didn’t take.”

It must’ve been similar to the Carlisle School.

He’d heard how they stole the children from their tepees and tried to kill the Indian inside by forbidding the children to speak their native tongue or practice the traditions they’d grown up with.

Rain must’ve had to endure all of this, and it seemed to have left her scarred and bitter.

At least he and his siblings hadn't faced such as this.

Cade stood. "I'm sorry, Rain. I think it's wrong to change people, any people, and wipe out language, homes, and customs. You have my sympathy."

He wanted to touch her, to offer some comfort, but her clear defiance put up a wall between them.

Leaning back on an elbow, he studied her.

The firelight softened the set of her jaw and the mulishness of her chin.

The flames danced in her dark hair like scampering children at playtime.

Cade wished he could take the pain that had created this bitterness yet knew it was impossible.

His belly grumbled as he got up and went out to clean the quail.

After a minute, Rain and the boy joined him. "Two can work twice as fast," she mumbled.

He moved over to allow her room. "That's true. Look, I apologize for prying. I was only trying to figure out how far you've traveled. And to make conversation."

"The apology isn't yours to make," she said expertly skinning a bird. "I was rude and I'm sorry. You've been nothing but kind."

"My Irish mother taught me some manners. She tanned my hide if I was anything short of kind." He released a soft chuckle. "My father stepped in on occasion, but it was my mother who ruled the roost."

“Mine too. It almost killed her when they took me away to school by force. The next time I saw her, which was only a month ago, she lay on her deathbed. I barely got to say goodbye.” Rain’s voice broke and she bent farther over the quail she was cleaning. “I never saw my father again.”

“That’s rough.”

“The sickness swept through the reservation, taking a good many. Just days ago, it took my sister and her husband as well, which I already told you.” She brushed her cheek with the sleeve of her blouse, stifling a sob.

Maybe being accused of bank robbery wasn’t the worst thing. He wiped his hand and patted her shoulder. She stiffened at his touch before letting herself relax.

“My parents were killed by a group of raiders, white men who came through here, murdering and stealing everything in sight. Us kids were at school and came home to the carnage. The people in town split us all up, sending us to live with strangers. I’m on a mission to get us back together.

” He flashed a brief smile. “I recently found my oldest sister, so the darkness is beginning to lift some.”

“How wonderful.”

Ten Bears clutched Rain’s skirt, murmuring something in Comanche.

“If you want to see to the boy, I can finish up here,” Cade said quietly. “We’re about finished anyway.”

“He is probably thirsty. I’ll get a cup and take him to the stream.”

Cade couldn't help but follow her with his gaze.

She walked softly, swaying as though to a babbling brook before it rushed downstream.

His heart went out to her and the sorrow she'd borne.

Life hadn't treated her kindly either. Just when a man thought he had a terrible story, someone came along with a sadder one.

After cleaning the game, he skewered the small quail on sticks and put them into the flames.

Rain and the boy sat with him as he turned the meat.

They didn't take their hungry eyes from the succulent pieces of browning fowl.

He wished he'd killed more. The quail being as small as they were, wouldn't fill their bellies.

He decided to give them most of what he cooked. They appeared to need it worse than he.

"Where are you headed, Rain? If it's close by, I can take you."

"I have nowhere to go. We have nothing to return to and no one expecting us. I'm free to go where I want, free to live how I desire. My intention is to keep Ten Bears's parents alive in his mind and teach him the ways of the Comanche."

"Here's the thing: you need a roof over your head and food. Rest up here until you decide what comes next. I can promise you freedom to do as you want. When it's

safe, you can help me fix up the home where I grew up. I want it to be ready for my siblings when I bring them.”

“I will help.” She finally smiled and the result stole his breath. What a beauty.

“Excellent.”

They ate and she washed the boy’s face and hands while he buried the quail bones. Ten Bears had kept away from Cade until now, but he edged closer, his small face a mask of serious thoughts.

“Hi there.” Cade stretched out a hand. “Would you like to sit with me?”

But Ten Bears inched back to the burlap bags Rain had brought and there he sat until she reached for him.

“I hope you brought some bedrolls.” Cade stood, thinking he needed to check on Buck before they went to sleep. He prayed the coyotes wouldn’t be back since he couldn’t bring the horse inside.

“Yes, I have some,” she said, removing the boy’s moccasins.

She made him a bed, and he crawled into it.

The gentle way she covered the little one brought an unexpected tug to Cade’s heart.

She was a good mother to her nephew. There was so much sadness in the world and watching her pull a blanket over Ten Bears and kissing him goodnight added a bit of sweetness.

One of Cade’s favorite memories was of his mother lovingly tucking them into bed

and kissing them.

The simple act had made him feel safe with no reason to fear evil lurking beyond their door.

Cade cleared his throat and walked to the door. “I’m going to check on Buck. I’ll be back soon.”

Rain gave him a nod, and he silently went out. Buck glanced up from the tall patch of buffalo grass he’d found. Cade wished for some oats to feed him. Maybe when it was safe to go to town, whenever that might be. But for now, grass would have to do.

He studied the dark sky for a minute, remembering how his father always kept an eye on the sky—and on his land.

Late summer squalls could come up before a man could blink.

It still seemed odd that raiders had caught his father by surprise unless the horsemen had shown no sign of aggression until after they’d ridden in.

He wished he could stop thinking about that horrible day, but it was embedded in his brain as though from a hot brand.

Cade knew he’d never forget the carnage, no matter how long he lived.

This was even worse for Rain and what she’d suffered at that school.

He had no idea of her age, and the thought crossed his mind that she might’ve run away from there. Maybe they were both in the same boat.

He spared a moment to mull that over. It hadn’t set well to find her in the dugout but

now, after hearing her story, he only wanted to help this beautiful woman who asked nothing of him beyond a little food.

The door opened and she emerged from the dugout. She came to Cade's side.

"Is everything all right with the boy?" he asked.

"Yes. Thank you for caring." She stood silently for a long moment. "I need a few things from town and our supplies are low. Since it's too dangerous for you to go, I wonder if you'd mind letting me ride your horse. I could go get what we need."

"Sure. I don't mind at all. Will you take the boy?"

She met his gaze, and her dark eyes pierced him. "Again, if you don't mind, I'd like to leave him here."

"I'll watch him. This will help a lot, and you can deliver a note to the sheriff for me. Just be careful returning and make sure no one follows you."

"I am always careful. Our lives depend on it. Most people still hate the Comanche, and I fear they always will." Heavy sorrow filled her words.

"Not me," he said quietly. "I'm sorry for the hate you've suffered."

She was achingly beautiful standing there so close they were almost touching, bathed in the silvery light of the moon.

This woman enchanted him. He wanted to hold her but knew she would never allow it.

Proudly independent, she was typical of most native women.

She had definitely awakened his protective instinct.

Buck snorted softly and looked their way from time to time.

“Rain, since you have no one to go back to you might think about staying here. Once this sheriff from Eagle Flat who thinks I’ve robbed a bank leaves, I’ll need help fixing up my childhood home.

I’ll make you and the boy a room of your own.

No strings. You won’t owe me anything. Just think about it. ”

“That’s a generous offer. Thank you. I will consider it.” She was quiet a moment before she spoke again. “Did you rob the bank?”

“No, far from it but I was there, staying with my sister Summer.” He put his hands on his waist. “The problem is my older brother Jess has a reward out for his arrest and this sheriff thinks we were working together. He refuses to listen to a word of reason.”

“I see. You are in a dangerous game with this man.” She glanced up at the stars.

“It is almost time for the harvest moon. My people called it a Comanche Moon and it holds much significance. When I was a little girl, I couldn’t wait to grow up and help the women prepare a feast.” Her voice trembled.

“But when the English men came, it changed everything.”

She shivered, hugging herself for warmth.

“You cold? This night air is a bit nippy.” Cade removed his light jacket and draped it

around her slim shoulders. "It's okay. You're safe now. Cling fast to the good memories and release the bad ones."

"Thank you." Rain clutched the jacket and shuddered. "I'm so cold. I haven't been able to get warm for years. Nor have I been able to forget. Why do people think they have to change others and take their ways?" She faced him and lifted her chin. "Am I not good enough as I am?"

A beat of silence filled the space between them. His voice turned husky. "You are good enough. Believe that."

It was he who had the problem. He hadn't felt confident deep inside in a long time. Maybe he never would again. Once it was taken from you, maybe it never fully came back. He was so full of doubt now and fear of being punished for something of which he was completely innocent.

If only he could talk this over with Jess. He needed his brother.

The problem was, Jess didn't seem to need him.

Or any family for that matter and that cut a deep, wide swath in Cade's heart.

But he was grown. What about the twins and Ashland who was yet only ten?

Ashland had only been six when she was forced to go with strangers.

What wounds she must carry, thinking her siblings didn't want her. The twins too.

Where were they? Lord only knew.

He reached for the cameo locket he carried in his pocket that Jess must surely have

left for him here. He opened it and stared at his smiling parents, thankful they weren't alive to see the family broken apart and scattered to the four winds.

Chapter Twelve

After a light breakfast the following morning, Cade saddled the horse.

He didn't feel right sending Rain into town by herself, but they had little choice.

They needed food. Three-year-old Ten Bears needed easier, softer foods.

The absence of a garden and fresh vegetables made it difficult for the child.

Maybe there were things Rain needed as well.

It was probably safe enough since saloons weren't allowed in Clarendon and he shouldn't worry, but he knew men and how some took advantage of a woman alone. Especially one dressed in native Comanche clothing. She'd be vulnerable without him to protect her.

Cade kept an eye on Ten Bears where he sat playing in the dirt while they waited for Rain to come from the dugout. It was a beautiful morning and the birds were happily flitting around. Not a cloud to mar the wide blue sky. Yep, it was nice with a hint of fall on the horizon.

Rain emerged. "What do you think? Will this do?"

His mouth fell open. Gone were the fringed and beaded deerskin blouse and skirt. The woman before him dressed as any white woman in a blue dress with her hair pulled back into a knot low on the back of her neck. The change was shocking.

“I hardly recognize you. You look like any other woman in town. I was worried about sending you in alone, but I think you’ll manage quite well.”

She glanced down at the dress. “I don’t know why I kept this after leaving the school, but maybe for such a time as now.” She gave him a smile.

“Well, it sure works. I doubt anyone will even give you a second look.” He glanced around. “I wish I had something to make you a hat from.”

“Just a moment. I may have something in my bag.” In a flash, she went back inside.

Ten Bears took off after her as fast as his little legs would go, saying something in Comanche.

Rain met the boy on her return. She scooped him up and brought him out, sitting him in the dirt he was playing with.

“See if you can do something with this. I was going to make a basket but ran out of time.”

Cade took the piece of braided straw from her. “Yes, I think it’ll be a good solution. I’ll just add some of the quail feathers from our supper last night and a few other things.”

After he finished adorning the hat with feathers and braided buffalo grass it was quite attractive. He placed it on her head. “I hope it doesn’t blow off. I have no way of pinning or tying it on.”

Studying her now, he revised his former assessment that no one would give her a second look. They’d look. Oh yeah. They wouldn’t be able to help themselves. She was the most striking woman he’d ever seen with her dark beauty.

She tilted her head just so and turned her dark eyes up at him. “You missed your calling, Cade. You should’ve been a milliner.”

“No thanks. Not for me.” He handed her an eighteen-inch piece of rope with loops on each end. “In case you need to hobble Buck for some reason.”

“You seem to have thought of everything.” She stuck the hobbler in a saddlebag.

Taking some bills from his pouch, he handed them to her as well.

“This should cover what you buy. And if you find a goat that’s affordable, get it for the boy.

He needs milk and we can also make cheese.

Goats are quite independent and if we have to leave here, it’ll do fine by itself.

And here’s the note for Sheriff Maxwell. ”

“I will do my best about a goat.” Rain secured the money and note in a pouch then put it in her boot. Putting her foot in the stirrups, she swung into the saddle. “Be back soon.”

“Watch out for the other sheriff and don’t let him or anyone follow you back.”

“I won’t.” She urged Buck into a trot.

Ten Bears stood crying and jerkily tried to get to Rain. Cade picked him up and wiped his eyes. “She’ll be back before you know it, little one. You’re going to stay with me.”

He and the boy watched her ride off then he took Ten Bears, the name he shortened to just Bear, down to the stream and let him splash in the sparkling shallow water.

He loved the joy on the boy's face and remembered how his baby sister and the twins used to have fun at a small watering hole.

They'd stay there all day if their parents let them.

Cade made himself comfortable, a silent prayer for Rain's safety on his lips.

The town bustled as Rain rode in and she was shocked to see armed gunmen on the streets.

The nondescript roan would blend in fine but the saddle with the distinctive Spanish tooling was a whole different matter.

She had to hide Buck. She turned and went behind the church to a nice patch of grass that was shaded by a towering elm tree.

Rain dismounted and hobbled the roan. Straightening her dress and adjusting the homemade hat, she stood for a moment wondering what to do about the saddle with the McIntyre name tooled into the leather.

However, she had nothing to toss over it.

Hoping no one would come back there to see, she set out.

She hated the times when she had to go into town.

The women usually stared, their lips curled with disdain.

A sudden memory of one of those times jarred her.

After she'd been at the English school for a while, they let them go into town.

The owner of the mercantile had accused her of stealing a ribbon and she'd had to open her bag, remove her shoes, and go behind a screen so a woman could inspect her clothes.

Rain had never been so humiliated. Everyone stared and whispered behind their hands.

Even now, the dress would never disguise her. She could never fool the women. Men often left her unnoticed, except the few who paused to stare with the kind of interest no woman wanted. She would get what they needed and be quick about it.

She stood for a moment, wishing she was back with Cade and Ten Bears. But they needed food so it was crucial she got some. Inhaling a deep breath, she set off. Though she looked neither left nor right, she walked with a heightened awareness. She would try not to draw any unwanted attention.

Halfway down the boardwalk, a poster tacked to the window of the county land office caught her eye.

She went closer and saw a drawing of Cade McIntyre as well as a reward offered for his capture.

Bank robbery was the reported crime. The person who'd drawn his likeness had done a terrible job.

The eyes weren't right. Cade had the most arresting gray eyes and a mouth that turned up slightly at the corners. He was a very handsome man and kind.

From the first, that mouth of his had brought to mind kissing...and other things too. It was dangerous to be near him like she had the previous night when he'd draped his jacket around her and the scent of sage and juniper had surrounded her.

Cade McIntyre smelled like this wild Texas land he loved.

Tears hovered behind her eyes, and she had to blink hard.

He was right to hide. His face had been a mask of sorrow and fear when he'd shared being wanted.

Rain had known a lot of white men to lie but she'd believed Cade last night when he'd come clean.

Her father would likely scorn her for trusting him to watch Ten Bears, yet she'd done it in a heartbeat and would continue.

The mercantile loomed ahead. She quickened her steps, in a hurry to be back at the dugout.

A bell over the door sounded as she entered the mercantile.

This store was larger than others she'd seen with rows of hats, shoes, and dry goods.

Some lined the walls as well. She kept her head down, looking for what she needed, ignoring about a half dozen other shoppers.

So far, no one gave her a second glance. Slowly, the tension began to melt away.

She passed a mirror and glanced at her reflection, glad her hat had stayed on.

A smile formed. Cade thought fast on his feet.

Although he wouldn't listen, he had a talent for making hats.

Another aisle contained colorful ribbons and women's necessities.

A woman glanced up and smiled. Rain returned the quick smile and put her head down.

She didn't want any trouble and would be most glad to leave town and return to their hideout.

A child about the same age as Ten Bears found freedom when his mother released his hand. He reached for a ball on a low shelf and threw it. The ball rolled to Rain. She rolled it back to the boy. The mother noticed and jerked the child to her, scolding him.

Rain wandered to the back of the store where a farmer had brought in some surplus vegetables. She pounced, filling a burlap bag from a neat pile next to them. The carrots, corn, and squash would be great. Another bushel basket held onions so she selected four of those.

The realization hit her that she'd forgotten to ask if Cade had any cooking utensils beyond a skillet.

No matter, they'd find a way. He had a coffeepot for sure so she grabbed a bag of coffee and took it to the grinder.

The store had a sign on the eggs that read ten cents a dozen.

Unsure of what to do, she gathered up two dozen and put them in a tray just for that.

The barrel of sawdust at the side must be to pack the delicate purchase against breakage so she scooped up a good portion to cushion them.

Rain added them to her pile on the counter while she finished up.

A smiling woman with a basket on her arm entered the store. “I have fresh baked bread if anyone wants some,” she announced.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 1:41 am

Two of the other shoppers hurried to the woman.

Rain held back until the others had moved away but she got two loaves that were still warm from the oven.

Her mouth watered. She hadn't had any fresh bread in a long time.

Unbidden memories rose of her mother baking bread in the outdoor oven in her village and the wonderful aroma.

At the English school, the bread had been mostly inedible and nothing but hard knots.

Several more items later, she approached her pile of purchases on the counter.

The clerk wearing an apron was a tall man, middle aged judging by the silver that streaked his hair, glanced at her. He had nice eyes. "Will this be all, Miss?"

"Add a box of cartridges and ring it all up."

"I haven't seen you around here before. Are you new to town?" he asked as he worked.

"Yes."

"Are you living in the old Jessup place?"

"No, sir," she murmured, wishing he'd stop with the questions.

“Well, no matter. Welcome to Saints Roost. We’re experiencing some troubling times at the moment so watch yourself.” He put everything into another burlap bag. “Be careful with those eggs. That’ll be a dollar fifty.”

Rain counted out the money. “Would you know of any goats for sale?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.” He scratched his head, smiling. “You might try the last house on the edge of town going toward Claude.”

“Thank you kindly, sir. Have a wonderful day.” She gathered the bags plus the tray lined with sawdust that held the eggs.

Rain wasn’t exactly sure how she’d get them back.

Maybe transferring them to the saddlebags would be best with the sawdust around them.

She’d figure it out. Her nephew needed the nutrition of the eggs, being as underweight as he was.

Oats for Buck occupied her mind, but she decided first to take her purchases back to where she left the roan.

She hurriedly tore off a big chunk of the bread and closed her eyes to savor the goodness as she chewed.

It was delicious and filled her hunger. Once she’d tied the bags to the saddle horn and checked on Buck, she strolled toward the stables.

The silhouette of a man in the doorway of the hotel sent chills up her spine. She walked faster but when she passed by, he grabbed her. She stared up into the

scowling face of a man she'd prayed never to see again. The bread she'd just eaten threatened to come up.

Sheriff Luther Jones in all six feet of cruel hate, the kind that hurt and destroyed.

"Where you goin', girl?" he snarled.

"I...nowhere," she struggled to make her tongue work.

"Why aren't you up at that school—the Hampton Indian School?"

"They...they let me go."

"That's a lie." He glared under the brim of his hat, spittle flying from his mouth. "I think I'll just telegraph them. How old are you?"

Her heart pounding like a locomotive making a steep grade, she inhaled and finally found her grit.

"I completed my studies, and they released me. You have no right to accost me." She yanked free of his hold and gave him a big push that knocked the unsuspecting Jones sideways against the building.

Lifting her skirts, she fled down an alley.

The makeshift hat fell off immediately, but she didn't stop. Nothing mattered except getting away.

Jones was on her heels, and she knew if he caught her, he'd hurt her bad.

At the school, the headmaster had summoned him to track down a runaway.

He'd brought the boy back and publicly whipped him until he was nearly dead.

Then, Jones had thrown the kid into an underground box.

Later, she'd learned the boy had died. In her opinion, Luther Jones was a pia mupitsi. A monster.

Please let me get away .

A quick glance showed him gaining on her. Her legs were almost spent but she had to keep going. She forced herself forward.

She knocked a barrel into his path to slow him down and kept running. Her lungs were screaming for air, but she didn't slow. If she did, she'd be dead, just like so many of her people.

Ripples of cold fear raced up her spine as she raced down the alley, knocking various things into Jones's path.

Up ahead a door opened, and a woman beckoned. "Come. Hurry."

As Rain drew closer, the woman grabbed her, pulling her inside. She slammed and bolted the door. Rain collapsed on the floor, desperately trying to catch her breath.

Jones pounded on the door. "I demand you open up! Let me in! You're breaking the law!"

The woman who'd saved her motioned for Rain to follow and they went into another room that held a printing press, tables, and stacks of paper.

It appeared to be the newspaper office and blinds were drawn over the windows.

Maybe she'd be safe here until she could make it back to Buck.

Finally, Rain spoke, "Thank you for saving me. I'm Rain." She glanced down at her trembling hands, trying to calm herself.

"I couldn't let that disgusting man or his henchmen get you. This town has changed. Armed gunmen now roam the streets and no one feels safe. Have a seat. My name is Abigail Farnsworth. I'll make us some tea."

With a wealth of auburn hair that hung loose, Abigail's age was a little difficult to ascertain. Maybe late twenties. Definitely older. But what struck her was Abigail's courage to stand up to the horrible lawman.

The English and their tea. She wasn't particularly fond of it, but she'd gladly take a cup.

"Will you be in trouble for helping me?" Rain asked.

Abigail laughed. "I'm always in trouble with someone. I print the truth and that's not always popular."

Rain followed the newswoman into a small kitchen area. "Will he hurt you?"

"Oh, he'd sure love to, that one, but considering that my father is a senator, Jones knows not to cross a line. He's just a little bit afraid of the consequences. The wrath my father would bring down can be quite fearsome."

"I'm glad he's afraid of something."

While the teakettle heated, Abigail studied her. "Where did you come from, Rain? You speak very good English however I can see Native American characteristics in

your coloring and hair.”

“I was taken from my village by force and made to attend the English Hampton Indian School. I left there several months ago.”

Abigail’s eyes lit up. “I’m writing a piece about the horrors of those schools, and I wonder if you’d tell me about them.”

“I don’t mind since you’re stuck with me until Jones goes away. But I do need to get back to my little nephew. The friend I left him with is expecting me.”

“I’d be ever so grateful to get a first-hand account for whatever time you have. Let me get my pad and pencil and we’ll get started right now.” Abigail hurried to a desk in the other room and rummaged around in a drawer before returning.

A clock on the wall said eleven. She could spare an hour but no more.

The timepiece ticked off the minutes as Rain detailed an account of her time at the Hampton School, including Luther Jones’s part in it. “They whipped us severely if they even caught us whispering to one another in Comanche. They wanted all traces of our Comanche heritage gone from us.”

“This is exactly what I was hoping for.” Abigail scribbled furiously on her pad for several quiet minutes before glancing up. “I have a little money to pay you for your time.”

“No need. I don’t want your money. Just publish the truth about that place in your paper. That’s payment enough. Maybe someday, the white government will end the practice.” Rain listened but couldn’t hear anything beyond Abigail’s door. “Do you suppose Jones has left? I really should be going.”

“I don’t know but I can check. Stay here.” Abigail went out the front door that opened on the street. In a few minutes, she returned. “He’s over by the telegraph office, talking to our sheriff Maxwell. It looked as if they’re having words. What else do you need to do before you leave town?”

“I have to get a sack of oats and try to find a goat for sale.”

“I have a goat I’ll give you, Rain. She’s a nuisance and I’ve been trying to get rid of her. I’ve had her two years and she destroys everything she sees. She eats the oddest things—any kind of paper, that’s her favorite. She’s also very fond of leather and fabric.”

“No matter. I’ll pay you. My nephew needs the milk.”

“You’ll do no such thing. The goat is a gift from one friend to another. Please accept it.”

“Then I shall with deepest thanks.” Rain rose from her chair. “I really must go.”

“I just had another thought.” Abigail’s eyes twinkled. “Let me fetch the oats while you stay here where it’s safe.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind? You’ve done so much already.” The note Cade had given her to deliver to Sheriff Maxwell crossed her mind, but she couldn’t ask yet one more favor of the woman.

Besides, Abigail’s long strides had taken her out the door anyway.

Rain sat down to wait, scolding herself for taking advantage of the woman’s good nature.

While she waited, she glanced at a few copies of the newspapers.

One about a bank robbery caught her attention.

It appears a gang rode into town while the sheriff and deputy were out chasing down some rustlers.

It seemed similar to the story that Cade had told her.

When Abigail returned with the oats, Rain offered to pay her for the newspaper.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Abigail declared. “I’ll not take your money. You’re welcome to the paper.”

“Thank you. I’ll go after my roan.” Rain’s knees shook at the thought of Jones catching her again and taking her back, but she couldn’t stay there. She had to get back to Ten Bears.

“Wait.” Abigail clutched her sleeve. “You go out wearing that and Jones will be sure to spot you. I have some things to disguise you.”

The kind woman pushed through a curtained area into her living quarters and disappeared. She returned a few minutes later with her arms full.

“These will work, I think. We’re about the same size. I wear them on occasion, when I don’t want to be recognized.”

It didn’t take long to change and Rain giggled when she looked in the mirror. The trousers were a pretty good fit. She only had to roll the legs up a little. The calico shirt was common and over it all, Abigail had thrown a colorful serape over her shoulders.

“I can’t believe the change.” Rain leaned closer to the mirror. “Hopefully, everyone will think I’m a man. This is very good, Abigail. Thank you.”

“One more thing.” Abigail went to a floppy hat on a nail. “Put this on.”

The hat was perfect for obscuring features.

“The transformation is complete. It seems I’m always thanking you, but I truly mean it.”

Abigail gave her a warm smile. “I know you do. Now, get going. And good luck.”

Rain hurried to Buck and rode him to the newspaper office. Then, collecting the goat and tying the oats on behind the saddle, she bade Abigail goodbye. Tears bubbled up, blurring her vision. “I’ve never met anyone like you. Thank you so much for all your help.”

“Stay safe, Rain. If you’re ever back in town, stop by. I’d love to see you.” Abigail’s hug was warm.

“I will.”

Rain lost no time in bidding the town goodbye. She kept a sharp eye out for Jones and his henchmen, feeling very exposed. The sooner she got back to the dugout, the better. With Matilda walking next to Buck, they reached the edge of town.

She’d gotten everything they needed, even managing to take one of Cade’s wanted posters and put it safely in her saddlebags. Maybe he wouldn’t be too upset about the note she was unable to deliver.

And as she left town, she caught sight of Jones huddling with a group of men. That

spelled trouble for someone.

The goat would slow her down because it had to walk beside Buck but hopefully she wouldn't lose too much time.

The day had held many surprises, and she was especially grateful to have met Abigail Farnsworth.

Skin color meant little between true friends.

Abigail had saved her life, no doubt about it.

Rain's success wasn't because of the English clothes or the way she spoke.

It was in finding someone worthy of calling a friend. And that was priceless.

Chapter Thirteen

The late August afternoon had turned extremely warm as it tended to do in Texas, so Cade made Bear a pallet under a tree and soon the boy was snoozing. Bear had played in the shallow water for a good while then ate a meal of some pheasant eggs Cade fixed. The boy was tired.

In the silence, he wondered about Rain who was never far from his mind. He prayed she wouldn't run into any problems.

Maybe he should've gone instead and run the risk of capture.

His conscience refused to listen to reason even now.

Some would say he was hiding behind a woman's skirts.

Others would call him a fool. He called himself plenty of names, coward being one of them.

When would he ever get to work on the house?

He toyed with the idea of doing a few things at night.

It would be difficult to see but it seemed the only choice he had as long as trouble dogged him. In a couple of hours, it'd be dark.

Where are you, Rain?

A glimpse of something in the distance urged him to his feet. He shaded his eyes. If it was Rain, she was coming from the wrong direction. Maybe when the rider got closer, he could make them out. There was nothing to do but wait and how he hated that.

The sleeping boy drew his gaze. He should take him into the dugout. Picking up Bear ever so gently, Cade carried him inside. The boy sighed and sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“Go back to sleep, little one.” He patted the boy’s back, and he lay back down.

Fifteen minutes later, Cade looked again. The rider was still on course. But this time he noticed something alongside the horse. A dog? The rider was wearing what appeared to be a Mexican serape. It wasn’t Rain. But who?

Probably someone passing by.

He hurried into the dugout for his rifle and was met by Bear.

“Hey there. I’m just going to look out. You stay inside.”

But the kid only understood Comanche. He studied Cade intently with his dark eyes. Reaching into a pocket, Cade pulled out a wooden horse he’d whittled and gave it to Bear to play with. The boy didn’t seem to mind that it barely resembled a horse. He sat down to play.

“Your aunt will be back soon, and I’ll bet she has all kinds of things from town.”

Bear silently pointed in the direction Rain had ridden.

“I know. You miss her. She’ll be back in a little bit.” Hopefully. Despite that the boy couldn’t understand him, Cade kept talking. He needed something to fill the silence.

So, he talked about anything and everything he could think of. At least Bear hadn't cried. He'd teared up when she left but nothing since. He was a sweet kid with big brown eyes and a lot of dark shaggy hair. Rain would have to cut it soon.

The rider was getting closer now and he could see that the animal walking alongside was a goat. His heart fell when he noticed the rider was a man. No Rain.

The rider was on a brown roan just like Buck. Had the man killed Rain and taken Buck? But why the goat? It didn't make sense. If he killed Rain, why would he come here?

Steadily, the rider came. Now, he could see the bags tied to the pommel which made even less sense.

As the rider entered Cade's domain, he pointed the rifle and barked, "Get down slow and easy, mister. Who are you?"

"Cade, stop it. It's me. Rain." She threw off the serape and dismounted.

"Rain? What happened to your dress? Why do you look like a man?" He lowered the rifle.

She removed the floppy hat, and her hair fell like a dark, satin waterfall. "Is this better?"

Bear came running and grabbed her legs. She picked him up. "You know me, don't you?" She said something softly in her native tongue before turning to Cade. "I had to dress like this to keep Sheriff Jones from catching me. He tried and almost succeeded, but I ran, and Abigail offered me safety."

The mention of Jones's name sent shock waves through him. "Who is Abigail?"

“She owns the newspaper. I have much to tell you but let’s unload and get Matilda settled.”

“Hold on a minute. When you talk of having to escape from Jones, did you mean Luther Jones, the sheriff?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“The same.” She laid a soft hand on his arm. “Is he the one trying to pin that bank robbery on you?”

“Yes, but I’m curious how you know him.”

“He came to the school.” Rain told him about the young runaway who ended up dead.

After a moment’s silence, he spoke quietly, “The man is like a water moccasin. It slithers silently into the water, then sinks its fangs in you.”

“That’s him.”

“I’m glad you got away.” Now, if he could just keep her safe. Something to ponder later. He turned to the bags tied to Buck, astounded at all she’d brought back.

“Cade, I never managed to get your note to Maxwell. I’m sorry I failed.”

“No.” He laid a hand on her shoulder and wonder of wonders she didn’t pull away. “It’s okay. Really. I knew it was a longshot.” He motioned toward Buck. “You made quite a haul. But why were you coming from the west when town is east of us?”

Bear clamored to get down, so she set him on the ground. “Wanted to confuse anyone in case they tried to follow. I rode in one direction a while then rode in another. It took longer but we should be safe here.” She tied the goat to a mesquite tree. Matilda raised holy hell.

“That makes good sense. Did anyone ever tell you that you’re smart?” He shot her a grin.

“Not in a long time. Be careful with the eggs in the saddlebags. I hope none are broken.”

“We’ll soon see.” He treated the eggs with kid gloves and deposited them inside the shelter.

She brought in the last of the purchases. “I have something to show you.” She retrieved the wanted poster and handed it to him.

Cade stared at his name and the rough drawing. “It was bound to happen. Jones is chomping at the bit to hang me.”

“But you didn’t do it,” she reminded softly.

“He doesn’t care. The man just wants to make someone pay for the robbery and for making him look like a fool.” Cade pinched the bridge of his nose. He wished he could turn back time, and instead of sneaking into the posse, stay at Summer’s. But then, he wouldn’t have seen Jess.

Cade wouldn’t have missed that for all the tea in China.

She muttered a Comanche word. “There’s something else.” Rain handed him a newspaper. “Read this.”

“The Alonzo Dakota Gang strikes again.” He silently read the article that never mentioned Jess at all.

Unless he’d taken an assumed name which was possible.

The gang seemed to be gaining strength. He glanced at the date of the paper.

A week ago. The town of Quanah they hit was a day and a half ride from Eagle Flat.

The bank at Eagle Flat must've been first then the gang had ridden on to Quanah and got that one.

The paper said they got away with five thousand dollars. That would catch the lawmen's notice.

After several long minutes, he folded the paper. "You came back just brimming with news. Tell me how it went."

"Except for Jones, my trip was good. The owner of the mercantile was nice and I didn't get spat on or called any names."

Cade frowned. Was it a regular thing to be spat on? "Mr. Jameson, the owner of the mercantile, knew my family well and we count him as a friend. I'm glad he was nice."

"I was astounded at the variety of things he stocks. He has a very fine store. Oh, and I hid Buck behind the church because of your saddle. The wrong eyes seeing that wouldn't have been good. But then, Jones saw me and grabbed my dress."

"That man is poison and uses his power to destroy. How did you get free?"

"I pushed him with all the strength I had and ran as hard as I could. Abigail opened her door at the newspaper office and pulled me inside. She is the kindest white woman I've seen in a long time."

"I'm glad. I have yet to meet her. She must've arrived while I was living with Tom

Abernathy.”

She opened a burlap bag and took out a carrot, handing it to Bear. The boy took a bite and grinned. “Abigail was really kind. We had tea and she asked me about the English school. She’s going to write an article about it for her paper. She’s fearless.”

“Sounds like someone I’d like to meet.”

“Her father is a senator or something and I think that means he has some power. She said Jones wouldn’t bother her because he’s afraid of her father.”

“Must be nice to have family in high places.” That sure would come in handy about now.

The shadows inside the dugout lengthened.

“I should go hunt some game for supper. While I do that, why don’t you cook some of these vegetables,” he said.

“Do you have a pot?”

“Only the skillet. Maybe you can cook them in that. How did you prepare them when you were in your village?”

“During good times, we had an earth oven and roasted them slowly in that. We also made bread that way. When we had to leave our oven behind, we laid flat rocks on top of the fire and spread the vegetables on that to cook.” Her eyes took on a faraway look.

“Sometimes, we dug a pit, lined it with a buffalo stomach, and put water in it. That was my favorite way.”

“Well, since we have none of that, try the skillet. That’ll work fine.” Cade glanced around. “Where’s Bear? He was here a minute ago.”

“Probably out with the goat.”

They went outside and sure enough Bear was feeding the carrot to Matilda. The boy glanced up and said something in Comanche then grinned wide. Happiness was written all over his face.

“You were right.” He held his rifle pointed at the ground. “I won’t be long.”

“When you get back, I’ll have Matilda milked and the vegetables cooked. But first, I’m changing clothes.” She wrinkled her pert little nose and turned, her hair swinging to and fro. “I don’t care for the English clothing. It’s not as soft as my own.”

Rain didn’t know how achingly adorable she was in her quiet, very feminine way. His gaze followed her inside, regretting the loss of the trousers that hugged her shapely legs and slimmed her waist. She was so beautiful. Not that it did him any good. She was only a friend, he reminded himself.

Still, he couldn’t stop thinking about kissing her. He’d kissed a few women, but he was particular. Rain appeared to have everything he wanted. She was intelligent, caring, a wonderful mother to Bear, not to mention beautiful.

Dragging his attention to the hunt, he tracked a prairie chicken, following its clucking sound.

The bird hopped into a juniper bush. Cade waited patiently until it emerged.

As it took flight and lifted into the air, he shot and the bird plummeted to the ground.

Collecting the dead fowl, he noticed how plump it was. His mouth watered.

By the time he made it back to the dugout, the sun had slid lower on the horizon. He had to get the chicken cleaned and plucked before darkness covered them.

Rain emerged from the dugout. “There are no small portions tonight.”

He chuckled. “Everyone will get their fill.” He noticed she’d changed back into her deerskin clothes. The urge to take her into his arms left him shaken. He’d never met a woman like her, and it was a powerful emotion. He cleared his throat. “How are the vegetables coming?”

“They’re cooking.” She moved closer. “Cade, tell me why Luther Jones would think you robbed that bank? I just want to understand.”

He wiped his hands and removed the knife from the sheath at his waist and began to cut the chicken up. Rain collected a few pieces of mesquite and proceeded to make a fire. “It’s natural to be curious. But let’s wait until after we get this meal cooked. I’m hungry enough to eat a bull.”

They ate and afterward, Rain brought Bear outside in the night air to play with Matilda while they talked. She sat close to him, their shoulders almost touching. The moon had risen and illuminated the land. Cade filled his lungs with the night air, thankful to be alive and free.

“Now, you promised to tell me about your relationship with Sheriff Jones,” Rain gently prodded.

“I definitely wouldn’t call it a relationship. The man has a vendetta against me.”

The air teemed with sounds of night creatures as Cade began.

He told her about the raid that left them orphans then hearing that Jess was a wanted man.

He proceeded to tell her about the camp where his life collided with George and his sons.

Finding Summer. Finally, he told her about the posse, seeing Jess on the rise, then finding the bank robbed when he got back to town.

“So, Jones is convinced my wave at Jess was a sign of some sort. It’s crazy.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Now, he’s stalking me and brought men in to hunt me down.” He met her gaze. “Rain, I don’t know if I’ll get out of this alive.”

She reached for his hand, her skin smooth and supple. “I know the depths Jones will go to. He cares nothing about taking a life. But you can’t hide forever,” she said softly. “Have you thought about running or trying to join your brother?”

“That won’t help me find my siblings and fix up the place. I want to put down roots and have family close.”

She turned his hand over. “It wouldn’t have to be for forever.”

The fire over which he’d cooked the chicken gave off a bright glow from the embers, brushing her features like a soft caress and shadowing the pain of something in her eyes.

Cade met her dark gaze and drowned in its depths. “Someone once told me that if you run from something, it’ll just follow you.”

Rain glanced down and toyed with her sleeve. “I lied.”

At first he wasn't sure he'd heard her, she'd said it so low. Lied?

"That's a strong statement." Cade tossed a little twig into the live embers. "Care to enlighten me?"

"I haven't been truthful about the school. I ran away and that's why Luther Jones is after me too."

There it was. They were both being hunted.

"I see." He tossed another twig into the embers. "It's best to know where we stand. No, I won't run and whatever my brother Jess is involved in is no solution either."

But what he wouldn't give for some sage advice about his predicament. He felt he was swimming in an ocean with no land in sight.

Chapter Fourteen

A week passed and September made its return with some cooler temperatures. Bear filled out nicely with the food and milk, but their supplies were running low. Someone would have to make another trip to town soon. This time, he wouldn't send Rain. No, this time, it was his turn.

On a hunt for game, Cade crossed paths with an armed man but managed to lose him in the rugged country.

Shortly after, he saw Luther Jones himself on top of a small rise.

They were close, too close. An ensuing chase almost ended with his capture.

By the grace of God, he managed to get away.

Armed men were swarming over the countryside, searching for him.

Why had this situation escalated? It wasn't like he'd killed anyone. Had the gang been involved in something else, something bad? Did Jones think Cade had the key to some credible information?

He had to talk to Maxwell and get some answers.

But how? He sure couldn't waltz into his office.

Jones had probably taken over the jail as well as the town.

All of this also made getting home more problematic.

They still had to eat and to do that, he had to hunt, but it was becoming more and more dangerous.

Luck was on his side when Cade killed a small antelope and had thrown the animal across the back of the roan. He happened to catch sight of Maxwell at a watering hole two miles from town.

He pulled alongside Maxwell's horse that was drinking the fresh water. Buck joined him at the stream what was fed by underground wells.

"Sheriff, glad I caught you alone."

Maxwell pushed back his hat. He looked like hell with bloodshot eyes and unshaven jaw. "McIntyre, you and an Indian girl have sure sent Luther Jones into quite a rage."

"That's what I want to talk to you about. You said to leave the man to you, and you'd handle it. What happened?" Cade asked, struggling to keep the sharp edge out of his voice.

"I couldn't make him see reason and now he's brought in all these armed vigilantes and took over the town.

It's pure chaos. The citizens are upset and threatening to get their pitchforks if I don't do something.

Everyone has a grievance. A week ago, I sent for the Texas Rangers but it's anyone's guess when they'll arrive.

" Maxwell wagged his head from side to side.

“Used to be, I could talk some sense into Luther, but not this time. He’s not the man I used to know. ”

Cade sympathized with the lawman. He knew how hard it was to try to reason with crazy, and crazy with armed vigilantes was an impossible situation.

“Sending for the Texas Rangers was a good move.” He sighed, resting his arm on the pommel.

“I reckon there’s nothing for me to do but hunker down until they get here.

Only one problem. I need some things from town and to see Miz Baker about the paper she’s looking for. ”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Esther Baker died.”

Shock and deep disappointment pierced Cade’s heart. “Died?” Could this get any worse? “She promised to find the paper where she wrote down all the folks who took in my siblings.” He could hardly breathe, the crushing news taking all the air from his lungs. “That sure leaves me in a tough spot.”

Maxwell gazed into the distance. “Sorry, McIntyre. I wish she could’ve found the paper before she got so sick.”

“I just don’t know how I’m going to find the twins and Ashland now.” Were they going to stay lost forever?

“Ready for some more news of the bad sort? I got a telegram from your sister Summer in Eagle Flat,” Maxwell said. “She’s set to arrive in a matter of days.”

Now? How could he deal with that at this point?

“She can’t come into this mess! Can’t you wire her back and tell her to stay put?” He didn’t even have a place for her. To make matters worse, the town was overrun with armed gunmen.

“I tried. She’s Irish,” Maxwell said simply as if that explained everything.

“Tell me something I don’t already know.” Was this day going to get any worse? Cade stared hopelessly at the sheriff. “So what now? We wait for the Texas Rangers? Can’t you run Luther Jones and his army out of town?”

“What with? Tell me that. I don’t have the fire power.

” Maxwell rubbed his eyes. “I’ve thought of calling Luther out, but I just don’t know if I have a faster draw.

I’m not a young man anymore. And even if I kill Jones, that still leaves his men.

For now, I’m walking on eggshells, and the town is a powder keg. Anything will light the fuse.”

“Sorry. I know you’re doing your best.” But where did that leave him? Looked like in a boat without a paddle. “What about contacting Miss Abigail Farnsworth’s father, the senator?”

“Already have but the legislature is in session, and he can’t come.” The saddle leather creaked as Maxwell turned to face Cade. “Have you thought about going somewhere else for a while until I can get the town back?”

Where? Besides, there was Rain and Bear now to consider. She was on the run too. Luther Jones had ruined all his plans. He couldn’t work on the homeplace or mount new searches for his siblings. He was good and stuck in a pit of quicksand.

“I’ll think of something. It’s nice to see you, Maxwell.” Cade turned his roan toward the dugout. Talking to Maxwell had only made him feel more hopeless.

Little Bear came running when he saw him. The boy had become used to him and was slowly learning a few words of English.

Cade dismounted and swung the boy up into the air. Giggles erupted bringing Rain from their earthen shelter.

“He’s growing very fond of you, Cade,” Rain said, smiling.

“And I of him.” Cade set the boy down. “He’s a fine lad.”

“It warms my heart to see how he’s taken with you.” Rain motioned to the antelope.

“I see you found some meat.”

“Yes, and I also saw Sheriff Maxwell from town.” Cade removed the antelope from his horse. “We had a little chat.”

“What did he say?”

“For one thing, my sister will arrive any day. She telegraphed Maxwell, hoping he could get a message to me.” Cade threw a rope over a tree branch and hoisted the antelope up by its back legs.

“Also, he’s telegraphed the Texas Rangers.

They’re coming to end Luther Jones’ reign of terror in Clarendon so there’s light at the end of the tunnel. ”

“That’s good news, isn’t it?” Rain asked.

“The best kind.”

She moved Bear out of the way of his work. “How long will it take?”

“Depends on how soon they arrive.”

“It won’t come too soon. Cade, we need some things from town. You’re almost out of coffee and I’d like to get more vegetables.” She shaded her eyes against the sun with a hand. “I wish we could have a garden and grow our food.”

“That would sure be helpful but for now we have to rely on the mercantile.” Cade swung around to her. “When we decide we have to go, it will be me this time.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Worry lined her face. “I can wear the disguise, but you have nothing.”

“I’ll think of something. And who knows? The Texas Rangers could arrive tomorrow, and the town will be safe. Their main headquarters is in Austin, but the Frontier Battalion has companies patrolling all across the Panhandle. I think they’ll respond rather quickly.”

Rain crossed her arms, hugging herself. “I hope so.”

Lord knows, help couldn’t come soon enough. Sheriff Maxwell was at his wit’s end watching Luther Jones tear his town to shreds.

As they waited for news that the tide had turned, Cade and Rain kept a close vigil. Then to break up the monotony, he took Rain and Bear for a picnic to an oasis with a pool of blue water up in the hills, hidden on all sides by high cliffs.

“It’s so beautiful. What is this place?” Rain stared at the lush bounty, her eyes filled

with wonder.

“I don’t know if it has a real name. Our family always called it the Spanish Veil. Why, I have no idea, but that’s what we called it.” Cade swung Bear down from his shoulders and the kid made tracks for the water. “It’s pretty deep so watch him, Rain.”

“I will.” Her gaze took on a distant look. “When I was a little girl, my people camped beside a place such as this. We stayed there a whole summer. It was the best time of my life. For once, we finally had enough to eat and fresh water.”

He touched her arm. “Aren’t you glad we’ll have a picnic?”

“I am.” She raised her eyes to his. “Cade, you’ve been so kind to Bear and me. The boy has grown fond of you.”

“And you, Rain? How do you feel?” he asked softly, his mouth to her ear. The scent of her made him a bit heady.

“I am grateful to you for everything that has made our lives easier. And yet, you ask nothing in return.”

“What I share is freely given.” He cast a glance toward Bear to make sure he stayed on dry ground.

“I care about you both and I want to keep you safe for no other reason than it’s the right thing to do.

” A moment of silence fell between them.

“But, Rain, that’s only half the reason. I think I’ve fallen in love with you.”

She was silent for a long moment as she rested a hand on his chest. “I like you. You’re very gentle and kind. Maybe you’re listening to your heart instead of your head.”

“I’ve thought about that, and I really don’t think that’s the case.” He brushed her soft cheek with a knuckle, his words quiet. “You’re hard to resist and being in such close quarters in the dugout makes it even harder.”

Her words came soft. “We come from different worlds, Cade.” She paused. “Others frown on mixed relations. They won’t accept...this.”

“I don’t care about what others think. I only care what you think.”

She stepped back. “I have to see to Bear.”

“Sure.” His gaze followed her as she moved the boy away from the rippling water, redirecting his interest. She seemed to have accepted his shortening of Ten Bears’ name and was now using it herself. Interesting.

They had a relaxing, carefree day there at Spanish Veil.

He went behind a bush and stripped down to his long johns, then he and Bear got in the water to cool off.

He tried to teach the boy to swim and the kid did pretty well.

At least he didn’t mind getting his face wet.

The boy’s laughter echoed off the walls around them.

Rain sat on the bank, dangling her feet in the water, watching them and calling

encouragement.

Cade flicked water on her and she responded in kind. It was nice to be out from under the tension of being hunted even just for a little while. It was especially nice to see Rain smile and laughter spring from her throat.

After the swim, Cade and Bear lay on the grass in the sun, letting it dry them. Cade glanced at Rain lying on the other side of the kid. “Are you hungry?”

“I was thinking about it. Bear needs to eat.” She stood, went to the bag that held their food, and began laying it out on the blanket they’d brought and spread out on a thick section of grass.

The boy said something to her in Comanche and hurried over. They’d figured out how to make cheese from the goat’s milk from their limited resources, so she tore off a piece. The kid took the hunk of cheese, nibbling on it.

Almost dry, Cade dressed and joined them, plopping down on the blanket.

He plucked an apple from the pile and bit into the sweetness.

He’d snuck down to the homeplace under cover of night and picked apples from his mother’s tree.

Then, he’d discovered some wild persimmon trees and picked what they could eat.

“This is heaven.” Rain lifted her arms to the sky and declared, “I wish we could stay here forever.”

“Me too.” Cade watched Bear taking delight in the food. “Rain, what’ll happen to Bear if you get caught and taken back?”

“I worry about that, and I don’t know. I’m not sure who would take him in. If anyone. Maybe they’d put him in an orphanage.” Worry creased her smooth forehead. “That would kill him. He’s such a sensitive child. He couldn’t stand up to the horrors.”

“Well, I’m just going to have to make sure you stay safe.” And he’d do everything he could to make it happen, regardless of his own predicament.

Later, Bear took a nap which allowed time for Cade and Rain to talk.

“I apologize for the bold talk of my feelings, Rain. That was quite forward.” Cade stretched out, propping himself up on an elbow to look at her.

“I didn’t mean to put you on the spot. But I have come to care for you very deeply.

” He got to his feet and held out a hand to her.

“Take a walk with me.” When she hesitated, he said, “We won’t go far and will keep an eye on Bear. ”

Finally, she took his hand, and he pulled her up. He matched his stride to hers down to the water. “My family used to come here often and spend the day. All of us kids swam like fishes, so we spent countless hours in the water.” He sighed. “I really miss those times.”

“I’m sorry, Cade.” Rain placed a hand on his arm. “We both have memories that haunt us.”

Standing there so close, the sunlight shining on her hair, Cade didn’t think he’d ever seen anyone more beautiful. He inched closer. “Rain, do you object to me kissing you?”

“I do not object.”

With permission granted, he tugged her against him and placed his mouth on hers.

The kiss was deep and real and filled with promise.

Rain leaned into him, slipped her arm around his neck, and wound a strand of hair around her finger.

It was the kind of kiss that teased his senses and made him want more—lots more.

Releasing her, he continued to hold her hand. Whatever else this life had in store for each of them, Cade knew he'd found the woman who fit perfectly in his heart.

Chapter Fifteen

The following three days found them making more cheese, hunting, and teaching Bear some simple English. The boy seemed proud of himself, grinning from ear to ear. He followed Cade everywhere and kept begging to go back to the water.

“We can’t.” Cade knelt in front of him, the late afternoon sun reminding him he had to hunt for game before dark. “I promise we will before it gets colder.”

“Go now.” Bear tugged on his hand.

Cade shook his head. “You’ll have to wait.”

Rain laughed as she hung some wet clothes on a juniper bush to dry. “You’ve created a slave driver.”

Cade pushed back his hat. “I did, didn’t I?” He chuckled. “Guess it could be worse.”

“It always can.” She said something sharp to Bear in their native tongue and he dropped to sit on the ground, pouting.

“What did you say to him?”

“I told him to leave you alone and quit pestering.”

Suddenly, Bear began screaming. Cade got to him first and picked him up. As he did, a black widow spider fell from the boy’s arm. Cade ground it under his heel.

Panic echoed on Rain's pretty face. "Quick, we have to get mud from the stream!" She ran for the small ribbon of water, scooping up some mud. She hurried back and put it on the bite. Bear continued to scream.

They took him inside the dugout in case someone riding by heard the racket and Rain held him in her lap.

"Do you think that mud will draw out the poison?" Cade asked.

She chewed her lip, smoothing back the boy's hair. "I don't know. It's the only thing I know to do."

"He needs a doctor." He felt so helpless. The boy's lips and eyes had begun to swell. Their only hope was a doctor.

"But they'll catch you," she said, worry in her voice. She reached for his hand.

"You, too. That's a chance we'll have to take. I'll saddle Buck." He didn't stop to listen to any objections. The boy's life was worth the risk. They had to save him. Already Bear was laboring to breathe. Just then, Bear vomited, and that settled it.

He put Rain and Bear on the horse with him leading it.

She hadn't had time to change into the disguise Abigail had made and he hated that she'd have to go in her traditional deerskin dress.

The tick of a clock inside his head was loudly counting off the minutes and he cursed the delay.

Each step, each breath, was taking them closer to town to the danger that awaited.

They reached the edge of Clarendon as darkness fell. Few people were out on the street. Somewhere, dogs barked. Cade led Buck behind some houses, coming up the back way to the doctor's office.

Thankful to have arrived with the boy still breathing, Cade took a limp Bear from Rain's arms and helped her dismount. As they hurried inside, Rain muttered in her native language.

"Doc? Are you in here?" he shouted, placing Bear's small body on a table. "Doc?"

Bear began to shake violently, and Rain tried to hold him down.

A man in his early fifties came from the next room, drying his hands. "McIntyre, I haven't seen you in a while. What do you need?"

When Cade lived in Clarendon with his parents, Doc Blanchard had been a bit younger. His reddish hair was mostly vanished and he was almost bald. It was nice to find a familiar face.

"This three-year-old was bit by a black widow," Cade explained.

Doc Blanchard jumped into action, grabbing a syringe and filling it from a vial. "This is potassium bromide and should stop the seizure."

After Bear settled down, Doc washed and sterilized the wound, covering it with a bandage.

He followed that with a syringe that he filled with clear liquid from a little vial and shot it into Bear.

"This injection should help ease his pain and labored breathing. His seizures are

gone, but he could have more. If none of this works, there's nothing else to try. "

Nothing else to try. The words rolled around in Cade's head like so many marbles. If Bear died, Rain would probably never stop blaming herself.

"Let's sit and let the doctor work." He put an arm around her, and she sank against him. He took her to three chairs against the wall in the room and they sat.

"Are you the boy's parents?" Doc asked.

"He is my nephew," Rain replied.

"The next few hours are crucial. If he still lives, he'll be fine." Blanchard returned the vial to a cabinet. "There's just not much else I can do. I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Doc. We appreciate this." Cade rubbed Rain's back. "He's going to be fine," he murmured into her hair. "He can't die."

They moved the chairs to the bedside and sat, holding hands, watching Bear struggle to breathe. At last, Cade rose and glanced out the window. Full darkness had fallen. "I have to move Buck before someone spots him. Can I get you some water?"

She raised her red-rimmed eyes. "No, nothing."

"I'll be back." He kissed her forehead and ducked out into the night.

A soft breeze ruffled his hair as he untied Buck and led the horse from the doctor's office. The church was bathed in moonlight and Cade decided it was as good a place as any.

He'd just left Buck and was on his way back when the faint rustle of clothing met his

ears. Before he could turn or draw his weapon, someone stuck the hard metal of a gun to his back.

“Hands up,” the man snapped. “Be quick about it.”

Cade did as the man ordered, curious. He didn’t recognize the voice but knew for sure it wasn’t Maxwell, and it was also missing the gravel of Jones’s. Maybe he could draw, spin, and shoot before the shot tore into his back, but it was doubtful.

“What do you want?”

When he started to turn, the man barked, “Eyes straight ahead.”

Knowing the time to act was at the beginning of a holdup before the guy got the upper hand, Cade swung and slammed a right fist into the gunman’s jaw.

He followed quickly with his left fist and the ruffian went down.

Sparing him a glance, Cade stared at the face of a stranger.

From the amount of weapons on the man, he assumed it was someone Jones had brought in.

Quickly stripping away the weapons, Cade tossed them into some bushes growing along the side of the church and made tracks back to Rain. The close call had set his hands shaking and heart pounding, no matter how much he tried to hide them.

He couldn’t fool her though as he slid into the chair beside her. The truth was in her dark eyes.

“What happened?” she asked quietly.

“I almost got caught. He had me dead to rights.” Cade blew out a large breath and removed his hat, running his hand across his eyes.

She chewed her lip. Standing, she gently laid a wet cloth to the boy’s forehead. “What if they find Buck? Should you go move him?”

At the moment, Cade couldn’t give her an answer. One problem at a time. “How is Bear?”

“The same. He still sleeps.”

Worry filled her dark eyes and he wished he could hold her. “Why don’t you let me take you to Miss Farnsworth at the newspaper office where you can rest?”

“The hour is late. If Bear is no better at daybreak...” her voice broke.

“He will be. We have to have hope. Has the doctor come in?” Cade stared at the little one who’d wormed his way into his heart. His blue, swollen lips had gotten worse.

“Several times but he didn’t stay long. He told me to think positively and pray.” Deep sadness colored her voice. “I do not like it here. I wish we could go home.”

“Me too. I long for the quiet of our dugout.” Where they had found happiness, even if it was as fleeting as the wind.

They sat beside Bear the long night through.

The doctor bustled in at daybreak. He listened to the boy’s heart and checked his pulse.

“I’m surprised he still lives. I wouldn’t have given you anything for his chances last

night.

” Doc Blanchard took off his stethoscope.

“Now that he’s survived this long, I think it’s a good sign he’ll pull through.

The situation looks more hopeful with the sunrise. ”

“You hear that, Rain? A thread of hope.” Cade squeezed her small hand. She had dark circles under her puffy eyes. “Now let me take you to Miss Farnsworth. I also need to check on Buck and decide what to do.”

Moving the roan might be more dangerous than leaving him behind the church. Either way would involve a great deal of risk. But he had to do something. Buck would need water soon.

Rain shook her head. “In a while. I want to be here when he wakes up.”

Cade wanted to tell her that might not happen, but he couldn’t force the words out and send her smile running. “I’ll be back soon.”

A quick scan of the street revealed few people.

With luck maybe Jones and his army got drunk last night and were still sleeping.

Cade slipped out and wove behind the store fronts until he reached the church.

The man he knocked out was gone. At the corner of the house of worship, he listened for sounds that would indicate Buck had a visitor.

Nothing. He proceeded and found Buck still there. The roan raised his head at Cade’s

approach.

“Hey boy, did you have a good night?” Cade patted the horse’s side. Buck nuzzled his hand then tried to put his muzzle in a pocket. “Sorry, boy. I have nothing for you. Maybe soon if I can manage it.”

Now, what to do? The urge to move Buck was strong. But where to put him? Esther Baker’s barn? With her passing, no one was living there and maybe Cade would find a bit of grain to feed Buck. Quickly deciding, he removed the hobble and led the faithful horse.

Every nerve ending stood as he moved out onto the street. So far, no one paid him any mind. He walked slowly as though in no hurry even though his gut screamed warnings. When the first alley appeared, he turned into it and increased his steps.

At the end of the alley, voices alerted him. He pressed against the building in an effort to make himself smaller. His heart raced and then when another gentleman, older by far, turned into the alley, he pulled his Stetson down lower.

“Good morning there,” the man said cheerfully. “I’m taking a shortcut.”

“Morning,” Cade mumbled, squatting down to lift Buck’s front leg. He stayed there until the man vanished.

Without further incident, Cade arrived at Miz Baker’s barn and opened the wide door, thankful to find it empty. Putting Buck in a stall, he opened a bin tucked against the wall and found oats. He gave a portion to Buck and filled a dry trough with water.

That accomplished, Cade breathed a little easier and thought of food.

Rain needed to eat. Halfway back, a door swung open as he passed the

boardinghouse.

He ducked into some large lantana bushes.

A young woman stepped onto the wide porch.

Something in the way she walked drew him.

He moved a large cluster of yellow flowers out of the way to get a better view.

The sunlight struck her auburn hair, and she turned.

Summer.

His heart leaped with joy to see her, then in the next moment he wished she'd heeded Maxwell's warning. But then his big sister had always charged straight into danger as though either it didn't affect her or she believed she could neutralize the threat.

What if the vigilante lawman got it in his head she had aided the brothers in the bank robbery?

Or even worse, tried to use her to draw Cade out.

Chapter Sixteen

Cade had to speak to his sister. He waited until she left the porch and came down the walk.

“Summer,” he whispered. “Summer, it’s me.”

She glanced around. “Who?”

“Cade.” He rose from the yellow lantana bush and motioned to her.

When she reached him, he took her arm and hurried them out of sight behind a peddler’s wagon parked nearby with a sleepy mule attached.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes, I’ll tell you that.” Cade pulled her into a hug. “But you shouldn’t have come.”

“Sheriff Maxwell told me about Jones and his obsession with you.” Summer pulled back and tears bubbled in her blue eyes. “I had to try to help you. We’re a family and that’s what families do. If you think I could’ve stayed away knowing the situation you’re in, you don’t know me very well.”

He hurriedly filled her in about Rain and Bear and the black widow spider bite.

“That’s the only reason we’re in town. I couldn’t let the boy die.”

“Of course not. How is he?” she asked.

“The doctor was encouraged when he checked Bear this morning.” He glanced up and down the street. More people were out milling around, reminding him of the danger. “Summer, we have to eat. If I give you the money, can you get us some food?”

Summer’s eyes lit up. “I know just the place. Several of the boarders didn’t come to breakfast this morning and poor Mrs. Fitz said she didn’t know what she’d do with the leftovers.

Stay here and I’ll be back. She’s a kindly sort and I think I can appeal to her good nature.

Yesterday, she fed some men out her back door. ”

“How long have you been here?”

“A few days.”

He pressed some money in her hand. “Give her this.”

Summer nodded. “I’ll be back.”

Cade kept his eyes and ears open and his hand on his Colt. There was a flurry of movement when the peddler climbed into his wagon and set off down the road. Cade hurried back to the lantana bushes and was mindful of the time. He had to get back to Rain soon.

Fifteen minutes passed, then twenty with a constant check of his watch.

Finally, Summer emerged with a small wicker basket and gave the call of a meadowlark.

Recognizing the game they'd played as kids, he answered back with the soft coo of a mourning dove.

She honed in on his location and joined him.

"Mrs. Fritz was happy to give you the leftovers." Summer handed him the bounty.

"I'm sorry to take so long. The poor dear is quite a talker, and I had trouble getting away from her.

And before you scold me for confiding in her about you, she despises Jones and the men he's brought in.

I didn't tell her a lot, just that my brother needed food and couldn't get it any other way. "

"You made a haul, Summer." He lifted a blue cloth to find biscuits, ham, and apples.

"You don't know how much we appreciate this."

"Oh, and Mrs. Fritz wouldn't take a cent." She stuck the money into his shirt pocket.

A horse and wagon rolled down the street, followed by two men on foot talking loudly to each other. He quickly ducked his head. Somewhere, dogs started raising a ruckus. Too many folks were getting out and about.

"Sis, I hate to go but I need to get back to Rain."

She pouted. "I know but it was wonderful to see you and to know you're okay. Where are you hiding out?"

"That old dugout a few miles from the homeplace."

She scrunched her face up. "I can't place it."

"You know where Jess and me used to camp and spend time."

"Oh, yes. I think I remember how to get there." A rider went by slowly, scouring both sides of the street. "Go!" A measure of fear lined Summer's face.

They hugged and he slipped around behind a group of buildings. Using the utmost care, he made his way back to the doctor's office. Rain glanced up and released a pent-up breath she seemed to have been holding. Bear's bed was empty.

"I'm sorry I took so long but I have Buck settled until we need him."

Rain squeezed his hand and whispered, "I worried that they might've caught you."

He freed his hand and passed her the wicker basket. "Eat something."

"Cade, Bear woke up and asked where you were."

What wonderful news!

"Where is he?"

"He was about to wet his clothes, so the doctor carried him to an indoor washroom." Her smile was brighter than the sun. "I have my nephew back."

"That's the best news I've heard." He reached for a biscuit and some ham and told her about seeing Summer. "She was helpful in getting us the food. It was great seeing her, but I worry she'll be accused of helping me and Jess."

"I hope they leave her alone. Maybe she can ride out to visit us."

“If we can get out of town without getting caught first.” He didn’t say their chances looked pretty bleak.

They ate in silence and the doctor returned Bear. The boy looked tired and weak, but he grinned big at seeing Cade.

“How are you?” Cade put down his biscuit and leaned to pat the boy’s head. “Have you eaten?”

“No want.” Bear sighed and slid further into the covers.

“The doctor brought some oatmeal in and Bear forced down a bite or two,” Rain said.

“That’s okay, buddy. There’s time for that. You just rest and get well.”

Bear raised solemn eyes to Cade. “Scared.”

“Sorry. We’ll go home. Would you like that?”

“Yes.”

After he and Rain finished eating, he turned to her. “Let’s get you down to the newspaper office while we can. That dress will give you away.”

“I agree and I’ll feel safer there.” She talked to Bear in their native tongue then stood. “I told Bear where I’m going and that I won’t be far away. How soon can we leave for home?”

“Let’s give Bear an hour or two at least to rest up and gather his strength.”

She nodded and gathered her things. “I am ready.”

They both kissed the boy and left the office as the stagecoach rolled into town. Using that distraction, Cade hurried her between the buildings and down the alley to the side door where he knocked.

Abigail opened the door a crack. “Who’s there?”

“Rain.”

“I’m happy to see you again.” Abigail opened the door wider. “Hurry inside.” She shut the door behind them and bolted it then glanced at Cade. “I assume you’re Cade McIntyre, the hunted desperado.”

A grin formed as he removed his hat. “Miss Farnsworth, it’s nice to meet you. I wonder if we might fall on your mercy and let Rain rest here for a while.”

“Most certainly. But tell me what brings you back to town?”

Rain told her about Bear. “We had to get help.”

“I understand. Come and let’s have some tea then I’ll find you something to change into.”

Cade’s gaze swept over the two women, thankfulness rising up that Rain had found a trusted friend.

He immediately liked Abigail Farnsworth.

He admired that she would risk so much to help a new friend.

The woman had courage in spades and had a force about her that instilled the belief she’d do anything for those she cared about.

Clearly, she'd lived a life of privilege, yet she hadn't let that affect her genuine kindness.

"Do you mind if I look around the office?" he asked.

The pretty woman waved an arm. "Look to your heart's content." She ushered Rain into the next room.

Left to his own curiosity, he roamed around the front room, glad the windows were still covered.

He picked up the latest newspaper that detailed all of Luther Jones's offenses since arriving with his army.

Miss Farnsworth was playing with fire. That article probably made Jones livid, which meant he'd be even more dangerous now.

Abigail might find herself in more trouble than her father could get her out of.

Speaking of that. How was he going to get out of this debacle? Cade ran a hand through his hair. Even more crucial, how was he going to get them back out of town? Then there was Summer to consider. He couldn't let Jones hurt her.

He could almost feel a rough rope around his neck, and it was tightening little by little. Cade loosened his collar and gulped for air.

The ladies returned and he managed a smile. Rain looked very pretty in a borrowed green dress with her ebony hair artfully arranged atop her head. She could've been in some rich man's parlor.

Cade strode to her and took her hands. "Just look at you! A beautiful picture."

“I told Abigail it’s too fine for me.” Rain freed a hand and thrust it down the silk dress. “Makes me look...uppity.”

Abigail released a frustrated sound. “That’s the point. No one would expect you in this. It’ll keep you safe.”

“You’re absolutely right, Miss Farnsworth,” he said, kissing Rain’s cheek. “Thank you.”

“Stop. Please call me Abigail.” The newspaper woman laughed. “Miss Farnsworth is for strangers and sounds like an old maid.”

“Okay, Abigail.”

A commotion outside drew their notice and Cade hurried to peer out. Jones and about a half dozen armed men were stalking toward the newspaper office. Each wore a heavy scowl.

“Abigail, please help Rain hide. They’re coming.” He considered his options which were limited, but he could go out the side door into the alley.

However, Jones probably stationed men there also. His best bet might be to go along peacefully and get before a judge. Maxwell, Summer, and Jameson at the mercantile would speak on his behalf.

But would that be enough? One of the men carried a coiled rope. Cade’s stomach twisted.

He sneaked another glance, and the group was almost at the door. Behind him came the rustle of petticoats. He swiveled to see the ladies vanishing into the kitchen and living quarters. At least Rain might escape.

Fists pounded on the door.

“Cade McIntyre, come out or we’re coming in!” Jones yelled.

Panic shook him. If they came inside, they might find Rain and he wasn’t going to let that happen.

With few options left, Cade released a sigh that carried the weight of the world. He pulled his Colt from the holster and let it dangle from a finger. Then, pasting on the biggest smile he could manage, he stepped out.

“Gentlemen, isn’t this a fine day? Jones, you really shouldn’t have come all this way just for me. I’m flattered.” Cade’s silky tone and nonchalant attitude turned Jones’s face red.

Rough hands snatched the dangling gun, then grabbed him and threw him face down on the boardwalk. He lost his hat as manacles snapped around his wrists and Jones jerked him up.

“You’re under arrest, McIntyre,” Jones ground out through gritted teeth. “I always get my man no matter how long it takes. You’re gonna hang.”

Chapter Seventeen

Without his hat, bright sunlight blinded Cade as Jones hustled him down the street. A light breeze rustled his hair. People stared but no one spoke out against Luther Jones.

They were halfway to the jail before Cade remembered he hadn't told Rain where to find Buck and he mentally kicked himself.

She needed to forget him and take Bear far away from this place but no matter how far she went, she'd always be looking over her shoulder.

There was no escape—not for him or Rain.

He certainly proved that. Neither were the kisses they'd shared in the moonlight enough to hold the fragile love they'd found.

Maxwell glanced up when they entered the jail. "What's the meaning of this?"

"I found this thieving bank robber and I'm going to see that he pays," Jones sneered. "Out of my way. Or would you rather I go over you?"

His face set in taut lines, Maxwell didn't budge. "This is my town and I'm the law here. McIntyre hasn't done anything to warrant this type of treatment. Bring charges if you can find any but I'll say who gets arrested and who doesn't."

"It's not your town now." Jones shoved Maxwell into his chair and took the keys to the cells. "I run things my way. Your new job is to scoop horse manure from the

street.”

Cade exchanged a glance with Maxwell whose face was livid then swung to Jones. “I want to see the judge.”

Luther Jones sneered. “Afraid I can’t allow that.”

“You know I’m innocent and there is no basis for these charges.” Somehow, he had to make the man listen to him. “Sheriff Maxwell knows my family and me and...”

A fist to the stomach ended his sentence. Cade doubled over. Though his eyes watered from the pain, he didn’t miss two of the men holding Maxwell’s arms while Jones drove a fist into him as well.

“Yeah, I know the McIntyres too, and they’re all a bunch of lowlife outlaws.

” Jones sneered that into Cade’s face. “And brother Jess is one of the baddest. I’ve changed my mind, boys, we’re not putting McIntyre in a cell.

We’re gonna string him up right now.” Jones motioned to the man with the rope. “Bring that here.”

Knowledge of what was coming descended like a two-ton locomotive. Cade’s stomach twisted and the breakfast he’d eaten threatened to come up. He broke free for a moment and struck Jones in the face. It felt mighty good, but it accomplished nothing because the other men tackled him.

“Boss, there’s a good hanging tree down the street,” one of the ruffians said.

“One of you finish off Maxwell. I’m tired of that man,” Jones snapped. “Let’s go.” He shoved Cade outside then down the street, attracting a crowd.

Folks stood silent, their faces grim. They didn't like what was happening, yet they wouldn't interfere.

When he saw no one was going to help him, doom settled in his stomach. Thoughts rushed through his head, piling up like cordwood. His mouth was as dry as cotton and he yearned for a drink of water even as he knew they wouldn't give him so much as a thimbleful.

"Someone get me a horse," Jones barked.

"You're sick!" someone shouted.

None of the townsfolk followed, them having no stomach for this. People on the street hurried into their houses and as they passed by, they drew their curtains.

In short order, one of the armed men brought a horse. Thank goodness it wasn't Buck. He couldn't have taken that.

The tree toward which they headed loomed large so it didn't take long to arrive.

Folks living around it lowered their blinds.

Part of the elm had been struck by lightning therefore it had no leaves.

It had always given him the shivers when he rode by the elm.

A blackened bare limb jutted out in an odd angle and a large black crow perched there, watching with its beady little eyes.

The tree seemed to be begging for something or someone.

Armed men threw Cade on the borrowed horse as others tossed the rope over the scorched limb.

He desperately searched for one small opening he could escape through. The horse was a powerful one and could easily outrun this mob of gunmen. But he failed to see a chance, however slight, and knew in his gut this was it for him.

Time slowed and everything progressed in slow motion.

The morning dew had burned off and the sky was the bluest blue he'd ever seen. It was a good day to meet his Maker. At least, he'd join his parents. It would be nice to see them again.

Unless Summer continued to search for their siblings, they'd be lost forever.

Bitter failure washed over him in waves.

He'd failed to reunite his family. Failed to fix up the homeplace.

Failed in keeping Rain and Bear safe and giving them stability.

Despair and anguish drove out all other thoughts and a hollow desolation descended.

His heartbeat slowed as did the blood in his veins.

He stared straight ahead, seeing nothing.

In all the flurry, someone brought Jones's horse and he mounted up. Reaching for the noose, Jones put it around Cade's neck. The hemp was rough and scratchy, digging into the tender skin.

Summer ran to Jones, tears rolling in rivulets down her face. “Please, stop. Please don’t do this! He didn’t do anything wrong,” she begged.

Why had she come to watch this? She should’ve stayed far away.

Yet, it was a comfort of sorts for him to have her there.

Two other women arrived, and through the fog in his head, he made out the bold newspaper woman—and beautiful Rain.

No, no! He struggled to breathe, and tears welled up inside, thickening his throat.

He didn’t want her to see him like this.

The memory of her hair shining in the sunlight, their laughter over nothing, and the taste of her luscious lips crossed his mind.

He prayed she would find a good husband to love her.

“Stop this travesty. This man hasn’t even had the benefit of a trial,” Abigail said, her voice ringing out loud and clear. “The governor will hear about this. Men are innocent until proven guilty and you have failed to prove any of your claims that you purport to be true.”

“Stay out of this, lady,” Jones bellowed, pointing a finger. “You’re walking a fine line.”

“You’d love to silence me,” Abigail answered, lifting her chin. “As long as I have a voice, I’ll keep using it. You’ll never be free of me. I’ll hound you for the rest of your days and make your life a living hell.”

Jones wiped spittle from his mouth. "I don't care who your daddy is, who the governor is, and I sure don't give a rat's hind leg who you are. Now, get back!"

However, Abigail stepped even closer instead of backward.

"I'm not afraid of you," Abigail answered. "You're nothing but a big bully. Someone will take you down."

"Get her out of here!" Jones shouted.

The horse Cade was on began to sidestep, putting a strain on the noose. "Whoa," he said softly to the animal, and it quieted.

Several of the armed men took Abigail by the arms, hustling her away. Thankfully, Rain kept silent, simply watching, a river of tears streaming down her pretty face.

Jones rested an arm on the pommel. "Any last words, McIntyre?"

"I have a question. Why? You know I didn't rob that bank so why did you come after me anyway? I think I deserve to know."

"Because you ran. I don't like it when any man or woman runs from me. Besides, I know you were somehow involved in that robbery. I just can't prove it, but you were working with them."

"So the punishment is a hanging?" Something was horribly wrong with the man.

"And when I catch your brother Jess, I'll hang him too. Might even hang your sweet sister." Jones ran a hand across his bristly jaw. "Still debating that." He smiled coldly. "She's a pretty thing. Might have a little fun with her first."

“You’re an animal!” Cade resisted the urge to lunge at him. Any movement would set the horse in motion. Besides, his hands were in manacles so it would be wasted effort.

Todd Jameson from the mercantile, still wearing his apron, stepped forward, an open Bible in his hand. “Whatsoever you sow, shall you also reap. You might get away with this on earth, Luther Jones, but God will have the final say.”

“You, sir, have no business here.” Jones shook a fist at him.

“You’re dead wrong. This concerns the whole town,” Jameson answered in a clear voice. “It’s every citizen’s business and we have a duty, an obligation, to speak against wrongdoing.”

Armed men appeared at Jameson’s side and hustled him away.

“Wait!” The telegraph operator ran toward them, waving a paper. “I have a message.”

“Too late!” Jones slapped the flank of the horse Cade was on and he was dangling in midair.

He tried to swallow but the rope had cut off that ability. The rough hemp dug into his throat like a hand itching to end his existence.

A woman screamed as he fought against rising panic.

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Chapter Eighteen

The thunder of galloping horses mixed with the pandemonium of angry yells suddenly drew Cade's attention. Then shots rang out, and Jones dropped from his horse. At least Rain would be safe now. Everything began to fade as he swung. His pain had vanished.

This was the end for him.

He'd never thought much about what heaven must be like, but this was nice. His parents must be somewhere here if he knew how to find them.

He'd often heard stories of how kinfolk who had crossed over would come to your side but there was no one. Had everyone living and dead abandoned him? If they hadn't, where were they?

Funny how he always figured there would be angels flying around and harps playing. This was eerily quiet.

"I've got you," a gentle voice said, as hands lifted him.

The voice sounded like his father's. He wanted to call out, only he couldn't get his tongue to work or his eyes to open.

"Cade!" the voice yelled. "Come on now. Breathe!" Then the owner of the voice slapped his face.

His eyes flew open, and he gasped for air, clutching a handful of clothing.

“Good, that’s it. Keep breathing, brother.”

That voice. He had to look. Cade turned his head just a little and stared into Jess’s face.

“What are you doing up here in heaven?” Cade’s words came out scratchy and weak. “Have they killed you too?”

“You’re not in heaven, little brother, and we’re not dead. At least not yet and not for the lack of trying.” Jess chuckled, a smile curving his lips. “When the time comes, no doubt I’ll go to the other place.” He held a canteen to Cade’s lips. “Drink. You need it but take it slow.”

“I’m so confused. I’m really alive?” Cade gulped the water, grateful to wet his parched, bruised throat. He glanced up at the dangling rope and everything came rushing back. “You cut me down.”

“You’re really alive. I had to save you.” Jess helped Cade sit up.

“Jones?” The word came out as a croak.

“Dead. And good riddance. The world don’t need people like him.”

Then it all flooded back. No one would ever have to worry about Luther Jones again.

“Did you do the deed?” Cade asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Nope.” Jess sat back on his heels, thumbing his black Stetson away from his forehead.

A rebel strand of hair fell onto his forehead and the familiar scar on his cheek added a dangerous air.

“Don’t know who fired the shots. No one could tell where they came from.

Jones fell dead, the bullet piercing his head.

An excellent shot. It could’ve been anyone from town.

Maybe one of his own men or one of the Texas Rangers.

I know they shot at him. Don’t waste your time trying to figure it out. Not worth it.”

Tall and lean, Jess got to his feet and pulled Cade up. They hugged as brothers do, slapping each other on the back. Cade couldn’t restrain a sob or the flood of emotion. It had all been too much.

“Sorry.” He stepped back and bent over. The world was dizzily spinning.

“Are you all right?” Jess asked.

“Will be.” He took a deep breath and stood tall, wiping his eyes on a sleeve. “It’s really good to see you again. Up close this time.” Cade still couldn’t believe he was standing face to face with Jess. “Thank you for leaving Mama’s locket in the dugout. How did you know I’d find it?”

“I followed you after you left Eagle Flat. It was the most logical place to go. Thought you might need the pictures to bolster you.”

“How did you know the locket would give me the strength I needed?”

“Because it helped me too when I rode back to find everyone gone. That was rough and I wanted to curl up and die. Then I went through the house and found the locket with the picture and I could hear Dad’s voice telling me I had things to do.

” Jess put an arm around Cade’s waist, supporting his weight.

“Thanks for the help. I’m still woozy. I was at my lowest when I found the locket and it lifted my spirits.” He peered up into Jess’s scarred face. “Is this another dream? Or is this real?”

“It’s real. You’re alive, brother. We’re both alive and well.”

“I’m really confused.”

“It’s going to take time to recover. Don’t rush it.”

Cade rubbed the back of his neck. “Jess, why didn’t the rope snap my neck like it was supposed to?”

“I guess they didn’t know how to make a proper noose. That’s all I can figure. And too, I got you down fast.” Jess patted Cade’s chest. “But mainly you had guardian angels watching over you just like Mama said.”

“If so, you and me both are sure giving them a workout.” Cade tried to chuckle only it wouldn’t come out through his bruised throat.

“Do you think you can make it back to the jail under your own power? Maxwell wants to see you.”

“I think I can, but where are you going?”

“I have to leave. I risked a lot to be here.” Jess removed the arm bracing his brother and lifted his horse’s reins. “Ladies, he’s all yours.”

Ladies? Where? A noise to the right drew him and there stood all three, all but Abigail crying.

Panic at losing his brother once again rifled through Cade. “Jess, can’t you stay and help me find the twins and baby sister? Don’t you care about them? About us anymore? Summer’s at the boardinghouse here.”

“I know. We talked. Yes, I care about all of you. Every single one.” Jess picked up Cade’s hat, dusting it off, and putting it on his head. “Hang onto your hat.” Then he pulled something from his pocket. A silver medallion of some sort. He handed it to Cade. “This might help you. You earned this.”

Cade read the words: Per Ardua . “What does this mean?”

“Translated, it says, Through Hardship or Difficulty. And the word under it, Cruachan , is the McIntyre battle cry.”

“We have our own coin?”

Jess chuckled. “Not just us, McIntyres everywhere.”

On the flip side of the coin, were the words: Honor, Truth, Courage.

“This is...I love it.”

Overcome with emotion, Cade was silent for a long moment, desperately trying to hold himself together. Stilling a quivering lip, Cade finally glanced up. “I can’t tell you what this means.”

“I know. I had the same reaction when Dad gave it to me.” Jess patted his shoulder.

“Our ancestors left us a great legacy. I’ll treasure this and maybe one day I’ll give it to my first born.” Cade sucked in air through his teeth. “Thank you, Brother.”

“Anytime.” Jess gave him a crooked grin. “I have things to do, and a reunion will have to keep until I finish this job. I’m sorry but this is the way it has to be.”

“What kind of job?”

“I’ll explain it all another time.” Jess swung into the saddle on a prancing black stallion.

What could he say to make his brother stay? Cade stared up at his brother, looking for the truth. “Jess, are you riding with the Alonzo Dakota gang like the wanted posters say?”

But Jess only laughed and winked. “We’ll talk the next time I see you. By the way, I like your Comanche girl. She’s got guts.”

“Can’t agree with you more.”

“Turn around. She’s watching you. Be good to her.” Jess touched a heel to his horse’s flank and they were off like a flash.

As he watched Jess ride off, Cade yearned to go with him. His brother might need him. He clutched the medallion that he hadn’t even known existed.

They were the McIntyres and McIntyres stuck together. Always.

Cruachan!

Chapter Nineteen

Before the last hoofbeat faded, Rain, Summer, and Abigail stepped up from the side where they'd been waiting. No one else remained.

Cade inhaled, filling his lungs with the morning air that carried a hint of fall.

He was alive.

"There you are." Even as he tried desperately to hold on to the last glimpse of Jess, the image was already fading. His head began spinning again and he bent over.

"Lean on us," Summer said, taking one side while Rain took the other. "Wasn't it food for our souls to finally see Jess?"

"Except I couldn't make him stay," Cade said sadly. He glanced at the medallion he still clutched that carried the family motto. Through Hardship or Difficulty. That described the last month or so. He slipped the treasured token into his pocket.

Summer squeezed his arm. "Everything broke loose at once and it was pure chaos. Old Barnabus at the telegraph office brought word that George and his sons escaped Eagle Flat's jail and burned it to the ground."

Rain smiled up at him, her eyes still swollen from crying. "Then a shot rang out and Jones fell off the horse. Dead. We don't have to worry about him anymore. Whoever fired the shot did the world a favor. The second he hit the ground, his men rushed forward and carried him off."

“You’re free. We both are.” He wished this fog in his head would lift so he could think clearer. Thoughts refused to stay in his head. Still, he wanted to tell Rain how much she’d come to mean to him. He loved her and it was the forever kind like his parents had.

Abigail, who was on the other side of Rain, took up the story.

“When Jones saw the Texas Rangers galloping into town with your brother, Jess, leading them, he slapped your horse. While Jess cut you down, the Rangers rounded up the remaining armed gunmen and locked them in the jail. Doc treated Maxwell for his beating and he’s back in his rightful place.

The town is restored.” The pretty newspaper lady sighed happily.

“There’s enough news to fill ten newspapers. ”

“I’ll say,” Cade said weakly. “I’m glad Jones got his just desserts.”

“Bear’s been asking for you,” Rain said. “He’s much better but he’s still at the doctor’s.”

“That’s good news.”

They stepped up onto the boardwalk as Sheriff Maxwell came toward them, his head heavily bandaged and both eyes black. The old friend was leaning on a cane.

“I’m glad you’re all right,” Maxwell said, regret in his eyes. “I’m sorry I was no help, son. I tried though.”

“There’s no need to say more. You did the best you could.” Cade shook hands with him. “Glad we both lived to fight another day.”

“I’m not proud I let Jones take over the town.”

“I’m not proud of getting hung either but we persevered and are still standing.” Cade eyed a bench nearby. “I think I’m going to have to sit down for a minute.”

“Go rest. I have some things to do.” Maxwell turned toward the jail and disappeared inside.

The women helped him to the bench, and he put his head in his hands.

Summer cleared her throat. “I need to speak to the doctor and Abigail has promised to show me around the newspaper office so we’re off to do that. Just sit there and rest, Cade.”

The two women strolled down the street.

“It’s no wonder you have to sit after all you’ve been through.” Rain sat beside him, glancing at him shyly. “We have much to talk about.”

How he loved her. He reached for her hand. “You first. What do you want to say? Just speak your mind.”

“When I watched you during your ordeal, I knew I wouldn’t be able to go on without your steadfast caring and encouragement.” She moistened her lips. “What I’m trying to say is I want to stay with you. I don’t want to lose this thing we found.”

“My darling Rain, that means so much. I had hoped you’d stay.

” Cade glanced up at the blue sky and decided to just say what was in his heart.

“When I thought my life was over, one thing became crystal clear. I love you. For

now and always.” He dropped to one knee and took her hand. “Will you be my wife?”

She studied him a long moment before she smiled. “Yes, I accept.”

“For a second, I thought you were going to tell me to get lost. Gave me a fright.” He sat back on the bench.

She laid her head on his shoulder. “I only hesitated to see if you really meant it and that it was not brought on by your ordeal.”

“I meant it with all the fiber of my being.” He kissed her fingers. “Beautiful lady, I’ve never meant anything more.”

There in broad daylight before noon, Cade kissed the only woman who filled the empty places inside him. Long days of loneliness would be over. He crushed her to him and deepened the kiss.

When the kiss ended, he stood, pulling her up. “Let’s go find my sister and Miss Abigail. I’m itching to tell someone.”

The newspaper office was right on their way to the doctor. With his hand resting lightly on the small of Rain’s back, they went inside. The two women were bending over some papers.

Cade cleared his throat. “I have an announcement.”

Both women raised and Summer spoke. “What’s that?”

“We’re getting married,” Rain clasped her hands.

“Oh my goodness! Congratulations!” Grinning wide, Summer gave them both a big hug. “I’m so happy for you. But I suspected Cade wanted to ask you. That’s why we disappeared.”

Abigail followed suit then stood back with hands clasped over her heart. “You are both such amazing people and I can’t wait to see this wonderful journey on which you’re embarking. Your stories have inspired me so much I’m going to write a book about your struggles.”

“Thank you both. I don’t know about inspiring anyone but if I did, that’s good, Miss Abigail.

” Cade couldn’t take his eyes from Rain.

His beautiful Rain. At last, he turned to Summer.

“I hope you don’t have to go back to Eagle Flat.

I can use your help fixing up the house.

And it would mean a lot to me to have you close. We have four years to make up for.”

“I came intending to stay so I’m happy it turned out,” she answered. “Dan will follow as soon as they find a sheriff there. He’s already been offered a place here. Maxwell’s retiring.”

“Excellent. How soon can you start work on the house?” Cade was ready to start hammering nails right then even though thoughts of Jess and the questions their conversation had raised still lingered.

Maxwell had to know more than he was saying—a lot more but pinning the old lawman down would take some doing.

Summer sighed contentedly. “Is next week soon enough? You’ve been through a lot.”

“I’d go out there now if I had the materials so don’t worry about me, Sis.”

“Slow down. You can’t do everything right now. You must rest,” Rain objected, putting an arm around him. “And we have to see about Bear. I told him you’d come back today.”

Cade nodded. “The boy needs reassurance that I’m not going anywhere.”

As they stepped outside to continue on to Doc Blanchard’s, some folks came down the boardwalk and he recognized the four elderly men he’d eaten with the first time he’d set foot inside the Dancing Goat.

“Congratulations, McIntyre,” said the man with the long beard. “It’s nice to be alive, isn’t it?”

“Sure is.” Cade shook their hands.

“We knew from the start you weren’t no bad seed,” said another. “We talked about it and decided this Jones guy needed to be run out of town.”

More townsfolk turned out, all wishing him well.

Todd Jameson came from the mercantile. “Glad everything worked out.”

“Thank you for what you tried to do, Mr. Jameson.” Cade shook his hand.

“I should’ve saved my breath though for all the good it did.” Jameson handed him a new Stetson. “Heard you’re getting married and figured this is a good time to give you this.”

“Are you a mouse in my pocket? I only just proposed so how did you know?”

“It’s a small town. Remember? News travels like wildfire.” Jameson laughed. “Try it on.”

“Yes, sir.” Cade put the hat on. “Perfect fit. Thank you very much.”

Less than an hour ago, he was a doomed man with no future and now it was shining like a brand new saddle. He tightened his hold on Rain. Oh, how he loved this woman who’d stolen into his life one dark night.

He placed a finger under her chin to raise it and very tenderly kissed her.

Bear was asleep when Cade and Rain entered the room. The sound woke him. He sat up, rubbing his eyes. “Sir!” Then he said something in Comanche to Rain.

“He said he’s happy to see you,” she translated, smoothing back the kid’s hair.

“Why is he calling me sir?” Cade asked.

“Bear finds English hard and can’t say your name yet. Still, he needs to call you something, so I suggested sir. That’s easy enough to say.” Rain met his gaze. “Do you mind?”

“Nope. You’ll get no objection from me. I’ll be sir for as long as I need to be. Tell him I’m glad he’s happy. We’ll go home in the morning. He should stay one more night here.” Cade rubbed his heart and gave Bear a smile. If the kid only knew how

miraculous it was for him to be there.

Rain relayed the message to the kid, kissing him. She sat down beside Cade. “You don’t fool me. It’s you who doesn’t have the strength to make it home today.”

“Keep my secret.” He winked and reached for her hand. “We’ll get a room at the hotel.”

“Get the room for yourself. I’ll stay here with Bear, so he won’t be afraid. We can both fit on his bed and the doctor told me it’s okay.”

“Probably best.”

Bear watched them curiously. “Home.”

Rain explained in the language he could understand. He sighed and lay back down, clearly disappointed.

The doctor entered and stopped. “McIntyre, I should check you out. How’s the throat?”

“Raw and sore.” He stood and pulled his shirt away, suffering through an examination.

Finally, the doctor stood back. “I have a salve to keep on that until it heals.”

“Will it leave a scar?”

“It’s permanent, I’m afraid.”

“Then, it’s fine. I’m past the need to hide things. If folks want to stare, it won’t bother

me.”

Doc’s kindly eyes reflected sympathy. “That’s a good attitude. I’m glad it turned out. I could be measuring you for a coffin instead of treating your wound.”

“Don’t need one of those yet. I sure thought I was done for, though. I thank my older brother for his quick action.”

“That’s the truth.” The doctor went to Bear. “And how are you, little fellow?”

“Goot ,” Bear said.

“Rain, did you hear that? Bear knows what we’re saying. He just doesn’t know how to form the words to speak a lot of English.”

“I see that.”

The day was filled with surprises.

“One more night and you can take him home.” The doctor patted Bear’s head. “He’s a good patient. Wish they were all this quiet.”

“Thank you for saving him, Doctor.” Rain laid her head on Cade’s shoulder.

“It’s what I was trained to do.” Doc Blanchard smiled. “He’ll be running around in a day or two like nothing happened. He’s very lucky. Most do not make it.”

Blanchard left quietly and Cade gazed at Rain. Was he really going to be married to this beautiful woman? It wasn’t a dream.

They had all ridden through fire and flames and come out the other side. It was a day

to celebrate.

Chapter Twenty

In the days ahead, Cade tried to put the hanging behind him and dive into the manual labor of rebuilding his childhood home, hoping to sweat the memory out that had such a stranglehold on him.

The adverse situation persisted in making him live through that over and over each night.

He struggled in silence, unable to talk to anyone about it—not even Rain.

The only person he could talk to about these residual effects was Jess, and he was gone.

So, Cade did his best to handle it himself.

The dreams were violent, and he'd wake up in a cold sweat, clawing at his neck, seeing Jones's sneer. Thank goodness Rain wasn't sleeping with him yet, so he'd been able to hide it for the most part. But he often had headaches and confused thoughts.

Sometimes, he jerked awake gasping for air, still feeling the rough rope. As the days passed, he was more and more grateful to Jess for saving him. He just wished his brother would see fit to return or at least find their lost brothers and sister.

One thought persisted. Since Jess had arrived with the Texas Rangers, he couldn't be an outlaw. But what was his brother mixed up in? That was the million dollar

question.

Regret plagued him that Miz Baker had died before she found the list of where his siblings went. It was the one thing he was unable to accomplish. Still, even though the search would be more difficult now, he wasn't giving up. Especially now that he had Summer's help.

With Abigail's help, he put ads in every newspaper across the country. Someone knew where Lucas, Logan, and Ashland had gone. Cade just had to find those people.

For the time being, Rain, Bear, and himself were living in the dugout until they made the house livable. This particular morning, Bear was outside playing with the feisty goat. Hearing the boy's sweet laughter brought back happy memories.

"Hearing him play brings back so many recollections of my twin brothers and little sister. They were the best of friends, even when they were squabbling." He brushed her soft cheek with a finger. "What I wouldn't give to hear them again. I've failed in my quest."

"You have not failed. Just be patient, dear." Rain slipped her arms around his waist. "We're going to find them."

The feel of her curves against him made him wish they could move the wedding up. He fretted at the delay, yearning to fill a marriage bed.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "There has to be more I can do. I just wish Miz Baker hadn't died. I pray every day someone answers the newspaper ads."

"You're working as hard as ten men. Slow down." Rain lifted his hand to her lips. "We have a wedding to plan. I do not want to lose you before we start our new life together."

“You’re not going to lose me.” The words came out raspy as he stared into her dark eyes.

She could see things he often missed and each night she rubbed a healing salve on the rope burn around his neck.

She possessed such a tender touch in her small hands.

He held her close, feeling the soft beat of her heart.

“I am such a lucky, lucky man to have found you.”

Rain smiled, silencing him with a finger to his mouth. “No, no, you have it wrong. It was I who found you. I distinctly remember seeing you standing in the doorway, pointing your gun at me. You looked like a fierce hunter.”

“And I recall you drawing your knife on me.”

A flurry of footsteps sounded. Bear entered, took his hand, and tugged. “Come.”

“What is it you want to show me?” Cade asked.

“Come. Now.”

“Okay.” He exchanged an amused look with Rain. “I’ll be back I guess.”

The boy, recovered from the spider bite, led him to horned toad he’d found just outside the dugout. Bear touched it and drew back shivering and shaking his head.

Cade picked the toad up. “It looks scary, but it won’t hurt you.”

Bear said something in Comanche.

Emerging from the dugout, Rain laughed. “He said it’s bad medicine and evil.”

“I guess I’m going to have to learn Comanche. Tell Bear it won’t hurt him.” Cade set the toad down and it scurried off into thick brush with the goat chasing.

A team of horses pulling a loaded wagon drew his attention. “We’re having company, only I don’t think she intends to socialize.”

A few minutes later, Summer pulled up. “I brought more lumber for the house. Are you ready to go?”

“You know what, Sis?” He pointed a finger at her. “You are a slavedriver. I wouldn’t want you any other way, though.” He glanced at Rain. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Rain slipped her small palm into his hand. “We are all going.”

He lifted Bear up onto the lumber. “You can ride here. Just hold on tight.”

“I can see.” Bear gave them a wide grin.

“You sure can,” Summer answered. “I’ll go slow so you won’t fall off.”

Cade swung into the saddle and pulled Rain up in front of him. Buck knew the way and proved it by heading the right direction to the house without any urging. He was a right smart horse.

A mild October breeze blew through the homeplace as they worked, and the sky was a brilliant blue with clouds dotting the expanse.

The day had turned a cooler, reminding Cade fall had begun.

Everyone had a job to do and performed it well.

Even Bear ran his little legs off moving the pieces of lumber they cut off and stacking them to the side.

Cade got the stove to work and made coffee. Then later, Rain cooked a bit of frybread.

Once they used all the lumber that Summer had brought, she went back for another load.

After stacking the wood on her return, they took a break and had lunch.

Rain had washed plates and cups, so they made a picnic on the front porch and ate a simple meal of her frybread, goat cheese, fried chicken Summer brought from town, and topped that off with wild grapes that grew in abundance behind the house.

The pretty plates with blue flowers his mother had loved brought memories of happier days to Cade and comforted him in a strange way. It almost seemed they were a family again.

After they finished, he retreated a little so he could view their handiwork with a critical eye. Rain joined him and he put an arm around her. "It's coming along quickly," he told her. "The roof will be next then we can move in."

Rain tilted her head to look up at him. "What about Summer?"

"Summer wants to stay here with us until Dan comes. Then I expect they'll get married and have their own place, but they'll be close by."

“When will Dan be here?”

“According to the last Summer heard, he’ll arrive within the next two weeks.

” He surveyed the house again. “Jameson at the mercantile, you remember him, has gathered a group of men for a roof raising day after tomorrow. That’ll be a big job but with us all working, we should complete it in one day.

” He glanced up at the sky. “That is if it doesn’t rain. ”

“Then we will be married,” Rain said happily.

“That’s right.” He faced this woman who’d made his life worth living.

She had a smear of dirt across her nose and one cheek but it made her even more beautiful, if that was possible.

He tenderly wiped away the smudge. “I still can’t believe someone as pretty as you would give my ugly mug a second glance. ”

“Stop! You’re a most handsome man and I won’t have you saying bad things about yourself.” Rain leaned back to study him. “Your eyes twinkle like stars when you laugh and you have a most kissable mouth.”

“I love you.” He lowered his head to claim her lips.

A horse and buggy driven by an elegant woman pulled to a stop in front of the house.

“Can I help you?” Cade asked.

“Is this the McIntyre place?”

“Sure is.” A long stride took him to her. “I’m Cade McIntyre. Can I help you?”

“My mother was Esther Baker and I’m her daughter, Lizzie Allister. You might not have heard that she passed on.”

Bear ran out of the house and hid behind Rain’s skirts, peeking around.

Cade nodded. “Maxwell told me. I’m very sorry, Mrs. Allister. She certainly seemed like a good woman.”

“That’s why I’m here.” Lizzie pulled a folded piece of paper from a pocket and handed it to him. “This is the paper on which she recorded where your brothers and sister went. Sheriff Maxwell said you are needing the information.”

Pure happiness mixed with a big portion of relief washed over him. His knees went weak.

“Yes, ma’am. I sure was. I had no idea where to start searching. This list was my only hope.” He steadied his trembling hand. “I can’t thank you enough.”

Rain put an arm around him. “Can I offer you a cup of tea, ma’am?”

“Oh no, I can’t spare the time. I have so much to do. But thank you.” Lizzie laughed. “If you saw my mother’s house you understand when I say it’s going to take a while to sort everything out.”

Cade chuckled. “Yes, ma’am, I sure agree, and I don’t envy you.”

“Well, I must get back. I promised my husband I’d be finished in two weeks. You folks have a nice day.” She put the buggy in motion, turned around, then headed back to town.

She'd only given herself two weeks? He laughed. She wouldn't be done in two years, much less two weeks.

"What does it say?" Rain prodded.

"I don't know yet. I'm still in shock because I never expected to get this." Cade unfolded the paper that held the answer to his search.

"Ashland McIntyre went to live with the Franklins in Willow Springs, New Mexico Territory." He glanced up.

"She crossed through that and wrote Raton at the side. If I recall, they changed Willow Springs to Raton. But Mr. Jameson told me Ashland is with the McMasters couple at Fort Gibson. Someone has it wrong."

"I guess you'll just have to go see. Bear and I just might have to tag along."

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“I’d love to have your company.” He gently kissed her cheek before returning to the paper.

“Lucas McIntyre was taken by Cletus and Mary Pope. To the side Miz Baker scribbled a location that I can’t make out and it has a question mark by it as if she wasn’t sure.

Maybe Summer can decipher it.” He went on.

“Logan McIntyre found a home with the Jordans in Clarendon. Then Miz Baker wrote: ‘Moved to Lonesome Pine, Oklahoma Territory.’”

“You have to go to them,” Rain said.

He itched to saddle Buck and get going only he couldn’t just yet.

There was the wedding and the house wasn’t ready, so he had no place to put them, even if he could get them all back.

Again, like he faced with Summer, they might like it better where they’d landed.

If they balked at leaving with him, he wasn’t sure what he’d do.

The twins were fifteen now and able to be on their own.

But Ashland was still a kid at ten. He released a heavy sigh.

It would be very difficult to leave her with the Franklins or McMasters, whoever she's with.

Still, he'd have no choice if she wanted to stay.

He wouldn't force her. At least he could let them know there was a place waiting for them.

"I'll go after the wedding. The house should be ready by then."

Rain rested her hand on his. "I see your worry and doubt. It will be what our Creator has destined."

"You're right." He pulled her against his side, and they walked to the house to tell Summer.

Later that evening, they had a feast that night in the kitchen where Cade's mother had cooked so many delicious meals.

While the women made the food, Cade played outside with Bear. He'd found a ball in a corner in one room that they'd played with as kids so he was teaching the kid how to catch.

"Hold your arms out, Bear, like this." Cade showed him and tossed the ball.

"I got!" Bear shouted. "I got."

"Yes, you did."

After that, there was no stopping and Bear pouted when they had to go inside to eat.

Summer filled their glasses with goat milk. "A toast," she said, holding her glass

high. “To me getting a job with Doc Blanchard. May God bless the McIntyres!” To which they all touched glasses.

Bear laughed and lifted his little arm too as if it was a game. The boy and Summer had spent some time getting acquainted and had become fast friends. He followed her, calling, “Auntie.”

Long after they went back to the dugout, Cade rose from his bedroll and stepped outside. He filled his lungs with night air and stood looking up at the stars. “I will find you,” he promised softly. “Wherever you are, I will find you and we will be a family again. I give you this solemn vow.”

Movement caught his eye and Rain appeared from the shadows to take his arm and lay her head on his shoulder. “I could not sleep either.”

“I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“We both have much to think about,” Rain murmured.

“And what, pray tell, keeps you awake?”

“The wedding. I don’t know what to wear and I do not want to embarrass you.”

“Honey, you will never do that. I’m proud to be seen with you no matter if you’re wearing a burlap sack. I have a niggling idea that Miss Abigail will be of immense help in that department.”

“I will go see her. That is an excellent suggestion.”

Cade kissed her temple. “Sweetheart, it doesn’t have to be fancy. We’re plain folk who know who we are and where we come from. One dark night, we found each other and a glorious love that will stand the test of time.”

She turned to face him. “Do you object to having a tepee stretched here?”

“A tepee?” He grinned, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Are you already planning to split the blanket?”

“I do not understand this split the blanket.”

“It means you don’t plan to sleep at my side but in a separate place.”

“Oh, I see. No, not that. I want to keep teaching Bear about his past and the ways of our people. It’s important he doesn’t forget about Comanche ways.”

“I agree. Too much gets lost when cultures cross. Sure, stretch a tepee. I’ll help you. It’ll give the place more character. And if folks get lost, they can use that for a beacon. I daresay there won’t be any others around.” He lifted a questioning eyebrow. “Will there?”

Rain stood on tiptoe and kissed him, silencing the talk.

The handwriting was already on the wall. She had him wrapped around her finger and he knew it.

“I’ll give you the world if you only ask for it,” he murmured lazily, nibbling her lip.

“I ask nothing except you keep loving me.”

“Stopping would be impossible,” he said hoarsely.

“I’ve loved you from the moment I first saw you.

” He cleared his throat. “Rain, I can’t promise what the future looks like, but we’ll face it together, holding hands, and eyes looking forward.

We can get through anything, working side by side.

And when our children are born, I want you to teach them about the Comanche.

We can't change the past, because that has shaped who we are, but we can change what happens from this moment onward. ”

The medallion Jess had given him weighed Cade's pocket. The motto—Through Hardship or Difficulty—was especially fitting. His ancestors, all the McIntyres down through the ages, had paved the way. He simply had to follow the path.

As his father had been fond of saying, “Making it in life is a lot like busting broncs. You're gonna get thrown a lot but the simple secret is to keep getting back on. And with the help of a good woman to stick with you through it all you can't fail.”

He stared into Rain's beautiful eyes. She was definitely a good woman. “Amen,” he said softly as he touched his lips to hers.