



# Mail-Order Blacksmith (Honorable Husbands)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Honorable Husband Series.

Even independent women can need a helping hand now and then. More than muscles and rugged good looks, this bride needs a blacksmith and only the honorable need apply but is that what they'll get?

Mail-Order Blacksmith

With the passing of her father in the war, Sadie Cahill finds herself running the town's livery on her own. A falling out with her blacksmith leaves her in desperate need. But is she desperate enough to marry one?

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## CHAPTER 1

### T ONGANOXIE KANSAS, MAY 1866

“Looks like you need a little help, Sadie,” Joe Curtis said as he leaned over the bottom half of the stall door where Sadie Cahill was mucking a stall. “Things would be better for you if you had a man around.”

Ignoring him, she tossed the soiled straw into her wheelbarrow, letting it get a little too close to where Joe was standing. He had to straighten to avoid getting a bit of the muck on him. Without acknowledging him, she turned to get another forkful of the straw.

“Come on, now, Sadie, I’ve been helping you out for the past three years and you at least owe me a bit of conversation.”

That froze Sadie in her tracks. As she turned around, her grip on the pitchfork tightened. “Helping me? You shoe the horses—the very job that you’re paid to do. You’re not paid any less than you would if you were doing the job at the livery in Lawrence. How do you see it as a favor?”

He spit a bit of chew off to the side, a bit of dark dribble making its way over his chin before he used his shoulder to wipe it away. “I could have raised my prices on you, but I’ve held them back all this time.”

“Oh,” she said, lifting a brow. “So, I should be thankful that you haven’t taken advantage of me by raising prices?”

He gave a half shrug. “The town’s getting busier, and you’ve got more horses that need shoes these days. I’m having to come out here twice a week now and it’s a two-hour trip from Lawrence.”

“You’re paid more because there’s more work. It’s not as though you’re being asked to do anything for free.”

“Most blacksmiths wouldn’t come out all this way.”

“I understand that, and I’m grateful to you for being willing.”

He cultivated a bored look and heaved a bit of a sigh before leaning on the stall door once more. “I’m not sure how much longer I’d be willing to keep coming out all this way. I mean, you’re not that pretty.”

Blinking hard at him, her heart leapt toward her throat. She’d never thought of herself as a beautiful woman, but she’d always caught a few eyes now and then. Usually the wrong ones, like Joe Curtis’s. Her jaw tightened as she swallowed back the urge to use her pitchfork in a violent fashion. “This is a business, and you are doing a job. You are being paid for your services, and all the tools and equipment are here for your use already. Nothing about this has to do with whether I’m pretty or not.”

“Well, I’m feeling a little unappreciated. Maybe if you and I started courting...”

That made her raise her pitchfork to chest level and point it at the man. “Keep your distance from me or you will feel even less appreciated.”

His hands went to his hips as he took a step back. “You wouldn’t.”

Stepping forward, she gestured in his direction with the pitchfork. “Try me.”

For a long moment, he just stared at her, glaring with her in a staring contest. Then finally he shook his head and threw up his hands. “Fine. I don’t need all of this. You’re crazy and it’s not worth coming out all this way. Good luck finding a new farrier.”

As he stomped toward the barn doors, Sadie’s heart sank toward her stomach. What was she doing? She was chasing off the one man that she’d needed in order to run her business. Joe grabbed hold of his flashy chestnut mare from the stall on his way and mounted in the barn aisle.

Aunt Penelope squealed a little and jumped out of the way as Joe trotted his horse out the barn and into the street. With her hand on her chest, Sadie’s aunt blinked at her, mouth agape. “What on earth is going on?”

Still holding her pitchfork at chest level, Sadie answered, “He was getting fresh with me, and I put a stop to it.”

“Sadie!” Her aunt cried. “You should have strung the man along. We need him. What if he doesn’t come back to shoe the horses next week? What are we going to do? Tonganoxie has been without a blacksmith since your father left for the war. And now that he’s not returned, it’s just been you and me.”

“I’ll trim the horses myself. I’ve seen it done a million times. Father taught me how to use a hoof gauge and how to tell when a foot is level. I know how to bevel nails and shape a shoe.”

“But do you know how to apply those nails into a horse’s foot? Do you really want to hold a horse’s leg up in the air for several minutes while doing the job? This is man’s work, Sadie. You’re nearly as strong as a man, sure, but you’re not one.”

“Who decided it was man’s work? I can do it.” Even though her aunt made all the

business arrangements with the hay dealer and the grain seller, and dealt with the customers when they needed a stall for their horses in town, it was Sadie's job to do the day to day chores that kept the livery running. All the feeding and cleaning of the twelve to twenty horses in the livery was her job, and her back and wrists ached for the labor.

Her aunt waved a hand. "Fine. Give it a try, but you're only adding more work to yourself. You still need to fill the water troughs and clean the stalls. You don't have the time to add shoeing the horses to everything else you're already doing."

"I'd rather do that than deal with that man ogling me and making lecherous comments. He says that he wants to court and get married, but what he really wants is to roll around in the hay. He's not the type to make an honest married man. How many times has he shown up here late and hungover from spending the night in a saloon? You've heard the rumors about his escapades with ladies of the night."

"Still, Sadie, you could have had some discretion."

"You say that I could have strung him along, but he was getting impatient with me for spurning him for nearly three years now. This wasn't going to end well, no matter what," Sadie said quietly, a bit of sadness overcoming her as she looked over toward her father's anvil. No, She didn't want to marry a man like Joe Curtis. It wasn't that she thought she was better than him, but she did believe that she should not be unequally yoked. A drinker, a tobacco chewer, and a lech who slept in on Sunday after spending Saturday night in a saloon wasn't what she wanted to hitch herself to. "He just isn't the kind of man I need to consider marrying."

Her aunt sighed and nodded. "It would be nice if you could find a good, Christian man, and one who didn't mind hard work and horses."

Finally, Sadie put her pitchfork down and pat the buckskin gelding on the nose who'd

been nudging her from his stall door. “That sounds like it would be too good to be true.”

“Well,” Aunt Penelope said softly, “We need to put an advertisement in the papers and see if we can’t hire a new blacksmith at least.”

“I already said I’d do the work myself.”

“For now, that’s possible, but you need to be thinking long term. Let me take care of putting out the advertisement.”

Sadie knew that arguing with her aunt would get her nowhere, so she shrugged, bit her tongue and gripped her pitchfork. Then she headed back toward the stalls that needed cleaning. Making her way around the wheelbarrow, she let out a sigh. Since the war, her whole, rural town of Tonganoxie had been a down on men of marrying age. There were men who were married and those who were younger than her, but the remainder were like Joe—not the marrying kind.

Shaking her head, she tried to focus again on her work. It didn’t matter. All that mattered now was taking care of the livery that her father started here in town and making sure that it continued strong. If she broke her back putting in the work to do it, it would be worth it. It wasn’t often that two women could live independently of men the way that she and her aunt were doing. And as long as she kept her nose to the grindstone, she’d be able to succeed by God’s grace. Picking up another pile of soiled straw with her pitchfork, she tossed it into the wheelbarrow.

### CHAPTER 2

#### S T. JOSEPH MISSOURI

Abraham Thomas sneered at the man in front of him, his hands fisted. Blood rushed to his face, heating his cheeks and making him dizzy. If this came to blows, he was ready for it. “I’ve never stolen anything in my life! How could you accuse me of such a thing?”

The old man shook his head, his stance unchanging. Arms crossed over his chest, he continued to look down on Abraham as though he were nothing better than a thief. It only made Abraham’s ire rise. The old man glared at him a long moment before he finally said, “It doesn’t matter. Whether you stole the tools yourself or just left them out overnight for someone else to steal, it’s the same result. The tools are gone, and they were your responsibility.”

Guilt pricked at Abraham’s heart. He was responsible for the tools, that much he could agree with. But was it really his fault? “So, you’re done with me then? Over this? You value those tools over having a loyal apprentice?”

The old man sighed, his arms finally loosening. “It’s not just the tools, Abraham. You might be able to shoe the horses just fine, but you’re unpredictable with the owners. Sometimes you show fits of temper toward customers that make them complain to me, and they’re even avoiding coming for as long as they can before their horse needs shod again.”

“I can’t help it if I’d rather work with the horses than the people. I don’t understand

why they need to talk so much while I'm working a hoof. It makes it hard to concentrate."

"I understand that, but the horses are only here because they have work to do for the people who bring them. And besides, the people are the ones paying us the money, not the horses."

Slowly, the anger in Abraham subsided as it was replaced with sadness. "But I'll do what I can to work off the debt. I know that the tools cost money, and I'll do what I can to replace them."

"This has been coming for a while, I hate to say. Like I said, it's not just about the tools. They were just the straw that broke the camel's back. Honestly, I'm not sure if you could take over the business here in St. Joseph. If you can't get along with the current customers, it will make it easier for another blacksmith to come in and take over the town. I think I need to find another apprentice, unfortunately."

Abraham's heart fell toward his stomach. Sure, he'd been grumpy with a few customers, maybe a little impatient with them, but he wasn't even being given a chance here. "I can change," his voice cracked as he said it.

The old man shook his head again, his face growing more somber. "I've lived long enough in this life to know that people don't change for good. They might improve for a little while, but they always slip back into their old way of doing things."

Every word the old man said broke Abraham's heart just a little bit more. His gaze dropped toward the man's feet as a lump formed in his throat. The backs of his eyes stung, but he swallowed it all back, determined not to let emotions take hold of him. Sniffing, he took one step backwards, turned on his heel and stomped out of the stable.



Once out of shadows of the barn in the sun of the late spring day, he looked up toward the cloudless azure sky. Was he really going to be abandoned again? He'd been apprenticing with the old man for close to a year, right after the end of the war. The war had stolen his youth, since he joined at the beginning when he was nineteen, served in the Cavalry for four years taking care of the horses, and then when discharged, he believed he'd found the occupation that he'd do well with.

He'd thought that by shoeing horses, he could work with the animals he'd grown to love while in the army. For as far as he could remember, he'd been awkward when dealing with people. A long time ago, he learned that you couldn't trust people with much and even a man who called you his friend would be willing to betray you for his own benefit. Swiping at his eyes, he straightened himself, cleared his throat and started marching away. But where was he going? He'd been living in the loft of the barn... would he be allowed to continue doing that? Not likely.

Without any friends, without any family, what prospects for the future did he have? The whole world seemed to tilt for him. He felt a bit dizzy as he was overcome with melancholy. Still, he continued to march forward with no bearing on where he was going. Honestly, he could hardly see in front of himself, for his vision was blurred with unshed tears. Besides, his mind was elsewhere. What was he going to do now? He had no idea.

Maybe he could go to another town and find a job working with horses. But even if he worked with horses as a blacksmith in another town, how would he gain any customers if his attitude was surly. He'd have to change. But he knew the old man was right when he said that people didn't change very easily. And besides that, he didn't have any tools. He didn't own an anvil, had no means of building a coal forge, and that was neglecting the smaller tools like hammer, clincher, nippers, and more.

Frustration and despair were taking over. It was unfair that he was having to go through all of this. One of the reasons he'd joined the war effort was because his

father had passed away. He'd thought that it would be helpful to his mother to send his pay from the Cavalry to her so that she could live, but little did he know that she would die that first winter of influenza. He mourned her while cleaning stalls in the army's stable.

Maybe that was something he could do. If he worked at a livery, he could keep his head down and clean stalls and do what he could to not have to talk with or deal with anyone. But the army's stable was an easier place to get that done. He just needed to follow orders there and nothing else. Swiping at his eyes, he finally cleared his vision and found he was nearly at the end of Main Street. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and tried to calm himself. Cleaning stalls was something he could do, but it wasn't something he could even consider raising a family on. Was he destined to be alone for the rest of his life? What kind of life was that?

Truthfully, was he even able to get along with a woman long enough to have her agree to court with him or marry him anyway? Unlikely. Swallowing down the lump that had formed in his throat, Abraham shook his head at himself. His future was uncertain. His ambitions were shattered. Weakness overcame him and his knees buckled a little so that he caught himself on the little picket fence he stood next to. With nothing left, where would he turn?

Then he heard piano music. And then the singing began, "I hear the Savior say, 'Thy strength indeed is small; Child of weakness, watch and pray, Find in Me thine all in all.'"

Looking up, Abraham found himself looking at the open doors of the church. The choir was practicing and singing "Jesus Paid it All."

The song was right. He was a child of weakness, and his strength to save himself in this situation was truly small. There was no way that he could do anything for himself. But when was the last time he'd truly turned to God in prayer over a

situation like this? Yes, he was a believer. And he eschewed sin, went to church every Sunday, but did he really live his life abiding in Jesus? Honestly, not since his mother had died almost five years ago. It wasn't that he'd turned his back on God, but there was a part of him that couldn't understand why God would take away his family like that. And because of that lack of understanding, his life in Christ had suffered. Maybe that was why he'd become so surly?

Shaking his head, he opened the gate in the fence so that he could draw nearer to the music. He couldn't blame all of his shortcomings on the Lord. The only one he could blame for all of this was himself. Once he stepped onto the porch step, he turned around and sat down upon it. He didn't want to interrupt the choir during their practice, but he just wanted to stay a while and listen and let his aching heart heal a little bit. The tears started to flow a little more freely now. Not because he was mourning what he'd lost anymore, but because now that he was spending time in the presence of the Lord, he was beginning to realize all that he'd been missing in his life. How foolishly and selfishly he'd been living. This wasn't the way it was supposed to have gone. Burying his face in his hands, he thought long and hard about what he'd been doing wrong and asked the Lord to help him to repent—to turn away from relying upon himself and to truly abide in Jesus, relying upon God to help him find his way.

He sat like that for a long time. The tears had dried on his face, making his skin feel taut. Eventually, the music stopped, and he could hear murmuring in the church as the meeting came to a close. He continued to pray, even as he felt the step he sat upon creak with the weight of the choir members leaving. A hand touched his shoulder, and he heard the prayers of others nearby, asking the Lord for help upon his behalf. It almost made him start to cry again.

The hand remained as he prayed until eventually, Abraham felt spent. Peace had overcome him, and even though the uncertainty of his life wasn't gone, it somehow didn't matter as much to him as it had before. When he looked up, he found the

pastor along with three members of the choir smiling down at him. The pastor squeezed his shoulder and said, "It's good that you came tonight, Son. The Lord has need of you."

Giving the preacher a questioning glance, Abraham asked, "Of me?"

Pastor Lamb nodded and then offered him a hand so that Abraham could rise to his feet. The other three men all shook his hand and patted his shoulder, wishing him well before they left. And then the pastor gestured for Abraham to follow him. Once they entered the rectory, the pastor turned toward him again. "Stay for dinner. Stay for as long as you need to in order to gain the wisdom and direction the Lord has promised you. It won't be long, I'm certain."

"You're offering for me to stay?" Abraham blinked at the pastor.

"Yes," Pastor Lamb said with a firm nod. "Help me collect the hymnals and we'll get these chairs put away. If you'll help me keep the rectory clean, Mrs. Lamb will have hot meals for you, and we'll study the word as much as we can until we find what it is the Lord wants to tell you. Fair enough?"

Nodding, Abraham felt that same peace come over his heart. For the first time since his mother had died, had no plans for his future. But maybe that was right where the Lord had wanted him to be.

### CHAPTER 3

A braham had once heard the saying that “both fish and visitors begin to stink after three days.” It didn’t really mean that visitors began to smell badly, but that visitors wore out their welcome in about the same amount of time as it took for fish to begin to rot. And now, Abraham was reaching the three-day mark of staying with Pastor Lamb and his family in the small house behind the church’s rectory. Even though neither the pastor or his wife said a word to Abraham about him becoming a nuisance or burden, Abraham didn’t want to stay long enough to become one and have them saying or feeling something of the sort.

After breakfast and prayer, he decided to broach the subject with the pastor. “I suppose that I’ve spent enough time here with you and your family to recover, and it’s best that I move on.”

Immediately, Pastor Lamb met eyes with him over his spectacles, and asked, “What do you mean?”

Swallowing hard, Abraham took a seat in the pew where Pastor Lamb stood. “I believe I’ve been here long enough to recover from the original surprise of losing my employment and livelihood. I don’t want to become a burden to you and your family.”

“You’re not a burden, Abraham. Have no worries there. But regardless, where will you go when you leave here, have you thought about that?”

A lump formed in his throat as he shook his head, afraid to meet eyes with the pastor.

The pastor put a hand on his shoulder and then sat down next to him in the pew. “Don’t let things get you down so hard. You take so much of the worries and anxiety of the world upon your shoulders and expect yourself to be able to handle the burden. Do you know why Jesus said that His yoke was easy and His burden light?”

Abraham shook his head again.

“Because His yoke is supposed to be used in pairs. He is pulling with you. Carrying the burden with you. Don’t try to carry it all by yourself. Let Him give you the help that He offers.”

Looking up again, Abraham met the pastor’s eyes. “How am I supposed to do that? How do I know what to do?”

“Pray about it, of course, and ask the Lord to help you to accept His help.” The pastor offered him a smile. “If you were to give me a vision of what your future would look like, one that is positive and maybe what you think is impossible, what would it be? What would you dream?”

“Dream?”

Nodding, the pastor continued to smile but didn’t answer with words.

Abraham thought for a moment, but didn’t have to think as long as he thought. Immediately, certain things came to his mind. “I’d like to be married. To have children. To work with horses in some capacity, even if it’s not as a blacksmith.”

The pastor smiled wider. “Is that all?”

“I’d like to keep abiding in Jesus each day, with prayer and bible reading, like I have been here, too.”

After patting Abraham on the shoulder, the pastor stood. “Wait here a moment.”

Unsure what he should do while waiting for the pastor to return, Abraham closed his eyes and began to pray. He’d spent more time in prayer over the last three days than he had in the past few years. Guilt overcame him. How could he ever have pushed this aside when his mother had passed on. Instead of seeing how this was just a temporary parting, Abraham had felt a bit betrayed, a bit lonely, and a bit hurt by his mother’s death. It was difficult for him not to feel disappointed with God for allowing his mother to leave him. It felt unfair. But he forgot that God’s ways were not always easily understood, but that God still loved him and had his best interest at heart. When Abraham finished, he opened his eyes again to see Pastor Lamb approaching him again with a smile on his face and raising a newspaper up.

“Here we are,” the pastor said as he sat again in the pew beside Abraham. “Millie found this advertisement in the paper this morning. It looks like a new one.”

Confused, Abraham took the paper and read the circled advertisement. His heartbeat skipped as he looked back up at the pastor after. “This is an advertisement for a husband?”

“That’s what it says. They need both a blacksmith and a husband to help the young lady run the livery in a town out in Kansas.”

“Only honorable men need apply,” Abraham read the last line of the advertisement again. “It seems the lady has already had a hard time finding either one.”

“It seems. But I think it might be worth your while to write to the lady. It couldn’t hurt. And I happen to have gone to school with John Reed, the pastor of a church there in Tonganoxie. I can ask about the situation and vouch for your honor with him. Perhaps this is more than a coincidence. You envisioned your dream, what you would most like to see in your future, and this advertisement seems to be the best means for

you to achieve it. Likely this whole situation was designed just for you to meet with this woman. It's an opportunity for marriage and working with horses. A family may also be in your future. To me, it seems like much more than just a chance of finding an advertisement and answering it. The Lord must have ordained this since John is the pastor there as well. Both Millie and I have been praying about it all morning—about whether we should mention this to you or not. We didn't want you to feel as though we were pushing you out. But after you said what you did this afternoon, I thought it might be a good time to show you."

Slowly, Abraham nodded. This did all seem to be too much of a coincidence to happen simply by accident. The feeling that the Lord's hand was in this was strong. But he didn't want to make the mistake of thinking that this was ordained by the Lord just because it was something that he wanted. He reread the paper in his hand and then looked back up into the preacher's eyes. "I suppose that I should pray about this."

"Absolutely. Pray. Write a letter if you're inclined. Or, throw the paper away in the trash can if you are not. There is no reason for you to do this or not. Millie and I will pray for you... with you as well. We want what is best for you according to the Lord's will."

Swallowing down the lump that formed in his throat that the feeling of care that the pastor and his family had shown him, Abraham nodded and looked down at his hands again. He hoped that the Lord would give him a definitive answer on whether he should try for this or not. After just feeling like he'd come back to the Lord, he didn't want to allow himself to be disappointed again if things didn't work out the way he hoped. As he closed his eyes to pray, he tried to keep in mind what the sermon had been about the day before. What the three young Hebrew men had said when Nebuchadnezzar threatened to throw them into the fire. They had told the king that their God was able to deliver them from the fire, but even if He didn't, they still wouldn't bow down to anyone or anything but the Lord. And that was the kind of



faith that Abraham wanted. Even if God didn't do things the way that Abraham wanted or expected... Abraham would still worship the Lord and abide in Him. That was what he wanted most. And as he started his prayer, that's what he asked for first.

### CHAPTER 4

Sadie hated it when her Aunt Penelope was right. It had been a month since Sadie had taken on all the duties in the livery, and she found her aunt was very right. The workload increase to Sadie was breaking her down. She couldn't keep all the stalls clean, the horses fed and cared for, the fences in good condition, as well as trimming and shoeing their feet as needed. Even though she only needed to worry about the frequently changing number of horses in her care, often a customer would come to the livery for the day and need a horse shod as well, and it was up to her to put everything else on the back burner while she took care of the new customer's needs.

But now, Sadie was tired almost all the time and had soreness and stiffness in her joints and back from the hard work. The early mornings and late nights were also taking their toll. Right now, she was relying upon her youth to keep her going, but she knew she couldn't keep up this pace for long.

"Good news," Aunt Penelope said as she came into the barn after running errands. She waved a letter in her hand. "We will soon have a blacksmith on the way."

Frowning, Sadie put her pitchfork off to the side and rolled her shoulders. "What are you talking about?"

"The advertisement—remember?"

Since Sadie hadn't heard more about it since the fateful day when she'd gotten rid of Joe Curtis, she'd almost forgotten that her aunt had mentioned something about putting out an advertisement. Frowning, she eyed her aunt. "What advertisement?"

Aunt Penelope released a sigh. “I put an advertisement out for a blacksmith and farrier for you in the Kansas Register. It got picked up by a couple other papers as well. So, the new farrier is coming from Missouri of all places.”

Shaking her head, Sadie waved a hand in front of her. “Hold on a moment. You’ve already accepted someone? What if he’s as much a snake as Joe? Haven’t you noticed that most of the men who work as blacksmiths aren’t much different from him?”

“I thought you might say something like that,” Penelope said with a knowing smile. “That’s why I put specifically in the advertisement that only honorable men need apply. And besides, this young man comes with a recommendation from a pastor—in fact, it’s a pastor that our own Pastor Reed knows from Seminary.”

Blinking, Sadie had to close her mouth which had fallen slightly agape. “Really?”

Penelope nodded. “I thought you might be surprised. Also, I’ve exchanged a few letters with the young man. He worked in the Cavalry taking care of the army’s horses, he trained under a blacksmith afterwards for a year and he comes recommended by a pastor. Could we really ask for a better prospect for the position?”

Feeling the palms of her hands sweating, Sadie wiped them on the sides of her skirt. “No, I suppose not.”

“Then it’s settled then. He’ll be sleeping in the hayloft for now until better arrangements can be made.”

“Hold on,” Sadie said again, since this was all going too fast. “Do we have enough work for him to be staying here like that?”

“Oh, he’ll be helping us run the livery, too.”

Sadie wasn't sure she liked the sound of that. The last thing she wanted was to have a man come in and take over her family's business and treat her as if she was his lackey. And if it was the other way around, most men wouldn't like to be taking orders from a woman, especially one as young as Sadie, herself, at nineteen. "We don't have the kind of money to pay the man, do we? Aren't we just barely scraping by as it is?"

"Taken care of," Penelope said, waving the hand with the letter in it. "He understands that he's working for a very small wage, and that we will provide him with lodging and meals."

"Meals, too?"

"Of course. It's not that hard to provide for one more person as far as that's concerned. He'll just take his meals in the house with us three times a day."

Swallowing hard, Sadie put a hand to her chest, trying to physically calm her racing heart. This was all too much. A man—a stranger—was going to be living in her barn, eating meals at her table and helping her care for her business and the horses? And she was supposed to just accept him based upon a pastor's recommendation? Could she really do any of this? Slowly she shook her head.

She was about to protest, to tell her aunt that she was fine and would continue to do all the work herself. That she didn't need any man's help, even if he seemed honorable or had a pastor's approval. But before she could speak, a voice cried out from the shadow of the doorway behind her aunt. "Hello! Anyone here?"

Penelope turned around and greeted the customer while Sadie cleaned things up a little in the area, moving the wheelbarrow of soiled straw and manure away from the aisle and closer to the compost heap. But then she heard the man say, "Four more behind me and two of them need shoes badly. The draft has lost one."

Exhaustion came over Sadie as her heart leapt in her chest. Four more horses to care for, and at least two of them needed shoes? She'd have to make a shoe from steel bar as well, since she'd only pre-made those for the size of regular riding horses, not a draft. As she looked ahead to the workload she had for the rest of the day, tears stung the backs of her eyes. There was too much to do, and even though she was a proud woman, this was getting to the point where she needed to admit it. She needed help. Perhaps this young man who was coming would be as honorable and good as Penelope suggested. And would he be coming soon? Sadie could only hope.

### CHAPTER 5

When Abraham first stepped off the stagecoach in Tonganoxie, he was surprised that it was even considered a town at all. In St. Joseph, there was a Main Street that was bustling with businesses, banks, and more than one of each kind. The stagecoach here stopped at their office which was also shared with the telegram and post offices as well. The bank building also seemed to be where they ran the offices of the mayor and sheriff. There only appeared to be one tavern and the barber seemed to be doing business out of one room of a house nearby. Only a handful of businesses seemed to occupy the street to both sides for only a block or two, with rural fields of crops and cattle pastureland in all directions otherwise. It was little more than a trading post.

He could take it all in with barely a glance around. And it wasn't much of a walk before he reached the livery. Tonganoxie was little more than a one-horse town if it were in Missouri, so how was it that the livery here could be bustling so well? When he stepped into the barn, he'd counted eight horses in the outdoor paddocks, and there were at least four more with their heads out in the barn aisle. He set down his small trunk and called inside, "Hello?"

"Just a minute," called out a sweetly feminine voice, and suddenly, Abraham found himself growing nervous.

The ride here hadn't been so bad, and he'd decided not to send out a telegram before coming so that he didn't have to pay the extra bit for it. But now he wondered if the young lady in question, Miss Cahill, got his letter in time that he'd be arriving on the fifteenth. He swallowed down those nerves when she suddenly appeared, wearing coveralls with a bandana covering her dark hair. She had a smudge on her cheek and

was pulling the leather gloves from her hands as she drew nearer. Even though her appearance made her a little less intimidating, the fire in her green eyes brought the nervousness back again, full force. Her appraising glance assessed him quickly, he could tell, and she looked uncertain what to do with the information that she'd gathered about him from appearance.

Clearing his throat, he stepped forward. "Hello, I'm Abraham Thomas, I'm looking for Miss Sadie Cahill."

Her eyes grew momentarily wider, then she looked away and started putting her gloves back on. "I'm Sadie Cahill, and we weren't expecting you yet."

"My letter didn't come? I told you that I'd be arriving on the fifteenth."

She shook her head and picked up the handles of the wheelbarrow she'd been filling with soiled straw. "There hasn't been a letter."

"I didn't expect to arrive before my letter did. I'm sorry that you weren't given enough notice." He stepped forward and gestured toward the wheelbarrow. "I could take that for you if you point me in the direction of your manure pile."

Glancing back toward him and lifting a brow, she shook her head. "I can handle a wheelbarrow just fine. If you'd like, you can take your things up to the hayloft. The ladder is to your left. We haven't had time to bring you a sheet or blanket yet, but we can get those momentarily. You may need to beat the mattress on your pallet for any accumulated dust. Like I said, we weren't expecting you yet, so we didn't quite prepare."

"It's all right. I hate that I came as good as unannounced. I'm happy to get my own pallet ready, thank you."

She nodded once, then turned and took the wheelbarrow away. He watched as she left. It was unusual to see a lady in overall dungarees. They fit her loosely, as though they were two or three sizes too big, so they hid whatever kind of figure that she had underneath. When she'd come out of the stall though, Abraham had been struck by how pretty she was. Pretty but intimidating. But still, there was a bit of tiredness around her eyes, and her face was a little pale and gaunt. She seemed to be working herself much too hard. Well, he was there to fix that.

Turning toward the ladder, he heard her voice call out, "Watch the third rung, it's getting a little old."

Stopping, he took a look at the third rung. Old was an understatement. The wood was rotting, and likely was made from an older piece to start with. It was loose in its slot and jiggled when he tested it with his hand. She was right; it would be best if he skipped that rung until it could be repaired. Looking around the barn in a new light, he wondered how many more things he could repair to help the place run better. Maybe this was a better situation than the one he'd been trying to cultivate before. Just being a blacksmith was labor-intensive, and he had to deal directly with customers much too often. But here, he was helping run the livery, and that reminded him more of the work he'd done for the Cavalry. Thanking the Lord in a quick prayer, he started up the ladder, skipping the third rung.

Sadie dumped her wheelbarrow and wiped the sweat from her brow on the long sleeve of her shirt. Then she peered back toward the barn, her heart still racing. That was Mr. Abraham Thomas? He was younger than she was expecting. Only a few years older than her, it seemed, but he was already getting a little bit of gray hair at his temples. Still, his blue-gray eyes seemed to bore into her soul when they met gazes. Her heart had skipped a beat. Fisting her hands, she grew frustrated with herself. What blacksmith... or horseman even had she known who wasn't lecherous? Outside of her father, she'd never met a man who made his living in horses that wasn't dishonest, lecherous, and a drunkard.



Her hopes that this Mr. Thomas would be different were very small. Although she was surprised when her aunt had told her that the man was coming with a recommendation from the pastor in St. Joseph, she still didn't believe that he'd be as honorable as he seemed. Maybe he was just putting on a good show for the pastor on Sundays which made the man believe he was good. She shook her head again, feeling a bit of guilt in her stomach. It wasn't right for her to judge the man on the actions of others. It was best that she gave the man a chance at least. Fine. She'd give him a chance, but still wasn't sure she could trust him with much when it came to her business. Her intention was to watch him like a hawk.

As she came back into the barn with the wheelbarrow, she could hear him shuffling around a little on the floorboards over her head. Unsure whether she liked this situation, she pushed the wheelbarrow toward the next of the stalls she needed to clean. Then, Aunt Penelope came in, waving an opened letter in her hand. With a wide smile on her face, she said, "He's coming today, Sadie."

Her lips thinning, Sadie nodded.

"What's that look for? You should be more excited. It's not as though we don't need the help, and like I said, he may be husband material."

Heat rushing to Sadie's cheeks, her eyes widened as she shook her head, stepped toward her aunt and shushed her.

Aunt Penelope blinked in offense and was taken aback. "What do you mean by shushing me?"

When Sadie grew close enough, she said in a sharp whisper, "He is upstairs."

The color drained from her aunt's face. "Upstairs?" she whispered as her gaze shot toward the wooden ceiling. "Right now?"

Sadie's heart was finally beginning to slow a little as understanding came across her aunt's face. She nodded and her aunt patted her chest as she continued to look upward.

Then the man upstairs cleared his throat and waved from the hole at the end of the ladder. "Hello," he called down. "You must be Ms. Penelope Cahill?"

Penelope nodded and the man offered her a thin smile that was barely visible through his beard. It seemed that smiling wasn't something the man did very often, and the expression looked awkward upon his face. Then he came down the ladder, careful of the third rung just as Penelope opened her mouth to warn him. Her jaw clacked shut in surprise as she lifted a brow toward Sadie.

Sadie shrugged.

Then the man turned around. He was a bit wider in the shoulders than Sadie had realized the first time she saw him. But from behind, and with Penelope there to compare to, she could tell that man had built the musculature of a blacksmith anyway. He offered a hand toward her aunt. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Cahill. I'm Abraham Thomas."

"The pleasure is all mine, but please, call me Penelope. Everyone does."

A look of relief came over him as he let out a breath and relaxed his shoulders. "Only if you'll call me Abraham, too. I'm not used to being referred to as anything else. When someone calls for Mr. Thomas, I look around for my father."

A small giggle escaped her aunt as she put the back of her hand to her lips demurely. "You are a charming one, Abraham."

He blinked at her. "That's a compliment I've never heard before but thank you."

His glance shot over toward Sadie, and she was struck by those blue-gray eyes again. Swallowing those feelings down, she scowled. Of course, he was charming. That was a part of what these kinds of men always did. Didn't Joe Curtis also flirt with her aunt? He pretty much flirted with anyone in a skirt, even when Sadie wasn't wearing one. Her hands fisted. "There's still a lot of work to be done today, if you're up for it."

"Sadie!" her aunt cried. "The man only just got here; you could at least let him settle in for a moment."

Sadie opened her mouth to answer, but the man shook his head and said, "No, it's all right. There's no better way of settling in at a barn than getting to work." The he turned toward Sadie. "Where should I get started?"

Those blue-gray eyes bore into her again, and his serious expression let her know that he wasn't just pandering to her either. Still, she wasn't going to go soft on him. "The bay mare in stall three has a sprung shoe. In stall four, the chestnut gelding might have an abscess that needs cleaning out if you'll check that. Then in stall five, there's a three-year-old here to be broke to a cart, but he's going to need shoes before he starts pulling down the roads here. He's never had on shoes before, so I'm not sure how he's going to behave."

"Do you use stocks here or cross-ties?"

"Cross ties for the first two, since I know that they stand well, but I'd suggest putting the three-year-old in stocks until he knows better. The crossties are over there," she said pointing toward the raised area where her father's tools were. Then she pointed toward the end of the aisle. "The stocks are just out the back door and to the left."

"You're going to have him do all of that on the first day?" Aunt Penelope asked, chewing on her bottom lip. "Isn't that a lot?"

“If he doesn’t do it, then I have to. It’s all on my list for the day.”

He shook his head. “It’s really fine. I can get all of that done and more. You’ll see.”

“Are you sure?” Penelope asked.

“Certain,” he said with a nod, and then started toward the blacksmith stall, which was twice as wide as the usual stall, raised above the rest of the aisle to keep it from getting waterlogged in the worst weather, and had crushed gravel packed in to make solid, even footing. Her father had designed the area with a door to the back where the coal forge was in a covered porch area. The new blacksmith, who she didn’t think she could call just Abraham, looked through the area, assessing it, and nodding approval.

A bit of pride came over Sadie because of her father’s inventiveness, but she shoved that down. She didn’t need this man’s approval over her father’s tools and equipment. Huffing, she turned away. “I’ve got stalls to get started on. Let me know if you have any questions or need anything.”

As she picked up her pitchfork and stepped into the stall she was preparing to clean, her shoulders relaxed a bit. The man did seem to know what he was looking at when he surveyed her father’s work area, and his presence gave her a measure of relief. At least now her list of things to get done had gotten much smaller and maybe she’d be able to get some sleep that night.

After cleaning two of the stalls, she went and checked on the new farrier. Sadie had heard him working the metal of the shoe on the anvil with his hammer. When she peered over, she found him widening it a bit on the horn and then flattening it again on the face of it. He handled the tools well and seemed confident in his work. With a nod, she continued working the next stall. At about the time she was done, he was filing down the last nail with the horse’s foot on the hoof stand. He peered up at her

as he picked the horse's leg up by the knee and then set it down gently. Her heart fluttered again. He didn't just drop the horse's foot to the ground like she'd seen so many other farriers do. It was always an annoyance of hers that blacksmiths didn't seem to care about the shock and stress that they were putting on the horse's joints and bones when they just dropped them in such a manner.

Then the man stood to his full height and wiped his brow. "Is it always quiet in here?"

She shrugged. "For the most part. The customers tell me or Penelope their needs and then drop their horses off. Usually, my aunt deals with the customers. I'm not much of a mind to deal with people. Most of them don't know how to ride well, and their horses show it through surliness or sores."

He huffed. "Yet everyone thinks they are an expert."

Blinking at him, she nodded. "They do. And if you try to suggest anything to them, they take offense. People just don't care enough about the horses. If the animal develops a problem, like becoming hard-mouthed, the owner wants a more aggressive bit, or they want to sell the horse and get a new one."

"And then the new one becomes hard mouthed, too," he said quietly with a frown.

"Precisely," she said, throwing her hands in the air. "You seem to understand this business fairly well."

"In the Cavalry, I learned about true horsemanship, but when I started working at a barn in St. Joseph's, I learned how the common man had very little horse sense."

She nodded, feeling her heart swell within her. This man seemed to understand people the same as she did. Maybe the two of them would be able to get along well

enough to run this business. As long as he was willing to accept her orders and not try to take over it all, she might be willing to work with him. He'd need to stay humble though, and she hadn't known too many blacksmiths who could do that for long.

Slowly, he let out a breath as he undid the hooks on the cross-ties from the horse's halter. "I should put this one away and get the next. You said I'm looking for an abscess? Which hoof?"

"Left hind," she answered as she watched him lead the bay mare back to her stall. Then he smoothly took off the halter and adjusted it for the chestnut gelding. The man seemed to know his way around the horses and the tools. He was gentle and soft spoken. Perhaps this would work out better than she hoped.

### CHAPTER 6

“Dinner’s ready,” Ms. Penelope called into the barn aisle at a little before sunset.

It had been a long day, and Abraham’s stomach grumbled in response to the prospect of getting supper. He hadn’t eaten a good dinner earlier that day because he’d been too nervous about making it to livery in Tonganoxie and meeting his new... honestly, he wasn’t sure what he should call Miss Cahill. Was she his intended? The thought of that made his cheeks heat up and all the blood in his body seemed to rush to his face as his heart beat faster and harder.

How could he think of her that way? She’d said nothing of romance or even a marriage arrangement. And surely, they’d want to get to know each other for a little while before jumping into marriage vows. After their short conversation about horsemanship or the common man’s lack of, she’d hardly said more than two words to him the rest of the day. Once he’d finished the work with the horses as he’d been assigned, he’d found a few things that needed tidying up around the barn and found a couple of nails so that he could fix that third rung on the hayloft ladder as well. It was about the time he was finished putting away all the tools that Ms. Penelope called into the barn.

“I’ll be ready once I get this horse put away,” Miss Cahill answered as she walked into the barn aisle with a buckskin pony. She’d been lunging it in the small paddock to give it exercise.

“I’ll meet you at the house then,” Penelope said as she turned and left the barn.

When Abraham considered all the work that he'd done today and the work that he'd seen Miss Cahill accomplish, he wondered at what she'd said earlier. Were these really all the things that she would have had to do for the day alone? If he thought it was a long day as it was, he couldn't imagine taking care of all of the stalls and feeding on his own, either. Then she drew near with a lunge whip in hand, and he offered to take it with a gesture.

She eyed him with brows raised, but then handed it to him without a word and continued leading the pony back to his stall. Abraham hung the whip up next to the others in the tack room. Then he went to close the door and put the lock on.

"You don't need to lock it all the way yet, just turn it so that it appears to be locked. After supper we'll feed and water the horses and close everything up for the night," she called as she was removing the pony's halter and then latching the stall door.

He nodded. Work in a barn often went late into the night and early into the morning as well. When he was working in the Cavalry, he got used to the fact that the hours were odd, and sometimes you lost sleep while caring for the animals. But the one thing his commanding officer taught him was that the horses couldn't care for themselves, so his responsibility was a noble, godly calling and Abraham should take pride in getting the chance to work with such splendid beasts. His shoulders ached and his muscles had a bit of soreness, but both of these feelings were good. It meant that he'd been working. It meant that they were getting stronger. It meant that he was useful again. And all of those things were very good. His step felt a little bit lighter as he made his way to the main house behind the barn.

Miss Cahill stomped her boots on the bottom porch step to knock off the excess dirt and mud, so Abraham did the same. When she got to the door, however, she took her shoes off and then turned toward him. "Aunt Penelope likes to keep a clean house, so we leave our shoes outside."



He nodded and pulled the laces free of the top of his boot and pulled out his feet. Immediately, he was struck by the fact that one of his socks had a hole in it, and his big toe was sticking out. Additionally, the faint odor of sweat came from his feet and his cheeks heated. How could he possibly go into the house in this condition? And have dinner... with two ladies? He didn't deserve to. Miss Cahill stepped forward and opened the door instead of waiting for him to. Another moment where he failed at being the gentleman... or man even.

She nodded toward his feet. "Penelope will likely want you to leave your socks so that she can mend them."

"I couldn't ask her to do that," he said with a gasp.

"She's not going to ask you." Miss Cahill huffed a laugh. "When Penelope tells you to do something, you won't have a choice or an argument. She's as stubborn as a chestnut mare and won't take no for an answer. You may as well just hand her over the socks when she demands them."

Abraham blinked as he took hold of the door over Miss Cahill's head. She looked up at him and then shyly looked away. It was the first time her green-eyed gaze wasn't piercing and looked a little unsure. He swallowed as his heart skipped a beat. But the moment was fleeting as Ms. Penelope came from the kitchen with an apron tied around her and she put out her hands. "Stop right where you both are!"

At the sound of her command, both of them froze mid step.

"Remove your socks and wash up your feet before you even come to the dining room. I've got a tub set up for you both in the wash closet. Just step in the soapy water and then towel your feet off." Then Ms. Penelope caught sight of Abraham's big toe. "Oh, my goodness, me! The state of your socks is deplorable. You'll leave those with me, of course, and I'll get you a fresh pair. How many socks do you have?"

Confused, he glanced over toward Miss Cahill who shrugged but offered no real help. He shrugged himself. "I only have the two."

Ms. Penelope shook her head. "No, silly. Not how many socks do you have on, how many pairs of socks do you have with you?"

"Oh," he said, but then shrugged again. "I only have two pairs, actually."

Shaking her head and pursing her lips in disapproval, Ms. Penelope said, "We'll have to fix that. For now, you can have my brother's socks. He has four pairs that are in excellent condition."

"What?" Miss Cahill said with a frown. "You're giving him my father's socks?"

"It's not as though Gerald is using them is it? He was buried in his favorite pair, anyway. These socks have no meaning to him."

Miss Cahill put her hands upon her hips. "You can't just go giving away my father's things."

"Why not?" Ms. Penelope said, resting her hands upon her hips as well. What Miss Cahill had said earlier was about right. Abraham could almost imagine the lady pinning her ears like a chestnut mare as she flared her nostrils. "Are you going to wear the socks?"

"I might," Miss Cahill said, and suddenly he realized that the younger Cahill had a stubborn streak in her that was probably just as difficult as her aunt's.

"They won't fit you."

"They might."

Abraham feared that the two would glare at each other so hard that something might catch fire. And he hated that they were doing it over him. “It’s all right. I’ll buy some of my own socks at the general store if I need to. I don’t want to take something that isn’t mine.”

Then they both glared at him and said at the same time, “Stay out of this.”

His eyes widened as he put up his hands in surrender. And he was pretty certain that was going to be the last time he tried to resolve an argument between the two Cahill ladies.

The aunt turned on her niece. “Look. It’s been two years. You need to take his bible off his nightstand and read it. Treasure it. Don’t let it just sit there, collecting dust.”

“I know that.”

“And when you marry, that bedroom will become yours.”

Miss Cahill swiped at her eyes but continued to frown. “That isn’t going to happen for a long time.”

Glancing toward Abraham, Ms. Penelope said, “It may happen sooner than you think. Now, those socks aren’t doing anyone a bit of good sitting in the drawer unworn while Abraham here tries to make do with only two pairs, and one of them is in a sorry state—who knows about the other.”

Abraham didn’t know whether to be offended or not, but decided that either way, it was best to keep his tongue at this moment.

“So tell me, Sadie, what should we do?”

For a long half a minute, the two just glared at each other. Then finally, the younger Miss Cahill let out a sigh and looked directly toward Abraham. “Take the socks and make good use of them.”

Then she turned on her heel and raced up the stairs to the second floor. Abraham’s jaw went slack as he watched her leave.

“Don’t mind her. She’s a bit attached to things that she shouldn’t be, and it’s understandable. She’s had a lot of loss in her life. Her mother died of influenza when Sadie was only seven, and then her father goes off to help in the war and gets himself shot. She’s of the mind that everyone leaves, so she wants to hold tight to the memories and things that remind her of those that she loves.” Penelope watched the stairs wistfully with a sigh before turning again toward him. “Now go and wash up in the water closet and leave the socks next to the tub. I’ll fetch you a clean pair, and then we’ll have dinner. All right?”

“I really don’t want to be a bother.”

She shook her head. “You’re no bother at all. I’m happy that you’re here. Oh! And by the way, Sadie doesn’t know that I put the advertisement out for a husband. She thinks you’re here only in the capacity of blacksmith and farrier. So it’s up to you to woo her, understand. I’m counting on you.”

The blood drained from Abraham’s face as the woman just turned and marched away like she hadn’t just said something of importance. He was supposed to... to woo a woman? Him? And not just any woman, but that spitfire of a lady who he’d just offended by accepting her father’s socks—not that he had a choice. And just how was he going to do that?

Of all the impossible tasks he’d been given in his life, this one seemed the most unreasonable, but somehow, he knew that he wouldn’t be able to convince Ms.

Penelope that he couldn't possibly. Part of him wanted to turn on his heel and run. Maybe he could catch the evening stagecoach. If not, maybe he could stay at the tavern and then take the first one in the morning. He could just leave this situation.

But where would he go?

What would he do?

He had no plans for his future. He had no family to turn to, no one to help him. He certainly couldn't return to the Lamb's house in St. Joseph. He'd already asked too much of them. But this was an impossible task. How could he, in his ineptitude with people, and worse with women, possibly woo a lady?

His glance dropped toward his feet, and he looked down at his bare toes. And even if he had someplace to run to, how far would he get without socks on his feet?

Ms. Penelope returned and lifted a brow before handing him a fresh pair of folded socks. Then she pointed to his left. "The wash closet is right there," she said gently.

"Thank you." Nodding, he started in the direction she'd gestured. All right. Maybe he could do this. He could at least give it a try. As he entered the washroom and found the foot tub of soapy water, he let out a breath. Would it hurt him to give it a try?

It would definitely embarrass him, he was certain.

Maybe it would even humiliate him. But hurt?

His pride might take a hit. Frowning, he shook his head. "What is impossible for man is possible with God," he whispered to himself.

What did his pride matter? What did it matter if he was humiliated or embarrassed? If

he wanted to make his vision—his dream—into a reality, he'd need to do things that made him uncomfortable. And this was definitely one of those things. He let out another slow breath and then nodded to his reflection in the mirror on the wall opposite the door. If he was where God intended him to be, then he was going to succeed. If he failed, then God had other plans for him. If he could just accept that, then his pride made no matter.

Then he determined to do what God led him to in the matter of wooing Miss Sadie Cahill, and he started washing his feet.

### CHAPTER 7

After they had finished the night feeding, Sadie locked up the tack stall as well as the blacksmith stall. She had to admit that she felt a little better about leaving the barn knowing that someone was staying there overnight. Somehow, inherently, she knew that Mr. Thomas was trustworthy. Maybe it was the way that he handled the horses, or the fact that he put away the tools after use in the right way, but she didn't see greed when she looked into his eyes.

In his eyes, she found something akin to a kindred spirit. There was loneliness there and hurt, and it seemed that Mr. Thomas was protecting himself from being hurt again. Sadie could relate to those feelings. She understood them. Now that the upstairs hayloft was where he was staying, she no longer felt comfortable making her way up there to drop hay down into the stalls of the horses who would be staying in, so she explained to him what she wanted, and he got it done.

Then she took hold of her lantern and turned toward the barn door. He stood by the ladder he'd just descended as she clicked the lock on the tack stall. "Come up to the house anytime after sunrise. Penelope will have breakfast ready shortly after."

"I should walk you home," he offered.

Frowning, Sadie shook her head. "I'm fine. I walk myself home every evening."

He shook his head. "I insist."

Rolling her eyes, she decided it wasn't worth arguing over and waved a hand toward

him as she started out the barn door. “Do what you will.”

Every day, she walked the few hundred yards from the barn to the house, and admittedly, there were some nights when she found the walk harrowing. Nights when the saloon noise was a bit louder than others. Nights when there was a customer that looked her up and down the wrong way and made her want to shove a pitchfork in between them. She had errant thoughts on those nights that she could run into someone that would want to do her harm, but they were fleeting and she’d never had any of them come to fruition.

They were walking along in the warm summer air with the waxing moon overhead casting silvery light into the shadows that her lantern couldn’t reach. And then they heard screaming.

Sadie’s heart jumped into her throat. The sound was coming from the bushes up the path, but the voice small as if the screams were those of a baby or small child. Her hand fluttered to her chest as she stepped closer and tried to shine the light of the lantern toward the darkened bush. “What is that?” she asked as she peered back at Mr. Thomas.

With worry creasing his forehead, he drew closer and put an arm in front of her and took the lamp from her fingertips. “Stay here,” he ordered her quietly and then approached the bush himself. The screaming continued.

She had no intention of staying back, so she followed right on his heels. He looked back once and gave her a disapproving glance, but she didn’t care. Curiosity was getting the better of her. Once they reached the bush, he pushed some of the leaves and branches to the side and the light of the lantern reached within. The shine of a pair of predatory eyes turned toward them and the animal hissed, its face covered in blood. Immediately it started to turn around, its black and white tail raising like a warning flag. It didn’t take more of a threat than that for both Sadie and Mr. Thomas



to back quickly away from the bush.

“A skunk?” he asked in a harsh whisper.

“And it seems to have found a clutch of baby bunnies,” Sadie said sadly.

“I didn’t even know that skunks ate bunnies. I guess I never knew what skunks ate actually.”

Then they caught sight of the skunk scampering away in the other direction, and they both kept their distance. It was then that Sadie realized that she’d been holding on to the gentleman’s arm that he’d held out toward her protectively. Immediately, she pulled her fingers from their hold and stepped to the side to gain some distance and clarity as her heart thrummed in her chest.

“Where do you think the mother is?” he asked.

Sadie shook her head, hoping that he wouldn’t turn and look at her in the light and realize how red her face had to be, as it had heated so much. She’d never touched a man so intimately. Even through the cottony fabric of his long sleeve, she could feel the heat of his skin underneath and the hardness of his muscles. She could only blame it on her surprise or perhaps the fear of being skunked.

It seemed he had the same thoughts and didn’t notice her holding onto him or release since he didn’t even bat an eye her direction. “We’re lucky it didn’t spray. Do you think any of them survived?”

Her heart sank at the thought of leaving any of those poor babies in the nest with the blood and gore of the others. “What if the skunk returns?”

“I’ll check.”

This time, she kept her distance while he returned to the bush with the lantern and looked a little deeper within. When he returned, he held a small brown bundle in one of his hands. “This seems to be the only survivor.”

“Is it injured?”

“It doesn’t seem to be. I don’t know if we should leave it here in the hopes that the mother will come back, or if that would only seal its fate if the skunk returns.”

“What would we do with it?”

“I’ll put it in a crate with some straw. We’ll see if it will eat some of the horses’ oats? Maybe your aunt could spare a carrot or other vegetable?”

“I’ll ask her.”

He nodded and held the small bunny closer to his chest. “Once it’s a little bigger and can make it on its own, we’ll release it. But for now, I think we should just work to keep it safe.”

“All right,” she said, taking the lantern from his other hand and reaching out to lightly stroke the brown fur of the small animal that was the length of Mr. Thomas’s hand.

“It’s so small.”

“It’ll grow quickly.”

She looked up at him and met his eyes. “How do you know about rabbits?”

He shrugged. “I don’t really, but they eat grass and things similar to horses. How much of a difference can there be?”

For a moment, she searched his eyes, and when she realized he was teasing, she couldn't help but smile. Wanting to roll her eyes again, she turned on her heel and started for the house once more. The light in the parlor showed that Aunt Penelope was waiting up for her, as she normally did. Sometimes, Sadie would find her asleep in the chair. Other times, she'd find her aunt cleaning. Either way, it felt good to have a loved one waiting for her return. At least they could keep each other safe. When they reached the bottom porch step, Sadie turned around and offered Mr. Thomas the lamp. "Here."

He shook his head. "I'll be fine by the light of the moon. I'll light the other lantern that's in the barn and make sure it's out before I go to sleep. Not to worry about a barn fire."

She blinked. "I hadn't even thought of that."

"Good," he said, "Put it out of your mind. I'll just take care of this little one and then off to bed."

Thinking about how the man would be sleeping on a pallet in her barn not too far away made her stomach twist a little. It wasn't exactly nervousness that she felt at the thought, but it was similar. Her heart fluttered at his kindness. But her feelings seemed to be all her own, as he was looking down at the brown fluff in his hand and turning to walk away. She watched him for a moment before he turned around again toward her, looked up and said, "Good night."

"Good night," she said, but quietly for she was feeling a little breathless.

Still, he seemed to hear and gave her a thin-lipped smile and a nod. And then he walked far enough away that she could barely see a silhouette of him in the shadows. Releasing a breath, she headed inside. Her aunt greeted her and then headed for bed. Sadie barely grunted in response. She took care of her nightly ministrations quickly

and without any thought. This day had gone very differently than she'd been expecting when she woke. She wasn't nearly as tired as she'd been for the last month or so when she went to bed. It was a blessing that she'd been able to carve out a little time to work with the buckskin pony and to get in a training session with two of the other horses she was planning on taking to the sale at the end of the month.

Even though she'd been against bringing in a person to take on the blacksmith role and to work in the livery with her based on salary and room and board, perhaps this was going to work out better than she'd expected. As she lay down in her bed, she couldn't help but think about the soft spoken man who showed kindness as if it were second nature to him. He wasn't trying to impress anyone with his actions, but just seemed to do them because he genuinely cared about the horses... animals. Because he even showed the same kind of care with the baby bunny.

Then her mind started to drift elsewhere, in comparison. How would someone else have handled the situation? Would Joe Curtis have put an arm out to protect her? Would a man like Joe attack the skunk instead of letting it go? Would he have searched to see if there was a live bunny still in the clutch? Would he be willing to care for the small creature until it grew enough to make it on its own?

Somehow she doubted a man like Joe would.

As she was getting to know Mr. Abraham Thomas, she was coming to realize that he wasn't much like Joe. In fact, she could see more of the kindness in his eyes that her father had before he left for war. He wanted to go and serve his country as a horseman, and he'd been adamant about that, especially after what happened in Lawrence with Quantrill's Raid. But still, why would he leave her alone like that? She swiped at her eyes as tears threatened to overflow. She did a good job of stuffing down her emotions when there was work to be done but when she was alone in her bed in the darkness, sometimes those feelings would rise up again. The tears came faster than she could swipe them away. And she cried out in prayer for her heart to be healed.

Without ever saying amen, she fell asleep on her dampened pillow.

### CHAPTER 8

After a few days, Abraham was getting used to the routine. Customers came daily because Tonganoxie was a trading post and a rest stop for travelers who were coming from the west to Kansas City, and for soldiers and traders moving from Fort Leavenworth to Fort Scott and vice versa. When he'd first arrived in the small town, he hadn't realized how popular Magdalena Bury's Tavern and trading post was as a stopping place for the travelers on the Oregon trail as well. All of these people kept Miss Cahill's livery afloat, but the people dealt mostly with Ms. Penelope, telling her what they wanted, and then she would relay the needs to either Miss Cahill or to himself. So that he and she were both able to work with the horses without the constant interference by the owners.

Swallowing hard, he peered out the window toward the riding paddock. Miss Cahill's silhouette was outlined by the reddening sky. In the mornings, she rode two or three horses, then worked through the stalls during the day, and then rode another two or three horses in the evening. It had gotten so that if Abraham wasn't busy shoeing a horse, he would give her a hand with untacking and rubbing down horses after she rode. At first, she'd been surprised by his willingness to act as her groom, but for him, this was what he'd done in the army for cavalry men. He didn't see much difference in doing it for her.

Now that he'd gotten the hang of things, the two of them didn't need to speak much to each other. She wrote in chalk on the dark wall which horses needed things done with their feet or fencing that needed repaired, and Abraham would just do those things. The quiet between them was comfortable and amicable, but he knew that would need to change if he had any hope in wooing her.

The thought of that made his heart race and his palms a bit sweaty. At first, he'd thought of Miss Cahill as a means to an end. That he could use her to achieve his dreams. But as they'd gotten to know each other over the last several days, his affection for her had grown.

They were kindred spirits. She seemed to prefer animals over the people as well, and showed the animals in her care respect, even as she gave them boundaries. The horses respected her as boss mare, and rightly so. In every situation when it came to the livery, Miss Cahill had control of what happened and when. In the house, it was a different story. There, her aunt, Ms. Penelope had control, and Miss Cahill seemed to willingly hand over the reins there.

Abraham had no intention of upsetting the balance in either situation. He did what he could instead to make both of their jobs easier.

"How is the bunny doing?" Miss Cahill asked when he took hold of her horse's reins to untack him.

But it caught him by surprise, and for a moment he stumbled to find an answer while he removed the horse's saddle. "She's doing well. Moving around the box and getting more comfortable in her environment, and though she nibbles at the alfalfa hay and oats that I put there, she prefers your aunt's vegetables, for certain."

"She? Have you determined that she's female then?"

"Oh," he said, rubbing the horse down as his cheeks heated. "No, I honestly don't know, but she just looks like a female to me, and I didn't want to keep referring to her as an it."

She nodded, the smallest of smiles reaching her lips. When Miss Cahill was done riding and at this time of day, her eyes seemed to hold onto less concern, her

shoulders were relaxed, and she seemed happier with the world. Sometimes, in the mornings when there was much to be done, or when a group of soldiers used the livery overnight and there were many horses to care for, Miss Cahill would become downright surly herself. Abraham remembered when that term could be used to describe him, but since he'd been in Tonganoxie, he'd become much more serene and hadn't lost his temper at all. Maybe it was because he'd been abiding in the Lord, but maybe it was also because Miss Cahill put herself as a buffer between the customers and his work. Perhaps that was one of the reasons he could keep his peace so well since he'd come to town.

"Would you like to see her?" he asked as he put the horse away in his stall and hung the halter on the hook by the door.

Her eyes lit up as she smiled wider and nodded.

Holding up a finger, he gestured for her to wait and then he made his way up the ladder quickly. After taking hold of the crate, he lowered himself back down to the aisle of the barn. He found her eyeing the ladder upon his descent.

"You fixed the third rung."

He nodded. "I did that on my first day here."

"Oh," she said, her cheeks pinking a little. "I hadn't noticed."

"That's all right. You don't have much need to go up the ladder any longer." Then he thought about her going up the ladder with him there and it made his own cheeks heat. For a moment, neither of them seemed able to look at each other.

Then she cleared her throat. "So, the bunny is in the crate?"



“Yes,” he said, pulling the crate in front of him and allowing her to peer in. The bunny was nibbling at the handful of alfalfa that he had put in there earlier that morning. “She’s a bit spry so I can’t really handle her anymore. She doesn’t like to sit still in my hands and tries to slip out. I imagine it won’t be more than a few weeks before she’s ready to be loose in the wild again.”

Miss Cahill blinked up at him. “She’s already grown too, and it’s only been a few days.”

“I thought she might have, but I see her every day, so I wasn’t certain.”

“I’d say she’s almost a third bigger than she was before. She probably won’t fit in the palm of your hand like she could before.”

He huffed a laugh. “You’re probably right there. She’s definitely longer than my palm.”

Reaching in with her fingers, Miss Cahill gave the bunny a couple of strokes on the top of its head. The bunny flinched at her touch at first, but then settled in and continued to nibble at the hay, seemingly not to care about the pats. “She’s much calmer than she was before. You’ve done well by her.”

Unsure how to respond, Abraham didn’t say anything. He was unused to receiving praise of any kind and felt that it might make things more awkward if he thanked her. Still, his cheeks heated more. The light from the sun was dwindling, casting them both in a golden glow that came through the front door of the barn. It highlighted Miss Cahill’s hair and made it seem as though she had a halo. The light around her gave her an angelic appearance, and Abraham was struck with a bit of awe. There were moments like this when it seemed that there was no more beautiful woman on Earth, and he wondered how he could even be in her presence like this, much less being expected to woo her and make her think of marrying him? Would that even be

possible? Was he even worthy of such a task?

She stepped to the side and took hold of the saddle that was still on the holder outside the door of the stall. Then she started toward the tack room. "I'll lock up down here if you want to put her away. Penelope will be coming down to the barn shortly to see where we are if we don't get moving to join her for dinner."

"Right," he said, coming out of his thoughts, but his heart still raced in his chest. "I'll put her away."

"Have you given her a name?" she asked as he started up the ladder.

"No, not yet," he called down as he put the crate back in the space by his pallet. Then he came back down the ladder and found her waiting there for him. "I haven't given it much thought."

"I was thinking we should," she said as they both made their way out of the barn, swinging the doors shut and latching them afterwards. "Something like Penny."

He lifted a brow. "Are you naming her after your aunt?"

She shrugged as they walked along the path between the barn and the house. "Why not? If we want the bunny to be strong and resilient, and too stubborn to fail, Penelope is a good name. Penny for short, of course, so we know we're referring to the rabbit and not the human."

"All right then," he said with a nod as they approached the front porch of the house. "Penny it is."

After kicking off their boots and removing them, they made their way inside for supper.

### CHAPTER 9

A nother week passed, and Sadie was getting used to having Abraham help her around the barn and with all of the extra work that she'd been doing on her own. He was kind, quiet, and didn't question her when she gave him a list of things to do. She'd noticed him humming the hymns that they'd sung in church the Sunday before, and often would see him with his head bowed as though he were praying throughout the day. And after the time they'd been spending together, Sadie was beginning to believe that perhaps this man was the genuine article, after all. Perhaps she'd been wrong before about thinking that it could all be an act of some kind. He was leading her to believe that it was actually possible for a man—a blacksmith in particular—to be honorable.

Then he started doing things that she didn't ask him to do. When she was between riding horses, he'd take one from her and untack it while she got the next one ready. It was making her mornings and evenings more efficient, and she was able to make it to Penelope's suppers in time at sunset. That made it so that she and her aunt were getting along a little better. But maybe it was also just his presence at their supper table. Penelope still seemed to be on her best behavior in the presence of company.

But was he still considered company? He'd been taking his meals with them and living in their hayloft for coming up on two weeks. This was fine for now, but how long could it last like this? In the summer, the hayloft was a fine place to sleep, but what would happen come winter? Could they really expect him to stay warm up there under blankets? He couldn't have a stove or a fire in the place where they stored hay. She wasn't certain with the plans were for the man when the weather turned colder, but she didn't really want to think on it either. For now, she was happy to accept help

from him through the month or season, or how ever long he would choose to stay.

“Hello,” a deep male voice called into the barn.

Sadie had just finished the three training sessions she had that morning with the sale horses and was getting the wheelbarrow ready to start cleaning stalls. Abraham was out in the paddock fixing a board that had come down, and Penelope had walked down to the general store to get a few supplies. Unsure who it might be that would be coming in so late in the morning, she stepped out of the tack room with her pitchfork, pasted on a smile and called back, “Hello. How can I help you?”

The man lifted a brow as he pulled off his leather gloves. “Is the man that runs this livery around here somewhere? I have a lame horse that I need him to look after. Pretty sure he has a hot nail.”

Funny how quickly her fake smile could turn into frown. “A hot nail?”

He man looked her up and down with disdain, likely because she was wearing her overall dungarees again. With a huff and a wave of his hand, he sneered. “The livery owner, if you please?”

Sadie’s patience wore thin. “You’re talking to her, mister...”

He glared at her, his brow wrinkled and sneer unchanged. “Collins. I’m Harvey Collins. And the horse I’m referring to is the gelding on the right attached to the private coach outside.”

Even though she wanted to tell this man to take his sneers and disdain elsewhere, she couldn’t just leave a lame horse in the man’s hands. She stepped around him as she pulled off her own gloves and headed outside. The man stood where he was but turned to keep his eye on her. She could feel his glare continue to bore into her as she

stepped up to the pair of dark bay geldings. The one on the right that he was referring to paw the ground with impatience.

“Easy there,” Sadie said as she offered the gelding her hand to sniff. Immediately, she noticed that the horse’s neck and was held in an awkward position by an overcheck rein. After running a hand down the horse’s neck, she noticed that he his skin flinched at her touch, and he had obvious soreness in his back. Frowning, she ran a hand down the horse’s shoulder and asked him to pick up his left front leg.

“It’s his right front,” the man said in his nasal voice. “He’s been favoring it ever since we left Lawrence, and that Curtis fellow reset his shoes.”

At the mention of Joe Curtis’s name, Sadie’s stomach twisted. Her frown deepening, she shook her head and checked the foot which seemed to be fine before running her hoof testers along the sole and nails and finding no issues.

“I told you, it’s the other foot,” the man said, crossing his arms over his chest.

Nodding, she moved to the other side of the horse. When she touched the horse’s neck and shoulder this time, the horse swished his tail and pinned his ears and then ground its teeth aggressively. “Is this how your horse usually behaves?”

“Of course not. It’s the reason I said that he has a hot nail.”

“Has he shown lameness in this leg then?”

Releasing a sigh the man asked, “Where is the farrier? I really don’t want to be discussing this twice. It’d be much easier if I just told him the issue from the start.”

Ignoring the man, she ran her hand down the horse’s leg. After yanking up the leg in response, the horse then proceeded to attempt to slam it back down again, but she

held firmly to it and growled at the horse to let it know that she would not accept bad behavior. The horse swished his tail again but relaxed through the leg, allowing her to hold it. She checked the nails with the hoof tester and found no anomalies there, either. As she put the horse's foot down and straightened, she asked, "What do you feed him?"

The man's jaw dropped a little as if he was in awe of the question. Then it snapped shut as his indignation returned. "What kind of question is that? I don't see how what I feed him has to do with a hot nail."

"Mr. Collins, your horse's problem isn't a hot nail. Although Mr. Curtis and I do not get along personally, he is a professional who does an excellent job as a blacksmith and farrier. He's not likely to hot nail your horse, and your horse didn't flinch once from the pressure of the hoof testers that I just used on the nails."

Finally, the man grew quiet, his brow furrowed. "That doesn't make any sense. What is the horse's problem then?"

"What does his diet consist of?"

"Oats and corn, just like any other carriage horse."

"What sort of grass or hay is he offered?"

"He's normally on the road from morning to evening and stays at the livery in whatever town I'm in—like Lawrence or Kansas City. Because he's exercising throughout the day, I see no need to give him additional turnout at night."

"He's stall kept then? Given hay?"

"Of course, only the finest alfalfa."

“How much?”

The man shrugged. “How would I know? Whatever the livery men give him.”

Sadie frowned. If the man didn’t specify how much hay to give the horse, many livery owners will either short the amount or give the smallest amount possible. Because their care of the horse is short-lived, they don’t worry about whether the horse will lose weight in their care. “I believe your horse may be suffering from ulcers.”

“Ulcers? What are you talking about?”

“If a horse lives in a high stress, high work environment, where they are given most of their daily ration in grain instead of hay or grass, they spend too many hours in a day with their stomach empty. If you watch how horses behave in the wild or on their own, they eat a little at the time all day. This means that their stomachs are constantly in use. If you allow their stomach to be empty too often and for too long, they will develop ulcers.”

“A horse with peptic ulcers? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

She nodded and then worked to remove the horse’s overcheck rein. “Just like with humans who have peptic ulcers, horses need to have stress alleviation. Rest would be good, if possible, but I understand that it’s not for most working horses, like this one.”

The man huffed a mirthless laugh. “No, I don’t have another horse to spare in order to give this one a rest. What are you doing?”

“This overcheck rein is a stressor. It causes undue anxiety in many horses to have to hold their head this high and to not be allowed to lower it to keep their balance.”

The moment the rein was removed, the horse relaxed along its neck and back and lowered its head by more than a foot.

“That’s preposterous. How can I run a successful carriage business if my horses look as though they should be pulling a plow instead of a carriage for high-end business clients who want the privacy afforded by having a coach on their own?”

Ignoring the man again, Sadie made her way to the other horse and released the check rein. The second horse also dropped his head several inches as he relaxed.

The man growled. “You should stop what you’re doing.”

Turning toward the man, she growled back and stepped toward him, pointing aggressively. “You should stop what you’re doing. These are live beings, animals to be sure, but they feel pain. But they will work their hardest for someone who cares for them at least an inkling and even die trying to work hard for someone who doesn’t care at all. You should count it a blessing that this horse is still able to work at all in his present condition. If it continues, he will grow worse and if you continue to ignore his warnings, he will become unruly, get branded a rouge and likely be shot. But you, sir,” she said, poking the man in the chest with her finger. “You, sir, have the power to stop this right now and keep him from ever getting to that point. It starts with getting rid of this stupid overcheck rein.” She dropped the leather straps to the ground and stepped on them. “And then you can cut the corn out of these horses’ diets. Switch to oats and wheat middlings or chopped alfalfa. This will allow you to feed greater quantities, and it’s cheaper, anyway. Then you will get a couple of feed bags. Whenever you stop in a town to allow your passengers a break to stretch their legs, you will attach feedbags to your horses and let them graze. This will help them to relieve stress and to keep their bellies from being empty all of the time.”

The man sneered at her, his hands fisted as he dropped them to his sides. “And just who are you to tell me what to do? You’re a girl of barely twenty, if that. I want to



“speak to your blacksmith. Now.”

To their side, a deep voice cleared his throat. Both of them snapped their heads in that direction and found Mr. Abraham Thomas standing there with his own arms crossed over his chest and his farrier's apron on. Sadie's heart skipped a beat. She'd never seen him glare at anyone so hard and with such a malevolent expression. As soft as he seemed to always be when he looked at her or while he was working with the horses or even with the bunny, she'd never thought him capable of looking like this. He almost seemed like a different person.

“About time!” Mr. Collins cried, throwing his hands in the air in exasperation. “Could you please take a look at my horse. He has a hot nail, and this... this woman has been trying to convince me otherwise.”

Mr. Thomas didn't move a muscle, but remained where he stood, looking as immovable as a mountain. And the glare he had remained fixed on Mr. Collins as the stretch of silence grew between the two of them. Then finally, he said, “Your horse has ulcers. You need to get rid of the overcheck rein and the corn in his diet. Then you need to find a way to allow your horse to graze as much as possible, even if it's on oat and wheat middlings or chopped alfalfa. It won't be long before you see your horse improve.”

Opening and closing his mouth like a fish on dry land, Mr. Collins deflated under Mr. Thomas's continued glare.

“And I'll offer you another piece of advice. Miss Sadie Cahill is the owner and proprietor of the livery here in Tonganoxie. She has been raised her entire life, and trained up by the great blacksmith, Gerald Cahill to become an amazing horseman, just like her father. If she tells you what's wrong with your horse, you'd do best to listen. And if you do as she prescribes and the horse's illness doesn't improve, then I will buy the horse from you for twice what it's worth.”

Sadie's heart leapt to her throat, and she couldn't take her eyes off of the man standing in front of her. If she'd been honest with herself, she'd have realized that her affection for the man had been growing exponentially since the first day that they'd met. But in this moment, he proved that he believed her. Believed in her. And it was something that she'd been missing for far too long. A puzzle piece within her clicked into place and she could see for the first time that it was something that she hadn't been able to live without as well as she'd thought. She needed this kind of reassurance. It wasn't just that Mr. Thomas was a kind man. He was also strong, but willing to be humble for her sake. To show her respect and recognition for her knowledge and talents. In a world where everyone wanted to discredit her immediately because she wasn't a man and she wasn't older, Mr. Thomas gave her the appreciation that her post deserved.

And suddenly she felt as though she wasn't worthy of it. She'd fought so long for this sort of acknowledgment, that now that she had it, fear overtook her. "You can't do that," she said suddenly feeling as though she needed to stop him from making a mistake. What if she was wrong? What if Mr. Thomas was forced to buy the horse at twice its value?

He looked over toward her, and his face instantly softened. The malice he had in his glare a moment before had disappeared. The softest of smiles tugged at his lip, and she felt some of her fear melt away with just that look. Then he asked, "Do you think it's possible that the horse has a hot nail?"

She shook her head, a lump forming in her throat.

"How certain are you that the horse has ulcers?" he asked, his reassuring smile growing just a little wider.

After swallowing down the lump in her throat, she said, "I'm very certain. I'm positive."

“Then my offer stands,” he said softly to her and then he turned again toward Mr. Collins, the hard look to his glare returning as he said in a deeper, more direct voice, “My offer stands.”

The man looked back and forth between the two of them and then shook his head. “Fine. I’ll be back through here next week. If the horse doesn’t show improvement, I’ll expect you to buy him for twice the price... and replace him with another animal of similar stature and value.”

Feeling more confident, Sadie turned on the man herself. “Fine. I will replace your horse as well.”

The man nodded firmly, offering a hand toward Mr. Thomas to shake on the deal. Mr. Thomas looked as though he’d rather wrestle a rattlesnake than take the man’s offered hand, but he took it and shook it with gumption.

Then the man turned toward her. “I suppose that we should shake on this too, since you’re the one offering me a replacement horse.”

“I am,” she said as she took the man’s hand and squeezed it firmly. “But you need to follow my directions to the letter. No overcheck rein, no corn. Use feedbags and often. And let the horse out in a paddock overnight instead of a stall.”

“You didn’t say that before,” he said, his brow furrowing.

“Do you have a problem with that one?” Mr. Thomas asked.

Mr. Collins’ lips drew thin. “No, I suppose not.”

“Also,” she added. “If you’d like his stomach to settle faster, you can see the apothecary about getting him some chamomile and liquorish root crushed into a

powder and put it in his feed.”

Shaking his head the man picked up his overcheck reins from the ground and threw them up into the driver’s seat of his carriage. “I’m going to go while the getting’s good. If I stay here any longer, you’ll add ten more stipulations, I’m sure.”

Then he mounted his carriage and reined them away. Even though the horses picked up their heads momentarily, soon they dropped back down to a more comfortable height and they both trotted away sound. Sadie felt good about that much.

When Mr. Thomas stepped up next to her, she started feeling guilty again. “You didn’t have to offer to buy the man’s horse.”

He shrugged. “I did. If I hadn’t, the man would have continued to argue that he was right. Now he’s got an incentive to see if you’re wrong.”

“What if he doesn’t do as I said? What if he puts those overcheck reins back on those horses tomorrow?”

“Then he’s a fool, and I don’t think he is. He wore his pocket watch on a chain and had it in his vest pocket like a businessman or a banker. His hair was coiffed and his mustache well trimmed. He fancies himself a gentleman and wanted to shake hands on the deal. I think he’ll stick to his word and try everything you prescribed to see if it works. Part of him hopes it will so that he doesn’t have to replace his horse, even though it hurts his pride to admit you might be right.”

Sadie let out a slow breath. “I hope you’re right... I hope I’m right.”

“I’m certain that you are.”

Looking up at him in the late morning light, she marveled. “How can you be so

certain?”

After looking down at her, with that same soft expression that she was used to returning, he said, “I watched you check over the horse, and I heard everything you said. It all made sense to me with the way that the horse was acting. Also, I don’t think you would start an argument like that unless you believed what you said.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“There you go then,” he said as he returned his gaze to watching the carriage stop at the tavern down the main road.

Her heart swelled in her chest. She’d not had this kind of reassurance in her life since her father left three years ago. This man was proving to be someone she could trust and rely upon. Someone who would protect her and respect her, and even stand up for her when others disrespected her. And that had been missing from her life for such a long time. This affection that she’d been denying in her heart wouldn’t be denied any longer. She had to admit to herself that the feelings that she was developing for Mr. Thomas were much stronger than she’d allowed herself to believe. How could she get so attached to the man so quickly? What would happen if the man decided to move on from here and go elsewhere? It was possible. He was an adept farrier and blacksmith, and his services would be desired in just about any livery in any town out west. What would possess him to stay here?

The smallest inkling of fear pricked at her heart. Maybe she shouldn’t allow herself to become too attached. But maybe it was too late.

### CHAPTER 10

The next Friday midmorning, Abraham was helping Miss Cahill pony the four horses that she was taking to the summer fair and auction in Lawrence. Each of them rode one of the tried-and-true road horses that they rented to people who paid to borrow them by the day, while leading two of the younger horses for the sale behind them. As they drew nearer to the town, Miss Cahill's excitement seemed to be growing as she smiled wider and turned in the saddle toward him. "My father used to take me to the summer fair in Lawrence every year to sell a few of the colts that he bought the year before... or the year before that. He'd sell a few and buy a few. But during the war and after the devastation of the raid, they cancelled the fair for a few years. This year is the first one they'd had since the war was over, and everyone is hoping it will be a success like its glory days."

It was the most that she'd said to him with a smile on her face. His heart fluttered when she looked at him like that, and he couldn't help but smile back at her. Honestly, he couldn't remember smiling so much in years, maybe not since he'd gotten the letter that his mother had passed. A part of him felt guilty for being so happy, even after thinking about his dearly departed mother, but then another part of him could see his mother smiling down on him, glad to see him feeling something other than grief.

Ever since he'd arrived at Tonganoxie, he'd been at peace and the longer he stayed, that peace grew into something more. Genuine happiness. And it was all because of the woman riding next to him. The kinship that he'd felt with her from the beginning had grown into affection, and now he could barely glance at her without his heart beating harder against his breastbone. It had been weeks now since Ms. Penelope had

given him the directive to woo Miss Cahill, but he'd not figured out a way to do it. Even now, any time he thought about how he should go about doing such a thing, his mind went blank. Why had he been tasked with such an ordeal? Maybe Ms. Penelope would have done better to have chosen someone other than him to be Miss Cahill's intended.

The thought of that made his stomach twist. The very idea that another man could marry Miss Cahill made him tighten his hand into a fist. It wasn't that he grew angry at the thought, exactly, but frustrated at his own inability to woo a female. If there was ever a lady that he wanted to woo in his life, it was Miss Cahill. He didn't want another man to beat him to it, and he didn't want for her to love another.

Love?

Where did that thought come from? His face flushed. Would it really even be possible for Miss Cahill to love a man like him? Wounded. Worthless. Virtually penniless. Without a family or an inheritance of any kind. Swallowing hard, he swallowed back the grief that was rising up in him. A lady like her didn't deserve to be saddled with a surly, second-rate horseman like he was. How could he even think any differently. Maybe it would be best if he just informed Ms. Penelope that this was all a big mistake and took his leave.

But where would he go?

Guilt took hold of him. He had no where to go, and it was selfish of him to stay. Completely and utterly selfish. He knew that though he was of some help to Miss Cahill, perhaps there was another man out there who would be a better help to her? Perhaps, even though it would be difficult, it would be best if he left.

He'd been with the Cahills for the better part of a month. And in that time, he'd found a groove and gotten attached to... well actually to both of them in some ways. But it

wasn't right for him to keep taking up the space that might be a better fit for someone other than him. Maybe after the summer fair, he'd tell them both that it was time for him to go. Even though the thought made him a little bit sick to the stomach, he decided that it was the best action for him to take, and as Lawrence came into sight, he was determined to go ahead and do it.

With prayer, he asked God to help make him strong even though he was afraid to leave because he was unsure where to go. And that the Lord would give him the backbone he needed to tell the two ladies that it was time for him to move on. That was also going to be difficult.

"There it is," she said, turning to him again in the saddle and flashing that disarming smile. "Just stay close to me. The way is going to get busier the closer we get to the fair with everyone setting things up, so we need to get these colts chalked with numbers on their hips and then put in the sale corral before we can take Franny and Festus to the livery."

He nodded and kept close to her as they made their way down the main road. Lawrence was surprisingly much bigger than Tonganoxie. It was closer to the size of St. Joseph, with several businesses on both sides of the street, and several people promenading up and down the boardwalks in front of those businesses in some of their best attire. A buzz of excitement ran in the air, and Abraham could feel it coursing through him, too.

Once they got the colts registered and put in the sale corral, Miss Cahill was cranking her neck trying to get a good look at the other colts in the sale. Abraham could barely take his eyes off of her. When she was in this state of excitement, the joy and enthusiasm flooded off of her and made her glow. He didn't think it was possible, but she became even more beautiful, and he even found it more difficult to stop staring at her.



Her eyes sparkled when she looked his way again. “What do you think about the palomino colt over there?”

Barely able to tear his gaze away from hers, he spotted the horse she was referring to. “Hip 42?”

“Yes.”

“Seems like he has good bone, straight legs, good feet. His neck might be a little short.”

“Agreed. The feet and legs are most important, but he might be harder to sell if he’s not pretty, too. The color is a bonus.”

“Makes him flashy. But the color might make him bring a higher price here in the auction than he should get, because some will buy him just for his looks rather than his potential talent.”

She smiled wider. “You’re absolutely right. I haven’t had a good horse talk like this in quite a while. Father used to tell me all the negatives of the horses that I picked in the pen, too. It helps me to make a better decision when we would debate the different points and balance them out. I knew I was right in taking you to the sale instead of going alone. Even though Penelope told me that I should.”

He huffed a laugh as they both led the riding horses away from the sale pen and toward the livery nearby. “Since she suggested it, I imagined you didn’t want to do it?”

Laughing herself, she nodded and raised a brow toward him. “Am I becoming predictable to you now, Mr. Thomas? Dull and boring?”

“Hardly,” he said, shaking his head. “You are a pleasant surprise much more often than you are ordinary.”

Her eyes widened and her cheeks pinked before she shyly looked away. He swallowed hard. When she looked at him that way, the desire to take hold of her and pull her into his embrace became almost unbearable. But they were in public. And he wasn’t given permission to be that intimate with her. Neither did he deserve to get permission either. His heart sank at these thoughts.

But still, these thoughts continued to plague him as they paid for Franny and Festus to have a stall while they were attending the auction. Soon they returned to the sale pen. Miss Cahill pointed toward a smaller chestnut gelding with an old scar on its back leg. “That one might be worth looking at.”

He nodded. “Big feet, kind eye. His neck ties in really well to the shoulder.”

She turned to face him in surprise. “You really do have an eye for a good horse.”

“My commanding officer would talk to me about all the different horses that would come in for the Cavalry. Some horses were donated by ranchers and farmers nearby, but often we’d go to sales like this one and he would talk about those horses just like we are now.”

“Oh,” she said. “So you do have some experience with auctions.”

“A little.”

“Why didn’t you say so before?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t want to color your decision on whether to take me one way or the other.”

Shaking her head, she pouted at him, making his heart thump again. “But you telling me would have been a very good thing in this case. I didn’t want to burden you with the extra work and take up a whole day with something that you might not have wanted to do.”

“I’d always make time for things you want to do,” he said matter-of-factly.

### CHAPTER 11

Sadie gasped and blinked at Mr. Thomas, her heart thrumming in her chest at his words. How could he say something like that without it seeming to affect him in the same way that it did her? He wasn't even looking her direction, but at the horses and his profile didn't change. He was being honest with her, but saying something so charming and smooth, that if it came from another man's lips, she'd suspect them of pandering to her, patronizing her, or downright lying. The way he could be so honest with his feelings was refreshing and one of the reasons that she'd become so attached to him over the month that they'd spent together. Making this trip with him was something that she'd wanted to do even before her aunt suggested that she offer. Even though the two of them had to get up well before sunrise to take care of the barn chores and get on the road so that they could make it to Lawrence by mid-morning.

After they picked which of the colts that were the best for them to make bids on, they took a stroll around the fairgrounds and watched some of the townsfolk and visitors playing games and getting the different varieties of food and snacks available at the fair. She turned toward him as they neared one of the booths. "Before the sale, my father used to let me get a caramel apple. Have you ever tried one before?"

With a small smile and his intense blue-gray eyes fixed on her, he shook his head. "I've never had one. But aren't those for children?"

"Why should children be the only ones who get to have all the fun?" she asked, and then stepped up to the man operating the booth and ordered two. He nodded and gave her two green apples that had been dipped in gooey brown goodness on sticks. With a smile, she handed one to Mr. Thomas.

He eyed it, turning it in his hand. “How do you even get started?”

Smiling up at him, she took a bite of the apple at the widest part. As the candy-coating melt in her mouth, she chewed the tart and sweet combination down with the biggest of smiles as the memories washed over her. The smell of the caramel and the familiar taste could almost make her feel twelve years old again. Nostalgia had her in her grip, but it was a bittersweet feeling instead of the usual painful grief this time. It was because she wasn’t alone.

Loneliness felt more like a distant thing. When she was spending time with Mr. Thomas like this, it reminded her of her father. The two men were similar, but somehow not at all alike, either. Still, when she was with Mr. Thomas, she had similar feelings of safety, comfort, and kinship that she had with her father, and being at the fair brought those emotions out even stronger.

After watching her, Mr. Thomas took a bite of his caramel apple. When he pulled it back, she couldn’t help but laugh as he had an almost perfect circle of light brown around his mouth and stuck to his beard. His eyes looking confused, he asked, “What is it?”

She shook her head but couldn’t stop laughing as long as she was looking at him, so she turned away and pulled her handkerchief from her pocket. Then she asked the proprietor of the apple cart, “Could you wet this for me?”

The man nodded and then dunked the kerchief in the wide barrel nearby that was full of apples for the game of bobbing. Once he returned the kerchief, Sadie wrung it out a little and handed the moist napkin to Mr. Thomas with a gesture to let him know where to find the caramel spots on his beard.

He handed her his apple to hold in return, and his ears turned a little red as he worked to get the candy off. “The apple is delicious, but it makes quite a mess.”

While he was cleaning, she had asked the proprietor of the booth if he could cut the apple for her, which he did and then handed it to her in a clean napkin. She offered it to Mr. Thomas.

With a small sigh, he asked, “Why couldn’t I have gotten it this way the first time?”

“That wouldn’t have been much fun,” she said with a smile as she took another bite of her own apple. “You need to have the full experience, sticky beard and all.”

After popping a sliced piece of apple into his mouth he shook his head and pointed at the rest of the apple in his hand. “I like it this way much better.”

She shrugged, and then they made their way to the registration table where they got a number so that they could bid in the auction as well. A short while after they took their seats and finished their apples, a crowd gathered round, and more people filled the stands. Things were already getting excited as they drew closer to one in the afternoon, when the auction would begin. With nervous energy, Sadie’s knee had started bobbing.

When she finally noticed it, she pushed it down with her hand. Mr. Thomas watched her and laughed. “Does that work?”

“Sometimes,” she said with a smile.

Then the auction began. The first horse up for auction was always one chosen by the auctioneers as a horse that wasn’t likely to fetch a high price, but not the worst of the herd in the sale pen, either. This year they put up a mare and foal. It was a three-in-one package, with the mare rebred to the same stallion for a potential foal the next year. Sadie was always tempted by this sort of deal, but she knew that they didn’t have the kind of facility to work with foaling out mares and it would be difficult to pony the young foal all the way back to Tonganoxie, so she sat on her hands and let

the first lot in the auction go.

The second and third horses were high-stepping carriage quality horses that she had no interest in. The fourth lot was the buckskin pony that she put up for sale. Her knee started bobbing again, but this time, she didn't care to stop it. The auction company had put one of their own kids on the pony. A ten-year-old boy trotted the pony around the small auction arena and then cantered in circles, before showing that the pony had good breaks and would stop with just the smallest tug. Then the child proceeded to show how well broke the pony was by standing in the saddle and then sliding off the horse's rump before crawling under the buckskin. All while the well-trained pony stood perfectly still.

Sadie couldn't help but smile with pride as the auctioneer's chant rose and fell in his rhythmic style as he called bids, and the price of the pony rose well above what Sadie was hoping to get. This pony had been in her training for five years—since the last auction that she'd gone to with her father. They'd bought it as a yearling, and now at six, he was ready to become a child's horse. Though it would be difficult to make up for all the time and feed that they'd put into the buckskin pony all those years, there was a sense of accomplishment in getting a good price on the pony that she'd put so much effort into.

“Sold for a hundred and twelve fifty,” the auctioneer said and slammed down the gavel.

Sadie was more than pleased to get enough money out of the first horse's sale to likely pay for the two or three project horses she was hoping to go home with. She beamed.

Next up for bid was the chestnut gelding with the scar on his leg. Excited, Sadie readied her bidding paddle. The bidding started, and there were two bidders who seemed interested, but the price was still relatively low and evened out when the

horse reached twenty-two dollars. And once it evened out, Sadie knew that was the best time to jump in and start bidding. She raised her paddle at the auctioneer's next call. Then it turned out that she'd only needed to bid two dollars and fifty cents more and got the project horse for much less than she'd already set as her maximum bid beforehand.

All three of her other colts brought good prices, since they were some of the best broke horses in the sale, and she knew she'd be going home with enough money to help them stock up with hay and grain for the winter. The auction house did a great job of showing her horses off, in her opinion, since they'd decided to even show how a cowboy could rope and lasso off her bay mare, when she didn't even train the horse to tolerate that. The bay mare didn't really surprise Sadie, though, since she'd always been sensible and fearless.

Afterward, she'd also bought a second chestnut gelding, this one a little taller than the first and a year older. It hadn't been broke yet, but she wasn't worried about its lack of training since it was by the same stallion as Festus, one of her riding horses, and she knew that the temperament on the geldings from that bloodline were very trainable.

As the auction was nearing the end, the palomino came up for sale. Because she had so much money left over, Sadie decided that even though the palomino was likely to reach a price that she'd not wanted to pay originally, it was within her budget to buy the fancy thing after all. When the bidding started, she waited for her lull and then lifted her paddle. Even though the golden colored colt wasn't even two years old yet, the price was reaching fifty dollars.

Then another bid across the way was called out, and she lifted her paddle again to denote her continued interest in buying the colt. When it was matched again across the way, she decided to search to see who the person she was bidding with might be. To her surprise, it was Joe Curtis. He flashed her a sinister smile as soon as they met



eyes with each other. Without even looking toward the bid caller, Sadie lifted her paddle, glaring at her former blacksmith.

His grin widened as he lifted his own.

This continued for about five more bids until Sadie felt a gentle hand on her arm. She turned and looked into those concerned blue-gray eyes that made the disdain that she'd felt a moment before disappear. He asked, "Are you sure you want to be bidding so high for that colt?"

His question brought her to her senses as she realized that the bidding was reaching the seventy-five dollar mark. What was she doing? She couldn't afford to spend that much on an unbroke colt. But when she peered back over toward Joe Curtis, she was tempted to raise her paddle again. Her knee started bobbing as the auctioneer was wrapping up the bids.

"Are you all right?" Mr. Thomas's calming, deep voice asked.

When she pulled her gaze away from Joe Curtis's patronizing smile, she found Mr. Thomas's caring, attentive gaze still fixed on her. And slowly, her leg stopped bobbing. It didn't matter. She didn't need the palomino colt, and she didn't need to win the bidding war with Joe Curtis. After letting out a slow breath, she nodded toward him and offered him a reassuring smile. "I'm all right."

And then the auctioneer's hammer hit the block, and he said, "Sold for seventy-three dollars and fifty cents."

Relief flooded over her much more than the tinge of regret that pricked at her. "That was a lot more than that colt was worth getting, especially as a resale project."

Mr. Thomas nodded, smiling back at her. "I think you made the right decision to

stop.”

“My father always said that if you don’t think that you’re going to get at least three times what you’re bidding on the horse in the next auction after a year of training, then you shouldn’t go any higher. I’m not so sure that when that horse is finished it would go for over two hundred dollars next year.”

“If he had a longer neck and everything in his training went perfectly so that he became like the buckskin pony, it might be possible,” he said with a shrug.

“But that’s a lot of ‘ifs’ and it took me five years to make the buckskin gelding as broke as he was.”

He huffed a laugh as he nodded. “That’s highly unlikely then.”

“Thank you for stopping me,” she said as she rested her hand lightly on his.

The touch of his warm soft skin on the top of his hand made goosebumps rise on her arms and a tingle surge through her whole body. She realized how forward she was being and immediately pulled her hand back. Her cheeks heated and she turned away. Once she’d taken a few minutes and caught her breath, she chanced a glance toward Mr. Thomas. He sat more stiffly than before and had turned away from her slightly as well. She’d obviously made him feel uncomfortable. She was unsure how to apologize and make things right.

But then they called the auction to an end, and most everyone in the stands drew to their feet. The both of them did as well. It was nearly four in the afternoon by the end of the auction, and her stomach grumbled. The caramel apple definitely wasn’t enough to satisfy them for all that they were doing that day. Somehow, it seemed that Mr. Thomas read her mind. He met eyes with her and said, “I saw that one of the carts was selling stew. If you’d like some, I’ll get us a couple of bowls and then meet

you by sale horses?”

“All right,” she said, glad that his attitude toward her had remained unchanged after her faux pas. “I need to settle up with the auctioneer company while you do that.”

Nodding, he offered her a small smile and then shoved his hands in his pockets as he went in the direction of the food carts, and she started in the other direction. After she finished settling up, she headed down a row behind the tents toward the sale pen where she’d catch up with Mr. Thomas. She wondered if it was wrong for her to be developing such strong feelings for her new blacksmith. He seemed to have no interest in her in the same manner, and why should he? She was hardly a lady—running around in dungarees and bossing him around all the time. What would a man find attractive about that?

She didn’t even attempt to do her hair in the latest styles or to do makeup the way other girls her age did. Fancy dresses and finery were far from her wardrobe. If she wore a hat, it was wide brimmed and made of straw and used to belong to her father. Feathers and bows and trim didn’t adorn it either. There wasn’t much of anything about the way that she did things that was ladylike. And yet a part of her was willing to give those things a try if they would pique Mr. Thomas’s interest.

Her heart fluttered at the thought.

“Oh, now hey there, Missy,” a deep voice said as a man sidled up behind her.

Her shoulders eked up toward her ears as her back tensed at the sound of the familiar baritone. As she turned around to face Joe Curtis, she fought back the scowl that she wanted to give him and cultivated a bored expression. “I don’t know who you’re calling ‘Missy,’” she said as she put her hands on her hips.

He hiked up a brow as he offered a sardonic smile. “You were interested in that

palomino colt, huh? He's a handsome one. I bet he's going to make a great riding horse. Maybe I'll even ride him back and forth to Tonganoxie occasionally when I come down to visit Magdalene Bury's Tavern."

"You do that." She fought not to roll her eyes as she turned back around.

He put a hand on her shoulder and kept her from facing away from him. "Or I might be interested if you were to make an offer for him. He could be available for the right price."

Then his hand ran down her arm in a gentle but lurid fashion to her elbow.

She pulled her arm out of his grip. "That's all right. I already bought two good colts to take home."

His sneer returned. "The chestnut with the bum leg?"

"It's just an old scar."

"And that older one that Kenny should have been broke a year ago?"

"Kenny Nelson had an injury during last year's harvest. It's understandable that he didn't have the inclination to break a colt. Chances are that the colt will be even more sensible having had more time to mature."

Joe huffed a laugh. "Sounds like a bunch of excuses to me. I don't see why you didn't buy something fancier."

"Pretty is as pretty does. When you own a livery, you don't need flashy horses to do the job."

“If you say so,” he said with a shrug.

When she went to turn away from him again, he took hold of her arm, this time his grip was a little tighter. “What’s wrong with you?”

Frowning, she tried to pull from his grip but he tightened it more. “Unhand me.”

He shook his head, his glare sharpening. “Not until you make me understand why you would rather shoe your own horses than be a little nicer to me. Why you invite a stranger to come live in your barn and eat in your house when you didn’t even offer me dinner even once while I was helping you out for all those years. What’s wrong with you?”

His fingers were digging into Sadie’s skin, and she didn’t like the threatening tone of his question. “I’ll ask you again, Joe. Unhand me before we both do something we regret.”

Huffing a laugh, he tightened his grip so that it caused her a bit of pain and she thought she might bruise. Then he leaned in closer to her. “I regret not taking you up into that hayloft one of those times when we were alone in the barn together. We could have had quite a roll in the—”

There was a cracking sound in the air and the palm of her free hand stung. She’d slapped him. Without even a thought, her hand moved of its own accord. She’d been so shocked by her own action that when his grip loosened on her elbow, she stood there slack jawed instead of pulling away.

Joe’s cheek was already turning red where she’d struck him. And his eyes which had been surprised a moment before turned icy cold as he looked down on her with more venom than she’d ever seen in them before. He took hold of her lower arm and started marching away, dragging her behind him.

“Stop! What are you doing?” She stumbled after him, afraid she’d fall on her face if she didn’t. “Where are you taking me?”

He didn’t say a word and kept marching.

She looked ahead in fear and saw that they were heading to an even more secluded area away from the bustle of the crowds and toward an alley at the back of the businesses there in Lawrence. Dread came over her. No one would know where she’d gone. Mr. Thomas wasn’t going to be able to find her. Planting her feet, she tried to stop herself, but he yanked her harder and she stumbled forward again.

“Stop,” she cried again, but her voice was getting weaker as fear was overcoming her. “You have no right to treat me like this!”

That made him stop and turn around, his face twisted in indignation. “You think you can just strike me with no repercussions? Since your father’s not around to teach you some manners and common courtesy, I guess it’s up to me. I should have done this a long time ago.”

What did he mean? Her heart and leapt to her throat and fear was overcoming her. She’d never been comfortable around Joe Curtis and now she felt much worse. He shoved her against the wall of a building and put a hand on her neck. When she swallowed, his grip on her tightened. She tried to fight him off with her fists, but he took the arm he had and yanked it over her head. Then he brought his face close to hers and she could smell the alcohol on his breath. Bile rose up the back of her throat. He ran his nose up her cheek and she tried to flinch away, but he squeezed his fingers on her throat.

“I can’t breathe,” she squeaked hoarsely, “let me go.”

He chuckled. “Some saloon girls like when you do it like this.”

Saloon girls? What did he mean? Her mind raced in several directions and none of them were good. Fear was overcoming her, and she tried to fight him off again to no avail. He was too strong. What would she do? She couldn't scream and with him pressed against her like this, she couldn't escape. He brought his face closer to hers, and she closed her eyes and tried to turn her face away. And she prayed that the Lord would help her.

And suddenly he was gone.

Doubling over, she coughed now that she could get air through her throat. Her eyes watered and her vision blurred. Through her blurred sight, she found shadows struggling against one another. She heard a growl, someone cried out and something cracked. Swiping away at her tears, she straightened and found a hulking form hovering over Joe with a knee on his back. "Get off of me," Joe grunted.

And then the man on Joe's back turned toward her, his blue-grey eyes fixing on hers with worry filling them. "Are you all right?"

Her throat tightened. It was Mr. Thomas. He found her. Two bowls full of stew lay crashed upon the ground in the alley a several feet away. She nodded to him and her voice cracked as she said, "I am."

"Get off of me!"

Instead of releasing the man under him, Mr. Thomas leaned forward, allowing his knee to grind into Joe's back and making the man groan in pain. Still, his gaze remained fixed upon her's. "Do you want to fetch the police?"

She shook her head. "No. It's all right."

Frowning, he finally looked from her to the man underneath him. "I am only keeping

you trapped for as long as you kept my intended. If you apologize to her and to me, I may release you sooner.”

“Intended?” Joe asked at the same time as Sadie thought it.

Her heart raced and butterflies launched in her stomach.

“Why else would a man be living with her, and her aunt as chaperone?” Abraham answered, “And that doesn’t sound like an apology.”

“You’re right,” Joe said, the anger in his voice dissipating. “I apologize. I didn’t realize that she was spoken for.”

Mr. Thomas stood, releasing Joe from where he’d been pinned. Slowly Joe stood, rubbing his jaw and rotating his shoulder. Mr. Thomas continued to glare at the man. “Even if she weren’t spoken for, you had no right to treat a lady in such a manner. Violence against the fairer sex is only showing weakness of the mind and spirit. Ask the Lord to help you overcome your temptations.”

Joe Curtis blinked at him, his face coloring as though he’d not been expecting to be rebuked in such a manner. Then his expression softened and he looked truly repentant. “I... I struggle against my temptations. I’m ashamed of the fact that I lose my temper and ability to control my anger.”

Nodding, Abraham said, “Alcohol is not an angry man’s friend. The Bible says to that there’s nothing wrong with anger, but it can cause us to sin if we let it take hold of us. We have to keep it under control. But drinking spirits can cloud our judgment and sense of right and wrong.”

Joe’s shoulders fell. “I didn’t know you were a preacher.”



Mr. Thomas shook his head. "I'm not. But any man can read the Bible for himself and study God's word."

His brow furrowed, Joe looked up at him. "You do that?"

Nodding, Mr. Thomas said, "Everyday."

After a moment of silence, Mr. Thomas stepped forward and set a hand on Joe's shoulder. And then he prayed for him. Surprised, Sadie bowed her head, too. She listened to the words he said and agreed with them in her spirit. It amazed her that a moment ago, Joe had been threatening her, and then Mr. Thomas had fought with him, and now they were praying together, and Joe seemed almost like a different person. The way things turned out were not what she'd expected when she first ran into him in the back of the tents. But she didn't mind.

Mr. Thomas was turning out to be every bit as honorable as his letters had promised. She'd noticed it more and more as she'd gotten to know him. He was the genuine article and not just putting on an act. The longer that they'd gotten to know each other the more certain she'd become and now she wanted to know what he meant about what he said earlier. Was he lying then?

### CHAPTER 12

“A men,” Abraham said and lifted his head.

The man he'd been praying for lifted his head as well, but his cheeks were wet with tears. He grabbed hold of Abraham's hand in both of his. “Thank you so much. I'm so sorry for the trouble I've caused you. You're Mr. Thomas, right?”

Shaking his head, he told the man, “Please, it's just Abraham. Abraham Thomas.”

The man nodded, shaking the hand that he held. “It's a pleasure to meet you. Please call me Joe. Joe Curtis.”

His brow quirked a bit at the mention of the name. This was the former blacksmith who'd been helping the Cahill family before Abraham had come. Although he didn't know the exact details of what had made that arrangement end. He'd gathered from the few scraps of conversation the two ladies had had about the man that Joe wasn't a very good or honest man. Today he'd also proven to be violent and troubled. “Well, Joe. I'm satisfied with your apology to me, but it's really someone else who you should make amends with.”

“You're right,” he said as he turned toward Miss Cahill. “Please forgive me, Sadie. I promise that I'll never lay a hand on you again.”

Miss Cahill nodded, her hand still fluttering at her throat.

There were all kinds of emotions running through Abraham in that moment. That the

man would have the gall to call Miss Cahill by her first name made him envious. When she reached for her throat and Abraham was reminded of the scene he'd stumbled upon, anger surged within him and he wanted to throttle the man who stood in front of him. But he knew that these emotions he needed to keep under control. Not his, but God's. Because if it was up to Abraham to control any of this situation, he'd just as soon beat the tar out of Joe instead of praying for him. But as he let out a long breath, praying to stay calm, he felt at peace with how things were turning out.

However, he knew he would feel better the further this man got away from Miss Cahill.

Bowing to both of them and apologizing again, Joe Curtis finally turned on his heel and walked away. And Abraham was right, the tension was leaving him as the man left. And after a moment, he and Miss Cahill stood alone in the alley way. He turned to her. "Are you certain you're all right?"

Her green eyes met his, her piercing gaze penetrating him right down to the soul, and his heart beat harder at its intensity. Then she asked, "What did you mean by what you said?"

Confused he shook his head. "I'm not sure what you're referring to."

"Your intended. That's what you called me."

"Oh," he said, dropping his gaze and rubbing the back of his neck.

"Well? What did you mean by that?"

"I... You... Your aunt—"

"My aunt?"

“Your aunt told me to woo you. She wants us to be wed,” he offered as an excuse, finally looking up, and what he saw made his heart drop to the pit of his stomach.

There was pain in her eyes, hurt there as her gaze wavered and then fell. “Oh...”

Was she hurt by his excuse—his lie of omission? “No, that’s not what I mean. You’re not my intended because your aunt wants us to be wed. I want us to be wed.”

Her gaze snapped back up again the emotions swirling within her eyes. “You do?”

Slowly he nodded. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for things to be like this. It’s true that your aunt wanted me to woo you, but I wasn’t sure how to go about that. And the more time I spent with you, the more I wanted to do as she suggested. I wanted to somehow convince you that perhaps we should court and be married. But I was afraid. Afraid that you would reject my affection. Afraid that you would turn me away. I... I would rather have never tried to woo you at all and remain as we are then ruin what we now have. I shouldn’t have told that man who attacked you that you were my intended when you never gave me permission to do so. I felt that he would have more respect for what he’d done if he knew the offense he’d committed wasn’t just against you but against me, too. Still, I shouldn’t have done it. I ask for your forgiveness and will not say anything like that again, Miss Cahill.”

“No,” she said firmly. “I hate that you call me that.”

His breath caught and he suddenly couldn’t breathe. She hated him.

“Don’t call me that again.”

As his heart continued to break, he nodded and looked down. “I’d never call you my intended again. I’m sorry.”

“No,” she said again. “Not that. You can call me that. I don’t want you to call me Miss Cahill again.”

Confused, he looked up, unsure what to say or ask her, but hope was sparking in his core. “You... you give me permission to call you my intended.”

She nodded. “And it’s Sadie. Not Miss Cahill.”

“Sadie,” he whispered, still feeling unsure.

“And I want you to know that you’ve already succeeded.”

“Succeeded?” he asked.

“You’ve already wooed me. You did it with your kindness and your strength and your humility and your respect. Every day you made it harder for me to resist you and each moment that you spent with me, I craved more. You... you made me desire for you to call me your intended and I, too, want us to be wed.”

His eyes widened as he stepped closer to her. “Do you mean it?”

She nodded.

Reaching out, he touched her cheek lightly and she leaned into his hand. His heart thundered in his chest and the desire to embrace her came upon him again.

“I love you,” she whispered and closed her eyes.

Suddenly the pain in his chest as his heart grew wild made him put a hand against it. He pulled away from her cheek, causing her eyes to snap open. He shook his head and backed away. “We need to get out of here. We need to get back on those horses

and back to Tonganoxie.”

She blinked at him. “What do you mean, Abraham?”

His heart leapt. “I can’t be with you alone like this right now. It’s driving me crazy. Let’s get back home and hurry and get married. If you tell me you love me again like that... if you say my name like that, my resolve might melt completely.”

Suddenly, her eyes turned playful, and she smiled a little. “I love you, Abraham Thomas.”

He gasped and backed further away, covering his ears with his hands. “Hurry, we need to go.”

Before she could even answer, he raced forward toward the end of the alley, heading for the livery. He was being honest with her when he said that he couldn’t stay there with her like this. The desire to kiss her and embrace her and touch her was too great and they were alone in that alley, and he didn’t want to sully any of those beautiful moments by being impatient. A chaperone would definitely not allow it. Penelope would be flabbergasted if she found out. Once he was nearly out of the alley, he turned back to find her a few steps behind him. Relieved, his shoulders relaxed.

Then she stuck out her hand.

He looked at it questioningly.

Smiling playfully, still, she said, “You could hold my hand and lead me out. You are my intended you know.”

His heart leapt again, and he looked around. Finally, there were people about and several of them were heading toward the livery as well. Feeling safe, he took hold of

her hand. The warmth of her small palm sent a tingle up his arm. And, acting on whimsy, he pulled her closer, brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it gently. Her eyes went wide, and surprise replaced the playfulness that was there in the alley. Then he followed his next impulse and leaned forward, whispering, “I love you, Sadie Cahill.”

### EPILOGUE

The two of them were married a few days later, and after church the next week, they decided it was time. Even though Abraham hadn't been up in the hay loft in the past few days, they'd kept the crate with Penny the bunny in it next to their marriage bed in the house. And Penny had recently begun escaping from the box, letting them know it was time to release her back into the wild.

He took his wife by the hand and led her out to back pasture, in a place that wasn't too close to the horses and there was a thicket nearby and pond. The area seemed like a good place. Then the two of them knelt down with the crate.

Sadie reached out and pet the bunny between the ears. "Maybe she'll find her mother again out here."

"Likely. I don't think that rabbits tend to stray too far from their territory."

"It will be fun to see a rabbit and wonder if it's this little girl. They all look so much alike it will be hard to tell."

"I hope that we'll be able to tell anyway."

"I hope so too."

Abraham picked up the bunny from the box with both hands, since she'd gotten so big in the month they'd raised her, and he set her on the ground. For a long moment, the rabbit just sat there between his feet.



“She’s not leaving.”

He nudged her with the toe of his boot, and immediately, the rabbit leapt forward and darted away without looking back. “She’s free. Just as she should be.”

“At least at this size, hopefully she won’t be hunted by skunks.”

“Life’s hard, though. So there are wolves and other dangers out there.”

She smacked him on the shoulder playfully. “Thanks a lot. You didn’t have to remind me of those things.”

He shrugged. “I can’t help but be this way though.”

“I know. My husband is both honorable and honest.”

He nodded and pulled her into his embrace, and kissed her on the top of her forehead. “Your husband also adores you.”

Leaning back, she smiled up at him. “And loves me too.”

He smiled wider. “He does.”

And then he leaned in and kissed her, brushing his lips against hers playfully before deepening it and pulling her body tighter against his. Everything in his body hummed with the love that he had for her. His vision of a wife and a life with horses had become a reality, and God willing, the family he desired would soon follow. All because he answered the call to become a mail-order husband.