



Once Upon a Montana Christmas

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Category: Historical

Description: Is a promise made...

Eva made a vow to her dying friend that she would deliver CeCe's infant daughter to her family in Cottonwood, Montana. But when Hunt Strauss, CeCe's brother, slams the door in her face, Eva realizes she and baby Lily must go it alone. Only, after a hotel fire destroys everything she owns, she's forced to set her pride aside and go back to the arrogant, handsome Mr. Strauss and ask for a job...

a promise kept?

At first, Hunt is skeptical, certain that Miss Eva Kenward is nothing but a schemer intent on draining his family's coffers. But once he sees Lily's likeness to CeCe, and the sincerity in Eva's beautiful eyes, he defers to his aunt's suggestion that Eva stay to help out with the Cottonwood Christmas festival. As the days go by and he and Eva grow closer, Hunt's desire for her grows too. But what about his past and its secrets that weigh heavy upon him? Surely, they're reason enough for him to fight his feelings and not get involved...

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Chapter One

Montana, December 1

Eva stood stunned, glaring at the dark, solid-oak door, her heart pounding with anger against her chest. She could not believe that Mr. Strauss had slammed it in her face. It'd never occurred to her that he would not believe her. That she would have come all this way, altered her plans, endured countless hours on the train, and for what?

Nothing .

He'd rudely refused to even hear her out.

The sound of thunder rumbled in the distance. Startled, she jerked around and saw dark storm clouds looming over the gently rolling hills. Her sudden movement caused the bundle in her arms to stir.

"Shh, Lily," she said as she patted the baby's back. "Don't you worry. I made a promise and I will keep it."

Blast that cursed promise , she thought as she clenched her jaw. If it wasn't for her pledge to a dying woman, she was certain she could have provided a fine life for herself and Lily. But she had made the pledge and intended on seeing it through. At the very least, she would make every effort to set things to rights.

Picking up her grey wool skirt with one hand, she walked down the steps. Mr. Strauss had made himself clear. She would not give him the satisfaction of another argument,

but rather, would think out her options and decide on the best course of action for herself and Lily.

She walked down the drive, then turned and glanced at the two-story home. In this wild part of the world, she supposed the house would be considered quite grand, but compared with her late father's estate in England, it was rather simple.

Nonetheless, she found its simplicity charming. The wraparound veranda would probably be most pleasant on warm summer evenings, and the sound of a nearby babbling creek would soothe the soul after a long day's work. The horse pasture and barn looked to be large and well maintained. Mature cottonwoods graced the scenery. It would have been a perfect place to raise a child.

Eva wondered what had made its occupant so cold and distant, so unwilling to hear the truth, let alone accept it.

As she took in the surrounding landscape, she thought of tales of the Wild West that she had often read aloud to her stepmother's aunt, Lady Edith. When she'd sat in Lady Edith's parlor in England, it had been easy to lose oneself in the dream of an exciting frontier land and a better life. Her own life, up to that point, had been boring and dismal. She'd spent long hours either reading to Lady Edith, or writing the woman's correspondences.

After years of hoarding, when she had finally saved enough money, she'd gathered what possessions she had, snuck out of the house while her domineering stepmother was away, and left that comfortable but boring life behind her. She doubted that her stepmother or brother would even miss her.

She certainly did not miss them.

Another rumble in the distance brought her back into the present. The driver she had

hired to bring them out to the ranch had not wanted to wait, instead promising to return—for a substantial fee—in two hours.

Her encounter with Mr. Strauss had taken all of fifteen minutes at best. She had no other choice than to walk back to town. She hugged the now sleeping baby closer to her chest, protecting her from the chilly wind as she picked up her pace, hoping the rain would stay at bay until she reached the hotel in town.

* * *

Hunt watched with a mixture of anger and curiosity as Miss Kenward walked down the dirt lane. He could not stop staring at her elegant form; the sway of her hips was most enticing. He was absolutely certain that she had an ulterior motive. They all did. He knew she was like all the rest. They only saw him for his wealth and vast land holdings. He would not be taken for a fool again. Besides, she had no documentation showing that the child was any kin of his. A wild tale about a turbulent voyage, and a stolen purse that contained a letter claiming Lily was his niece, was not substantial proof.

“Why did you send that poor girl off? You did not even hear her out,” Aunt Carol scolded. His relative had the softest heart and would take anyone in without hesitation.

Hunt did not have the patience to deal with his aunt today. He had other worries on his mind at present.

But true to form, Aunt Carol wasn’t about to back down. Eyebrows drawn together with worry, she began to ramble, “What if she doesn’t make it to town before the storm hits? What if the baby...”

Slipping his hands into his pockets, Hunt responded, “She’ll be fine.” Even as he said

the words, he had his doubts and looked out onto the landscape.

The weather was turning dark as rain-filled clouds threatened in the near distance. Damn . He would not want another death on his conscience. Without looking at his aunt, he growled out, “Tell Smythe to take her to town.”

He didn’t need to see his aunt’s face to know that she was smiling. Her warm heart would be his undoing, but that would be the only act of kindness he offered Miss Kenward.

* * *

Despite the turbulent weather during the night, the day after proved most pleasant, the sun shining brightly in the endless blue sky. Streaks of light filtered into their simple room at the McBurney Hotel. Lily was nestled against her in quiet repose. Eva loved the feeling of this little one against her.

She had lain awake most of the night, staring at the ceiling, trying to determine her next course of action. She would not let the arrogant—albeit handsome—Mr. Strauss dictate her future. There was only one solution.

Within an hour, she had readied herself and Lily. Satisfied with her appearance, she left the hotel and walked with determination to the train station.

The town had yet to rise to the level of activity that she had witnessed the previous day. However, upon reaching the station, she saw a cluster of travelers milling about outside.

Brushing past a group of well-dressed couples, she entered the ticket office. She was greeted with the smell of unwashed bodies and loud conversation; the room was overflowing with disgruntled passengers. She pushed through the crowd, all the while

protecting the sleeping Lily, wondering what the commotion was about.

As she reached the clerk's window, she overheard an elderly woman complain about the lateness of the train. She had the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that her plan conceived in the wee hours of the night was about to change yet again.

Having approached the clerk, she did not even manage to ask her question before the small-statured man answered her without even glancing up. "Train's delayed."

Heat rose in her cheeks as she muttered, "What do you mean the train is delayed?" This was not how it was supposed to be. She had little time left to reach San Francisco and find her uncle all before Christmas Day. She was determined not to spend another Christmas alone.

Still not glancing her way, the clearly irritated clerk said, "Delayed. Late. Not..."

Tired of his insulting tone, she cut him off and tried to focus on the problem at hand. "When do you think the train might depart?"

When the man glanced up at her, his tone and features eased. She did not know if it was because she was holding a baby, or if her despair showed on her face. Whatever the reason, she was thankful. "Don't rightly know, ma'am. Could be two hours or two days. Problems with the track 'bout hundred miles west of here."

Hot tears began to sting her eyes. Don't cry, she told herself over and over. Her voice wavered with restrained emotion. "There must be some way to meet up with the train."

"Wouldn't recommend it," he started with a shake of his head, "not with the babe and all."

In a daze, she thanked the clerk and left the station. This was an utter disaster. How was she to accomplish everything she needed to by Christmas? She did not even know if her uncle still resided in San Francisco. The last correspondence she had from him had been dated two years ago. She had to find him. He was all that was left of her family. Well, except for her stepmother and brother.

As she walked along the boardwalk heading back toward the hotel, the dismay she thought she had long since stamped down started to rise again. She had not felt this way since her father died eight years ago. What would she do? Where would she go? When she'd started this journey several months ago, her future had seemed so bright. But all her planning, all her sacrifices, all her good intentions had been for naught.

Lost in contemplation, looking down at the baby in her arms, who was as much an orphan in this world as she, Eva did not see the man in front of her until it was too late and she had collided with him.

"Oh, pardon me," she started as Lily began to cry at the sudden disruption to her nap. She rubbed the baby's back to quiet her as she glanced up into the unsmiling face of Mr. Strauss. "Oh, it's you!" she exclaimed as she tried to sidestep him.

Blocking her way, as he tipped his hat with his right hand and responded with sarcasm, "Pleasure to see you again, Miss Kenward."

"What are you doing here?" Her tone sounded harsh, even to her own ears.

"I believe this is a public street."

Casting scorn was not going to help the situation. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to sound rude." With her apology, his expression softened. He was a most handsome man, and those green eyes stirred an unfamiliar tingling feeling in her limbs that she chose to ignore. Clearing her throat, she continued, "I just received news that the train is

delayed. It appears that I... we ...are stranded here for the time being.”

He drew in a deep breath through his nose. “You’re not leaving Cottonwood, then?”

“No.” She looked away, not wanting to make eye contact. She’d dreaded this conversation since she conceived this plan, but it was now or never. “I am actually glad that I ran into you, Mr. Strauss.” As he stood listening to her, watching her, her insides did flips. “I wanted to discuss the matter of Lily.”

“I told you...”

“I understand your feelings. I am not going to try and sway your opinion, but I do have a request.”

Through gritted teeth, he asked, “What?”

“That you allow me to take custody of Lily.”

When Miss Kenward said she had a request, the first thought that crossed his mind was that she wanted money. When she asked him to give up custody of the baby, he had the uncomfortable feeling that she’d been telling the truth yesterday. However, his initial suspicions were confirmed a moment later.

Worrying her bottom lip, she started, “There is one more thing I would like from you.”

He knew it. She was just like the others. The thought of past betrayals were reeling in his head when she stated her demand. “I would like Lily to have her mother’s favorite china doll, the one wearing a ruffled petticoat and a pink and white floral dress with puffed sleeves.”

How did she know about the doll?

In the dark hours of the previous night, he had convinced himself that somehow Miss Kenward had learned of his trouble with CeCe and concocted an elaborate scheme to drain the family coffers. Here was her opportunity to strike, and instead, she stood before him, never asking for a cent, only for his sister's doll. What the hell was all this about?

Doubt began to rear its head, but he shook those thoughts away.

He still did not believe her tale—or trust her, for that matter—nor did he like the feelings she stirred in him. Just now, when she was talking, he hadn't been able to take his eyes off her soft pink lips. He wondered what it would be like to kiss them. Damn, he had to get those thoughts under control and deal with the situation at hand.

“I need to think this over.” He was not going to make any rash decision about a child he hadn't known existed less than twenty-four hours ago, or think about CeCe.

Her face reddening in agitation from his response, Miss Kenward cleared her throat. “You clearly do not believe me, so why wait to be rid of me and Lily?”

Noticing they were attracting unwanted attention from passersby, he said, “It is not up for discussion. I will be in contact with you at your hotel soon.” Not wanting to hear any remarks from the woman who was muddling his thoughts, he walked away.

He spent the remainder of the day trying not to think of Miss Kenward. He had enough worries with a pregnant mare, the annual Christmas festival hosted by his family to organize, and a fast-approaching winter.

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Chapter Two

Two days passed without word from Mr. Strauss. Eva was fast losing patience with so much at stake. Word had come the tracks had been repaired and a regular service would resume tomorrow, and it was her intention to be on the first available train heading west, desperately hopeful she would have Lily in her arms.

Her deadline to reach San Francisco was fast approaching, and with every passing hour, her spirits sunk lower than ever. She didn't know what to do if her new plan was dashed.

She pulled the beige curtain back for the umpteenth time and glanced down onto the street below. All was quiet, not a soul was stirring. Only the crescent moon and twinkling stars made their appearance known. She had been even more anxious and uneasy than usual this evening, but could not explain why. Probably just her nerves getting the better of her. Returning to the bed, she glanced down at the sleeping angel.

Over the last several months, she had nurtured and cared for this little girl. It was only when Mr. Strauss had slammed the door in her face that she'd realized she did not want to give the baby up. Lily had come to mean the world to her, had become the daughter of her heart.

She had made a promise, but if Mr. Strauss would not take in his niece, she would not abandon Lily the way her family had abandoned her. Still, the thought of raising a child alone in an unfamiliar place was daunting. What would people think of an unmarried woman raising a child on her own? She could make up a story, pretend she was a widow trying to create a better life for herself and the baby. Surely raising a

child by herself was better than the alternative—being alone in the world.

There was no one left who cared for Eva. Her father was gone. She had no memory of her mother, having been so little when she died. Her father had never talked of her mother; there were no paintings, no personal items that once belonged to the woman who had given her life to bring her little brother into the world, a life that was now turned upside down.

Worse still, she knew deep down that the distant uncle, who was hundreds of miles away, was no more interested in her than her dead father. A sense of hurt and betrayal swept over her. She had been foolish for embarking on this journey.

She sat on the bed and pulled the blue and white cameo from her pocket. She traced the delicate image of the lily with her finger. It still truly amazed her that, within a short amount of time, Lily's mother, CeCe, had become such a good friend and confidant.

They had formed a special bond, and shared much of their life stories with one another. Although CeCe had fallen into an unfortunate situation, she was a remarkable woman with a caring heart. On that distant day, when CeCe had taken her last breath, Eva had vowed to make sure Lily would know what a wonderful person her mother had been, and that she had loved her.

She shook off the memory of that horrible day so many months ago when that sweet young woman she had come to adore had died in her arms. Tucking the cameo back into her pocket, she went to the window once again, drawn by the insistent high-pitched sound of a dog barking.

As she looked out the window, a soft glow emanated from the side of the building. Pressing her face against the cool glass, she strained to get a better look. Moments later, she heard cries ring throughout the hotel.

“Fire! Fire!”

Without a second thought, she picked up Lily, grabbing a warm blanket in the process, and rushed to the door. She could hear hurried footsteps running down the hall and feared the worst. Opening the door, she began to choke as smoke filled her lungs, although she could see no flames. She tightened the blanket around the crying baby, hoping to protect her from the smoke, and ran down the hall, following those before her.

There was commotion all around as hotel guests scurried about, panicking as they tried to reach the safety of outside. Some had had the foresight to grab possessions, while others had left their rooms with only the clothes on their backs.

When she reached the cool night air, she breathed a sigh of relief. She kissed the top of Lily’s head. They were safe, but the fire was raging out of control. In a daze, she felt someone usher her across the street to where others were huddled together. She watched as men formed a bucket chain to douse the flames. Their efforts seemed in vain as the fire consumed the building. Sounds of cracking wood and falling timber disturbed the night.

Hours later, as the sun crept over the eastern slope, she could see the total destruction the blaze had wrought. All her possessions, all her money, everything was gone. Trembling consumed her body as she took in just how dire their situation had become.

She could not help but wonder if this was a sign from above that she was destined to stay here. First the train, now this.

Just then, she heard an elderly woman call out, “Shoo!” Half expecting to see some wild animal, she turned just in time to see a small black and white dog urinating on some ashes. Her laughter caused the small pup to stop.

“Is this your dog?” she questioned one of the other displaced hotel guests.

“Nope. I think it’s a stray. Seen it rummaging ‘round here for several days.”

As soon as she bent down, the pup approached and nuzzled into her skirt as Lily cooed. She felt sorry for the pup, but her own situation was most concerning. She did not know what she would do, or how she would care for Lily, let alone a dog.

Standing up, she walked away toward a group of hotel guests, trying to ignore the whimpering animal. The last thing she needed was another mouth to feed.

Hours passed as those around watched the cleanup. Murmurs of alternate plans circulated around her, but she had none. She had no money, no family, nothing.

More time passed before she finally admitted to herself there was only one place they could go. Her muscles tightened with just the thought of what she was about to do. To make matters worse, she was filthy; her face and dress were smudged with soot, and even without a mirror, she knew her hair was a tangled mess. Despite her appearance, or perhaps because of her disheveled looks, she was able to convince Mr. Burton from the livery stables to drive her and Lily out to the ranch free of charge. She assumed the man felt guilty for abandoning her the other day. Whatever the reason, he agreed without so much as an argument.

No sooner had she and Lily reached their destination and descended the conveyance than Mr. Burton bid them good day and left. She watched the carriage get smaller on the horizon. Trying not to wake the sleeping baby in her arms, she smoothed wisps of hair back from her face.

Taking in a deep breath to steel her nerves, she knocked on the door with firm purpose.

Expecting the arrogant Mr. Strauss to open it, she prepared to give the man a sound lashing. It was his fault that she was stranded here, after all. If he had just been civilized the first day they'd met, she would have returned to town and boarded the next train west, avoiding any delays. And he hadn't even done her the courtesy of replying to her request for custody.

As the door began to open, she took in a deep breath, telling herself, You can do this . "Mr. Str..." The words stopped short when she saw that it was not Mr. Strauss, but a petite older woman, who was even shorter than her own five foot three inches. But it was her eyes that Eva found most comforting. They were the same color as Lily's, a beautiful shade of emerald green.

"Oh my, dearie, what happened to you?"

"There was a fire at the hotel, and..." Eva could feel the lump in her throat rise as tears pooled in the corner of her eyes.

"You must be half frozen." Opening the door wide to allow entry, the older woman said in a gentle voice, "Please, please, come in. Is that your dog?"

Eva had been so worried about her appearance and nerves she'd failed to notice the pup had followed them from town. "No, I believe he is a stray. He can stay outside." She would think about what to do about the four-legged creature later. One problem at a time.

The dog must have understood. He turned and found a sunny spot on the veranda and plopped down, ready for a nap.

The moment she walked into the warm space, a sense of belonging enveloped her, which was odd, given Mr. Strauss's cold nature. This was not just a house, it was a home. She'd credit the lady who had opened the door and invited her in for that.

The fire in the grate was inviting, and the smell of biscuits filled the air. The furnishings were far more elegant than she would have expected in a wild frontier town. She had not been in a house since she'd left England all those months ago—having lived out of her trunk in inns, on a ship, and then a train—and even then, her own home never felt so welcoming as this. Perhaps all the smoke from the hotel blaze had addled her brain.

“Please have a seat. You must be tired.” The older woman waved Eva farther into the parlor. She had only just sat down when the woman introduced herself. “I am Hunt’s aunt.”

“Hunt?”

“Konrad Anselm Huntsman Strauss IV. Fancy title, but we all call him ‘Hunt.’ Had good instincts, just like his father.” The woman talked about her family with such pride.

Eva was uncertain what to do or say. Only days ago, the rudest man she had ever encountered had slammed the door in her face and now she was being welcomed into his home by his aunt. She was most certain that Mr. Strauss did not have knowledge of what his aunt was about.

Almost forgetting her manners, she responded, “Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Strauss.”

“You must call me Aunt Carol, everybody does.” The older woman must have caught Eva’s questioning look because she added, “No, no, I insist, dearie. Now, I believe you have some information to share.”

Eva shifted uncomfortably in her chair. She did not know what Mr. Strauss had told his aunt about her or Lily, but she preferred to discuss her situation with this kind

woman rather than her gruff nephew.

Although she had rehearsed this speech many times, it did not make it any easier to say. “I fear that I am the bearer of unpleasant news and...”

A deep masculine voice from behind growled out, “What is she doing here?”

Lily decided on just that moment to start wailing, accompanied by the sound of the dog barking on the veranda. “I do apologize,” Eva began, speaking over the crying baby. She continued with sarcasm in her voice, “You have startled her, Mr. Strauss.”

His expression turned to stone. It was clear that he was not pleased to see her again, or hear a reprimand. He probably had never had any intention of discussing the matter of Lily with her. Dammit, but even with that unpleasant expression, Eva thought him to be one of the most handsome men she had ever seen. He had the same shade of green eyes as his aunt and Lily. Set against his dark brown hair, those eyes were even more alluring. He was tall, much taller than any of the men of her acquaintance back in England. His broad shoulders and muscular physique spoke of someone used to hours of hard labor. He was more than the quintessential cowboy. She had always been fascinated with cowboys and the Wild West, but Mr. Strauss surpassed even her imagination.

Perhaps she really had inhaled too much smoke.

Aunt Carol approached them, distracting her from her unnerving thoughts, and rubbed the baby’s head. “Shh, don’t you cry, little one. What’s her name?” she asked as she continued to try to soothe the unhappy baby.

“Lily.”

Aunt Carol gave Mr. Strauss a knowing look before turning her attention back to the

baby. Laying a hand over her heart, she asked, “May I?”

Eva stood and handed the crying baby to Aunt Carol with a great deal of reluctance. Although she knew she wasn’t handing Lily over for the last time, she felt the loss as if it were a stab to the heart.

The older woman pulled the blanket aside and stared at the baby. Her eyes filled with tears. “Oh, Hunt, she looks just like?—”

“Take the baby to the kitchen. I want to have a word with Miss Kenward.”

Eva added rude to his growing list of faults. She was even more nervous than the day when she’d run away from home and embarked on this adventure. What could he possibly say to her that he hadn’t said already? She stood still, waiting as the seconds dragged out. Only when she heard Aunt Carol’s footsteps fade did she dare glance up into those perfect green eyes.

“Why are you here?” Not waiting for her to respond, he jumped into an interrogation instead. “Where is your jacket? What has happened? Is?—”

Eva’s patience snapped. “If you would just shut up and listen,” she stopped mid-sentence. “Bloody hell,” she murmured. Losing her temper was not going to help the situation. Rubbing her sore neck, she explained, “The hotel burned to the ground. My trunk—” She swallowed hard. She was trying not to sound desperate, but once the words started to flow, she couldn’t stop herself. “Lily’s clothes, all of our things, my money...everything is gone. I have nowhere to go, and...” She swallowed her pride and uttered the words she never thought would cross her lips. “I would like a job.”

Mr. Strauss stood glaring at her. She could not even guess what he was thinking. But the truth was, she needed him. Her dream of reaching San Francisco by Christmas was shattered. In one night, all her priorities had changed. Surviving the winter was

utmost in her mind.

His features softened, and before she knew what had happened, he'd closed the short distance between them, pulled her into him, and kissed her.

The moment their lips touched, she felt powerless to the onslaught of emotion. She did not know what she had done to first enrage him, then encourage this...

However, what had started as a harsh kiss quickly turned into something else, something unfamiliar. Something that thrilled and frightened her all in the same breath. When she felt his tongue flick her lips, she pulled back and slapped him hard across the face.

Hunt knew he deserved that slap. One moment he had been listening to Miss Kenward's plight, the next, he'd pulled her into his arms and kissed her. She had been taunting him in his dreams for the past two nights and, damn it all, he had given into his impulses. No female had ever affected him so, and he was chagrined at his lack of control.

"How dare you! I did not come here to be treated as such. I am not one of your saloon trollops that you can...."

Cutting her off, his response was quick. "I apologize. It won't happen again."

"I should hope not." The woman stood her ground, carefully delineating her plan. "I want a proper job. As soon as I have saved enough money, Lily and I will leave. You do not have to be concerned that I will try and change your mind or blackmail you, or..." She waved a hand in the air, seemingly uncertain about what to say about what had just happened. "Or any such..."

Hunt admired her courage. The problem was, although he did not want her to leave,

he did not want her to stay, either. The easiest solution would be to give her money and be done with it, but for the life of him, he could not. Something deeper kept nagging him and until he figured out what that was, he wanted to keep her close at hand. There was no question in his mind there was more than met the eye with regard to Miss Kenward. He didn't even have time to answer her before Aunt Carol came strolling back into the room with a very wide-awake, green-eyed Lily.

"I think it is a wonderful idea, Hunt. Miss Kenward can help with the Christmas festival." Aunt Carol ignored the glare he shot her and instead addressed Eva. "I'm getting too old to do all the decorating myself, and poor Mrs. Walker, the housekeeper, vowed never to stand on a stepladder again, not after last year's fall. Oh, and the men..." She let out a long, dreary whistle. "The men are utterly hopeless..." Hunt wondered if his aunt would ever come up for air, she went on for so long. After several minutes of rambling, she asked Eva, "Please say you'll stay, dearie?"

Hunt held his breath, waiting for Miss Kenward to respond, at odds with what he wanted. When she glared at him, and then finally agreed, he exhaled in relief. He didn't understand his own feelings. He had vowed never to let another woman affect him so, and yet here he was, hoping that a total stranger with a baby in tow would stay. He did not know what it was about Miss Kenward that disrupted him so, but he intended to find out.

Chapter Three

Eva had not known what to expect when she'd asked for a job, but being installed on the second floor, which she assumed was reserved for family, had never crossed her mind. Perhaps she had been given this room because of Lily.

Mrs. Walker had just delivered fresh linens, while Mr. Walker, an old ranch hand who now helped around the house, fetched a cradle. When it was brought into the room, Aunt Carol told a wonderful story about how it was first used by her great-grandmother and then brought over from Germany by her mother when she was just a bride.

The room was large and spacious, decorated in shades of pale pink. White lace curtains graced a pair of large windows that overlooked the area in front of the house and the white picket fence. Eva opened the door nearest the fireplace and was pleasantly surprised to find a private bathing room.

Aunt Carol was fussing about the room, paying no heed to her. But when she opened the other door that flanked the fireplace and let out a gasp, the older woman turned around in question. "Is anything the matter, dearie?"

"Is this adjoining room meant to be a n...nursery?" Could it be that Mr. Strauss had had her installed in the master suite?

"Yes, Hunt thought you and the baby would be more comfortable in here," Aunt Carol said in a matter-of-fact tone, as if it was the most natural place for Eva and Lily to be. "Hunt's mother occupied this room until she died about six years ago. The

late—” Aunt Carol paused and looked as if she’d said something she should not have. She cleared her throat before she continued, “It has not been used since.”

Eva wanted to ask more questions, but did not want to appear rude or ungrateful. “I’m sure Lily and I will be most comfortable here, thank you.” It was larger than anything they’d occupied thus far, times two.

Aunt Carol smiled at her as she finished lying out the linens. “Now, if you need anything, my room is downstairs, down the hall, first door. Mr. and Mrs. Walker’s room is the second door, past mine.”

Alarm shot through Eva. She knew servants would not occupy a room on the second floor, but surely, his aunt would. “Your room is not on this floor?” she questioned with hesitation.

“Oh no, dearie. I have a bad leg. Been giving me trouble for several years now. That’s when I moved downstairs.”

“Oh, I see,” Eva responded as she swallowed hard.

“Don’t you worry. Hunt is across the hall.”

That was exactly what worried her, but she couldn’t think how to express her concerns without insulting the lady’s nephew.

As if sensing her angst, Aunt Carol added, “Don’t mind my nephew either. He doesn’t say much, but that dear boy has a heart of gold. He can appear a little harsh on the outside, but that has nothing to do with you, dearie.” Aunt Carol moved toward her and Lily. Stroking the baby’s blonde little head, she said in a kind voice, “Have patience. He will come around. I promise you that.”

Eva didn't need him to come around . All she required was a job for the time being. Then, once she had sufficient funds, she and Lily would be on their way.

* * *

An hour later, Eva found herself sitting at the dining table with a silent Mr. Strauss and Aunt Carol. She decided she would not concern herself with his harsh looks, but instead, focus on Lily.

Bouncing the happy baby on her lap, she glanced about the room. It was decorated with rich green wallpaper dashed with flecks of gold, a direct contrast to the delicate lace curtains. The table, set with white china and crystal, glistened in the soft glow of candlelight. The elegance reminded her of her father's house, and of a brief, happier time before the arrival of her stepmother.

Aunt Carol's comment brought her out of her reflection. "I gave that dog of yours some scraps."

"He is not my dog." As if he knew he was the topic of discussion, the nameless pup howled in protest from the veranda.

Aunt Carol laughed. "I think he's disagreeing."

Eva, uneasy at first, began to relax as the other woman's casual conversation over the course of the meal calmed her nerves. That was until she started questioning her about life in England. "Did you have an occupation?"

Eva sensed Mr. Strauss go still at the question. She wanted to refuse to answer but as an employee did not feel she could and searched for the right words. "No, not quite an occupation. I was a companion to my stepmother's aunt."

“Did you not want to marry?”

She shifted the baby in her lap, uncomfortable with the personal direction of the conversation. When the silence continued, she knew she had little choice but to reveal her life up to this point. “My stepmother held the purse strings and my brother dictated my life. After an unsuccessful first season, I was told that I would be a companion to Lady Edith. That was four years ago.”

“Oh, you poor thing! How did you come to find yourself in America?”

Aunt Carol hung on every word as Eva explained, “I saved my pin money. When I thought I had enough, I sold what jewelry I had and left.” The sympathy on Aunt Carol’s face did not sit well with her. “I made my choices, and although things have not turned out quite as I planned, I find I am much happier now than when I was in England,” she said in a firm voice, then kissed the top of Lily’s head with affection. No, things had not turned out as she planned, but she would not change a thing.

Hunt listened to the conversation with interest. He had offered Miss Kenward room and board and a small salary in exchange for helping Aunt Carol and Mrs. Walker in the house. Both women were getting on in years, and both were too stubborn to admit when they needed help. Except that was when Aunt Carol had rambled on, trying to convince him to allow Miss Kenward to stay. After that, she’d mentioned every ache and pain she ever had.

Eva outlined her plans for the future in a practical manner. “I believe that by early summer, I will have saved enough money for Lily and me to travel on to San Francisco. We will live with my uncle. I’m sure when Lily is old enough, I can find employment.” She glanced up at Hunt and stated, for his benefit, he was sure, “I would not want to take advantage of your hospitality for longer than necessary.”

He was about to speak, but his aunt started pleading, almost on the verge of crying.

“Oh, dearie, you mustn’t even think of leaving. We would never think that you were taking advantage.”

With that statement, both he and Eva stared at his overwrought relative, then looked at each other.

It was clear that both he and Eva were having the same thought.

The precise statement that his aunt had just declared was his first impression of Eva when she’d arrived on his doorstep, and he had no doubts Eva knew it, too. He started to laugh and noticed Eva’s shoulders relax as she giggled. It was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard.

Damn, but they were going to be long months while she was living here.

* * *

Eva reached around and tied the apron strings at the base of her back. She glanced in the mirror one last time. Her hair was pulled back in a sensible chignon, and the clothes Aunt Carol had found for her, although not stylish, were clean and presentable.

Eyeing her reflection, eyes wide in disbelief over the transformation from a proper Englishwoman to a common servant, she tried to boost her spirits. “You’re in service now. Come on, things could be worse. Think of the future...and Lily.”

She checked on her angel. Lily had just gone down for her morning nap and was sleeping soundly. “Soon,” she whispered as she stroked the baby’s soft curls, “soon.”

She walked out of the room, leaving the door open just a little. Neither of them were used to being alone, and Eva did not want Lily to wake up and be scared.

The sound of women busy in the kitchen drifted through the house. Hurrying down the stairs, Eva prepared herself to learn how to cook. That is, until she rounded the corner and entered the kitchen. The sight before her was like nothing she had ever seen before. There, on the wood block table, were several featherless, headless chickens.

“Good morning, dearie. I saved the feet to give to that dog of yours, and... Are you alright?” She heard Aunt Carol’s voice, but could only focus on the decapitated birds.

“She don’t look too well.” Mrs. Walker chimed in with her prognosis.

The smell of uncooked chicken entered Eva’s nostrils. Grabbing her midsection, she managed to mutter out, “I think I’m going to be sick,” before running from the room. Laughter from the two older women followed her down the hall.

The next thing she knew, she slammed right into a wall. Only this wall smelled of leather and fresh hay and had firm hands that encircled her with comfort.

Hunt was heading to the kitchen to check on his new employee, when the woman in question plowed right into him, trembling as if she had just seen a ghost. He rubbed her back with one hand, unwilling to release his grip on her with his other hand. All he could think about was how good Miss Kenward felt, warm and supple. This was exactly how he’d imagined she would feel like in his arms.

She must have realized where she was and who was holding her. She stiffened and tried to pull away, but still he did not let her go.

She looked up at him in anguish. “I’m...I’m sorry Mr. Strauss...”

“Hunt, call me Hunt.” He softened his tone and asked, “What happened?”

She took in a shaky breath before she spoke, looking as if she was about to lose the contents of her stomach. “I...I went to the kitchen to help and there...there were...dead chickens on the table.”

Hunt let out a hearty laugh.

“What is so amusing?” she scolded, still trembling as she managed to pull out of his embrace.

“You, Miss Kenward,” he addressed her formally. She had not yet given him permission to use her given name. “Only a proper English rose would get sick at the sight of a meal being prepared.”

She must have accepted his point. A bit of color had returned to her face, and she covered her mouth with the tips of her elegant fingers and started to giggle. “I suppose it is obvious by now that I have no skill in the kitchen.” She looked up at him, and then said, “Please, call me Eva.”

Hunt’s lips curved up in a smile. He couldn’t remember the last time that had happened.

* * *

After Mrs. Walker declared Eva to be utterly hopeless in the kitchen, Aunt Carol took it upon herself to teach her some basic cooking. Mrs. Walker, who could not contain her laughter, informed them that she would make herself useful in a different part of the house, stating that she could not bear to watch Eva make a mess. Today’s lesson was baking biscuits.

“First, we are going to sift all the ingredients.” Eva watched as Aunt Carol measured ten cups of flour, a pinch of salt, pepper, and sugar. She was uncertain, however,

exactly how much a pinch was, since it appeared that Aunt Carol scooped up different quantities between her fingers. “Now take the sifter and add small quantities and shake until empty, then add more of the dry mixture.”

As Eva worked, Aunt Carol kept the conversation jovial with tales of when Hunt was a young boy. By the time Eva had sifted all the ingredients, and added lard and water, she had a vivid picture of a young, mischievous Hunt in her mind. She loved listening to the stories as Aunt Carol demonstrated kneading the dough.

Her family had never talked or shared anything of their past. It was quite a lonely existence not knowing where you came from, apart from what was listed in Debrett’s.

Aunt Carol motioned for Eva to join her at the kitchen table. As she reached for the kettle, she said, “The dough has to set for half an hour. Plenty of time for a nice cup of tea, dearie. You’ve earned it.”

Eva knew that Aunt Carol had something on her mind. No sooner had she sat down than the older woman’s inquisitive nature shone through. “When did you first meet CeCe?”

Eva was not surprised Aunt Carol would want to hear about her late niece. “We met the first day on board the ship to America.”

Aunt Carol shook her head as she worried the handle of the teacup and said, “So you were not friends before?”

Eva looked away, remembering that day that now seemed so long ago. “No, not even acquaintances.” Instead of answering one question at a time, she decided to tell Aunt Carol the whole story without interruption. The sweet, caring woman deserved to know.

“CeCe and Lily were traveling alone. She would never talk about her husband, only that she needed to leave England and return home. It was not long into the voyage that she took ill.” Eva glanced down at the elegant white embossed tablecloth. This conversation was proving to be more difficult than she had imagined. “CeCe had a fever and was moved away from the other passengers. I took care of Lily during that time.”

“I’m glad that my niece and great-niece had you, dearie,” Aunt Carol said as she patted Eva’s hand.

Eva could feel nausea rising again and tears stinging the corner of her eyes at the memory of subsequent events. It had all happened so fast. Fingering the napkin in her hand, she blurted out, “Within a matter of days, CeCe was so ill that I feared she would not survive the voyage. One of the other passengers often helped me with Lily. When not tending to the baby, I would sit with CeCe.”

“Did...did she ever talk about us...fondly, I mean?”

It was not the first time that Eva wondered what had happened to cause CeCe to leave a loving family. She tried to put the kind old woman’s fears to rest. “She spoke of the place she called ‘the ranch’ with much affection. All she cared about was getting her baby home. In her last hours, I think she knew she was dying. She made me promise I would bring Lily to her family in Montana. I could not abandon Lily or deny CeCe’s dying wish, so I agreed, and here I am.” There was more to the story, but Eva did not want to relive those memories again. CeCe had suffered terribly, but Aunt Carol had such a tender heart, and Eva decided some things were better left unsaid. Desperate to change the subject before Aunt Carol questioned her further, she asked, “Do you think the biscuits are ready for the next step?”

“Oh, dearie, yes indeed.” Aunt Carol seemed relieved to leave the conversation, and the two women returned to the wood block and waiting dough. Aunt Carol pulled out

a rolling pin, sprinkled the block with flour, and instructed Eva. “Gently roll up and down, then turn the dough and roll again.”

Eva followed the instructions as best she could, but noted there was more flour on her and the floor than on the wood or dough.

“Good. Now we are going to cut the dough into rounds, then cook ‘em up.”

Eva did as she was told. Within a matter of minutes, she had an army of biscuits waiting to be cooked in the cast iron skillet. The next step was most concerning. She had never in her life cooked anything. Truth be told, she was scared of the hot pan. She placed the first batch onto the warm surface and waited until they were golden brown, then awkwardly flipped them onto their other side.

“Something smells wonderful in here,” Hunt said as he walked into the kitchen.

“You’re just in time to taste Eva’s biscuits. She is doing quite well.”

The compliment from Aunt Carol warmed her heart. She had never experienced such kindness or patience in all her life.

She placed a biscuit on a simple white plate and handed it to Hunt. He stared down at it as if it was poison. “It is not going to eat you,” she said with annoyance.

Hunt took one small, unsure bite. She wasn’t sure what his response would be, but when a smile crept across his face, she knew he was pleased with her effort. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

After her successful attempt at making biscuits, she gained some confidence in the domestic realm, and started to enjoy her new role. For the first time in her life, she felt useful. She was able to fall into the easy routine at the ranch. While Lily was

napping, she would help in the kitchen—except when chickens were involved. She learned to hang laundry, clean, or sometimes she just chatted with Aunt Carol and Mrs. Walker about their lives in Montana. She had even decided to name the pup, who seemed determined to stay.

One conversation she'd had with Aunt Carol still brought a smile to her face. They had been enjoying a break from household duties on the warm, sunny veranda when the older woman had asked Eva if she'd decided on a name for the dog curled up at her feet.

"I think I'll name him Nero," Eva said with affection as she leaned down and rubbed the pup's head.

"That's an odd name for a dog," Aunt Carol had said.

Eva laughed at the image ingrained in her memory from the night of the fire. "Not if you saw what he was doing to the hotel ashes."

Even Lily was flourishing in this environment. She was growing bigger by the day and had become a proficient crawler. In the afternoons, Eva would often take the inquisitive baby for a walk near the horse pasture and stables. Nero loved to join them and barked at all perceived dangers. He had even become quite handy at catching rats in the barn.

Her happiest moments, though, were when they gathered around the fireplace in the evening and shared their day over a cup of spiced cider.

Hunt kept a polite distance, only interacting with Eva and Lily at mealtimes, but there were no more awkward moments. Every once in a while, however, Eva would catch him looking at her out of the corner of his eye. His gaze always made her insides flutter. During those times, she wished that she had not set such strict boundaries

when she'd agreed to work here. With each passing day, she was falling more in love with Montana, and she suspected with the cowboy as well, who stirred so many unfamiliar feelings.

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Chapter Four

“O h! It’s here!” Eva heard Aunt Carol bellow from downstairs. She gathered Lily in her arms and went down to see what all the fuss was about.

She arrived downstairs just in time to see Hunt and Mr. Walker carry a large crate into the house and place it beside another.

Aunt Carol’s face was bright with excitement. “Oh, dearie, you are just in time.”

“Just in time for what?” Eva edged closer to the crate.

“Christmas decorations, tinsel, and treats from my brother in Germany!” As Aunt Carol explained about the contents of the crates, Hunt and Mr. Walker prized them open, revealing wrapped packages and tins full of fragrant spices.

Eva sat down on the floor with a very curious Lily on her lap. When she opened a tin embossed with a German landscape, the scent of cloves filled the air. The next package she pulled out contained a smooth wood block engraving of a Christmas tree. “This is beautiful,” she said as she admired it.

She was surprised when Hunt began to explain the significance of the engraving. “It’s a cookie mold. We use the molds to make decorative Lebkuchen , a type of spiced cookie, and ornaments for the Christmas tree. It has been a tradition in my family for many generations. My oma taught my siblings and me how to make them.”

She could hear the pride in his voice. Despite his tough exterior, underneath it all was

a sensitive man. Not for the first time, she wondered what had hardened him.

“Did you have any family traditions, dearie?”

Eva did not know how to answer that question without raising sympathy from Aunt Carol. Her family was not close and would never dream of sitting on the floor rummaging through crates. She could hear her stepmother now: “That is why we have servants. Let them get their hands dirty.” Looking away, she shook her head without a word, and continued on with unpacking their traditions, wishing desperately she had some of her own.

* * *

Hunt had been trying to keep his distance. He did not want to get close to Eva, having been married once, and that had ended in betrayal and death. But seeing her opening the packages, caring about the contents, and asking about his family history, made him believe that love and happiness were possible.

Lily was just as intrigued by the crates’ contents. He watched the baby pick up the lid of the decorative tin and bang it against the base. Memories of a little sister doing the same thing hit him with full force. Over the past weeks, he’d come to realize that Eva had been telling the truth. He felt the emptiness at the bottom of his gut. His sister was dead.

As if sensing his thoughts were about her mother, Lily crawled over to him and gave him a toothless smile. She was so much like CeCe. Until his dying day, he would make sure that he did not disappoint his niece the way he had his sister. Before he had the chance to pick Lily up, Eva jumped to her feet and scooped the baby away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t notice she crawled over. She won’t bother you again.”

Hunt was flustered by Eva’s reaction. He thought that they had been getting along,

those first few awkward days long forgotten. But seeing her reaction just now made him realize that that was not the case. He didn't want her to feel like an intruder.

He was just about to try and put her mind at ease when Devon came racing in, all in a huff. "Need you to come an' see Larkspur, boss. I think 'er time is near'n."

He grabbed his long leather jacket and black Stetson and followed the old ranch hand out to the stables. Sure enough, Larkspur was even more agitated than she had been the previous day.

As Hunt leaned on the wood railing, he examined the restless mare from a safe distance. Larkspur had been very difficult of late, and he did not want to cause her undue stress. "Looks like her udder is distended."

"Noticed the beading already." Hunt saw the concerned look on Devon's face even before he spoke the words. "I think this one is gonna be big. She might have problems."

Hunt agreed. He did not want to lose his favorite mare. Larkspur had been with him for ten seasons and was an excellent mount. "You and Smythe take turns. Keep a close eye on her, and if anything changes, let me know." There wasn't much they could do but offer her comfort if need be. Birthing was as old as time, and on occasion, things just did not turn out well.

It was a sobering thought, and for the first time ever, he grasped some things were out of his control. Sometimes, things weren't meant to be. He'd spent far too many years living in anger over mistakes, and not just his own.

It was time to put the past to rest. Christmas was, after all, a season for forgiveness.

* * *

Hunt rode out past the cottage and bunkhouse, past the family graveyard where three generations of his family rested in peace. The fruits of their labors were realized in the vast expanse of the Strauss landholding; their sacrifices had not been in vain.

Turning Dakota onto the trail that led to the southeast slope of the property, he continued to admire the land that never ceased to amaze him. The snow-capped hills in the distance, the vast expanse of blue sky, the fast-flowing creek, the abundance of whitetail deer—he loved this country. It was a part of who he was. He had always known that, but now he wanted to share that love with the next generation in a way he'd never imagined before.

In the near distance, he saw his destination, and dismounted Dakota near the creek. It was a good spot for his horse to rest. The frozen ground crunched beneath his boots, the light snow from the previous night only having managed to form a thin layer of brown ice. He found the sound comforting as he embarked on his difficult task.

“Hello, Nelly. It’s me, Hunt.” He took his hat off and stared down at two weathered wooden crosses. “I came to tell you that I forgive you.”

He had waited too long to say those words. Perhaps it wouldn’t have made a difference back then, but it did now. He was not going to destroy his future because of events long gone that were out of his control.

“I was angry... You robbed me of what was supposed to be mine.” He ran a shaky hand through his hair and glanced down at the smaller of the two crosses. “But I never wanted you or your baby to die.”

Pulling from his pocket the silver chain he had been carrying as penitence for the last five years, he looped it around the top of the larger cross. The weight of the heart-shaped locket rested against the vertical post.

“Goodbye, Nelly.”

Chapter Five

Lily had been crying most of the night. Eva had felt the ridges on the child's gums just that morning and the poor thing was teething. She was at a loss over what to do to ease the baby's pain.

Rocking Lily back and forth, she tried to sing a soothing lullaby, but was too tired to put any coherent words together—not that it would have mattered to Lily. Standing up, she paced the length of the room. The rug was soft beneath her weary feet.

Outside, the gentle breeze that had been blowing through the valley during the day had now increased to a gale, disturbing the tree outside her window. The sound of scratching branches against the house only added to her anxiety. It reminded her of the terrible storm on the night her father had passed away. She and her little brother had not been allowed entrance as her stepmother kept vigil by his bedside. As always, her brother had wanted nothing to do with her, finding comfort instead with his nanny. Eva had been left alone, waiting for her only parent to die.

Her limbs threatened to give way as those memories surfaced. Stamping them down for another time, she focused all her attention on Lily. Her little angel needed her, and she'd discovered it was nice to be needed when you loved.

Hunt laid awake for a couple of hours, wondering when Lily might stop crying. Not that the sound bothered him, it was more that he didn't like to hear her in pain. He remembered his mother's distress and sleepless nights whenever one of her children was ill. Eva must be beside herself with worry.

As another scream echoed through the house, he rubbed his temples with his hands, whipped the blanket off in one swoop, and pulled on his clothes. He was going to put an end to this once and for all.

He walked across the hall and tapped on the door. He doubted that Eva could hear his knock above Lily's cries. He eased the door open and peered inside. A blast of warm air met his face. Standing near the fire, rocking the baby back and forth, was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen.

Eva was in her nightgown and robe. Her long blonde hair cascaded down to her waist. She was holding Lily against her chest and humming a melody, rubbing her cheek against the baby's head.

He cleared his throat and tapped on the door again to get her attention. Trying not to startle Eva, he said, "May I help?"

When she turned to face him, he could see the dark circles under her eyes. Her shoulders slumped as if she was too tired for proper posture.

He did not wait for her to answer, but walked in and reached for Lily. Eva hesitated. He took the baby out of her arms. "Rest. I'll tend to Lily."

"But what if?—"

"She will be fine." Hunt gave Eva what he hoped was a reassuring smile and then took the whimpering baby and left the room. He made his way downstairs and went to his father's rocking chair. Nero woke up, let out a loud moan as he stretched, then rose, circled twice, and curled up next to his leg.

The sound of the wind rustling through the branches was a soothing balm that carried his worries off to some distant place. In his younger years, while away at school, it

was the rustling that had comforted him, brought him home in his mind. During the darkest years of his life, his troubled marriage, and the death of his mother, it was the sound of the wind and the promise of something better on the horizon that had got him through those difficult times.

Lily had finally settled down, although she was not yet asleep. In the faint glow of light emanating from the fireplace, he studied her features. She was so much like CeCe, with her large green eyes and sweet dimples. When Lily smiled, those dimples lit up the room. He missed his sister, and now it was too late. He would not make the same mistake twice.

Hunt held his little niece close to his heart and rocked her back and forth as she finally drifted off to sleep. He might have failed CeCe, but he would not fail Lily. Somehow, he would make up for his past wrongdoings.

* * *

Eva woke up in a panic. Where is Lily? Who is taking care of her? The spot beside her on the bed was empty, the cradle was empty, and there was no sign of her. Her mind was muddled, and her body still ached from getting only a couple of hours of sleep.

Then she remembered. Hunt had taken Lily, and that had been hours ago. No man would want to deal with a fussy baby for that long. The thought brought more panic.

She tended to her toilette with haste, put on the suede skirt and white blouse that Aunt Carol had bought for her, and went in search of her tiny companion. The sun had already made its presence known on the horizon. Lily would want her breakfast soon.

After tapping on Hunt's bedroom door and finding the room vacant, she tiptoed down the stairs, unsure what she might discover. She heard him talking in a soft voice to

Lily.

“Your mama was the best little sister. Full of mischief, but that’s what made life with her fun. She could outride most of the young bucks on the ranch, and even moved a herd of cattle with your grandpa and me. You look just like her, you know.”

A mixture of sorrow and happiness swept through Eva. She was glad that Hunt was accepting Lily as his kin, but her chest ached and her stomach churned, knowing that her time here would soon be at an end. Lily would be with her family, and she would be alone in the world once again.

* * *

This day has proved to be long, indeed, Eva thought, as she fed Lily her supper. Because of the little sleep she’d had the previous night, every chore, every movement, had become a struggle. Thank goodness for Hunt. Otherwise, she would have put her head on the dining table and gone straight to sleep with no care for propriety.

No matter how hard she tried, she could not get the image of Hunt holding Lily against his chest out of her mind. His sweet words and gentleness with Lily had tugged at her heart. Despite her previous reservations, he would make a good father, the kind of father she’d only dreamed about. That dream, which would never come true for her, weighed heavy in her heart.

Sniffing back the tears, she finished feeding Lily, trying not to think of what would never be.

“Would you mind asking Hunt if he would bring in some more wood, dearie? I’ll finish feeding the baby,” Aunt Carol said as she entered the dining room.

Aunt Carol was smitten with her great-niece and looked for any opportunity to tend to her. “Not at all,” Eva said as she handed Lily’s spoon over to the other woman.

“I believe he is in the stables,” Aunt Carol said over her shoulder as Eva walked out of the room.

She pulled her jacket off the hook by the kitchen door. With each passing day, the weather was getting colder. Soon travel would be difficult, especially for someone short on funds. When she thought about leaving, she realized how much this place had come to mean to her. She shook off that thought. Now was not the time to indulge in something that would never become reality.

The sun hung low on the horizon. She loved this time of day, when the land was aglow in soft shades of orange and yellow. The sky was deepening to a dark blue, and soon, millions of stars would twinkle across it in joy.

She walked to the stables and peered inside. The scent of hay and horses infiltrated her senses. The faint glow of a lantern could be seen at the far end. She walked down the center aisle toward the light and sound of straw shuffling. When she came upon the last stall, the sight that met her eyes took her breath away and set her skin tingling.

Hunt had removed his shirt to work, and the magnificent sight of his muscular form mesmerized her as sweat glistened on his taut skin. The muscles in his arms flexed with each rise of the pitchfork. She wondered what it would be like to be in his arms, her own bare flesh against his broad chest.

He must have sensed her presence. He turned around and looked straight at her. She watched an unfamiliar change take place in his deep emerald eyes. It was as if he saw right through to her heart, seeking out her deepest desires—desires she did not fully comprehend. Without any word of warning, he dropped the pitchfork, walked up to

her, and pulled her into his warm embrace. The smell of leather and fresh hay invaded her nostrils, a combination that was distinctly Hunt.

The moment his lips touched hers, she was lost. Urges she had never experienced before bubbled to the surface. Greedily, she wanted to feel more, experience more. Wrapping her arms about his neck, she pulled herself toward his taut form. His skin felt warm and damp from his exertions mucking out the stall. His hand cupped her bottom, bringing her even closer to his hard, muscular body. She should be shocked, should protest, but it felt so right to be in his arms.

He deepened the kiss, stroking her tongue with his. He tasted like warm apple cider on a cold day. His mouth left hers and started doing wonderful things down the column of her neck before travelling back up toward her ear. She'd never realized a tongue could bring such pleasure as his hot breath whispered against her ear. "I want you, my English rose."

She was unsure what to say to encourage him, so she let her instincts guide her and began to explore his smooth chest with her hands. She felt him shift, and the next thing she knew, he'd picked her up and was carrying her over to a pile of fresh straw.

He laid her down, stretched out beside her, and gazed into her eyes. She tried to look away, feeling uncertain all of a sudden, but he reached out to her with a gentle hand and stroked her cheek. "Never be shy with me." His voice was deep and husky. She had never heard anything so sensual in all her life.

Hunt looked down into the most intoxicating eyes he had ever seen. He could lose himself forever in their brown depths. He dipped his head and kissed her soft lips, teasing her to open for him. Her breath caught with his onslaught of nibbles and kisses. When she flicked her tongue across his lips, he knew she was feeling more confident.

As he deepened the kiss, his hand dealt with the buttons on her blouse. It had been so long since he'd been alone with a woman and he was desperate to have his hands on her. He reached inside her blouse and cupped one ample breast while fingering her nipple.

As he trailed kisses down her neck, she arched her back, offering her breasts to him. He took one sweet pink nipple in his mouth and suckled.

“Oh my, that feels wonderful...” Her words trailed off on a gasp of pleasure. It was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard.

“Eva, I...” The words caught in his throat as distant sounds came to the forefront. He looked up and listened for what had disturbed his senses and brought him back to reality.

“What's the matter?” she whispered out.

He stared at her and saw a mixture of uncertainty and desire. He should not have taken advantage of her here in the stables. She meant more to him than a quick tumble in the hay. He wanted to earn her trust and respect, to build a future.

He felt her body grow tense beneath his as she questioned, “What's that noise?”

The sound of a coyote howling and chickens clucking with alarm confirmed his suspicions. “A coyote has gotten in the chicken coop.” He watched her face pale at the mention of chickens.

His English rose had yet to recover from the headless chicken incident. “Come on, I'll take you up to the house, then deal with the mess.”

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Chapter Six

E va stepped out on to the veranda, welcoming the cool, crisp air that added life to her weary body. After the kiss she'd shared with Hunt in the stables, all thoughts of San Francisco faded into the recesses of her mind. She wanted to stay here with him and Lily. She wanted to be part of a loving family.

Lily had had another rough night, but thankfully, Aunt Carol was now watching over the napping baby. She walked to the porch railing and took in a deep, refreshing breath.

Everything about this land reminded her of Hunt—rugged on the outside, but full of hidden treasures.

The landscape spread out before her like a winter wonderland. It had snowed during the night and the land looked like it had been covered in beaten cream, so peaceful, so magical, shimmering like millions of diamonds against the sunlight.

Even Nero seemed to be enjoying his surroundings. He had found a patch of sunlight on the veranda and was basking in its warmth.

As she reflected on the events of yesterday, the man of her daydream joined her. “Are you busy?”

She loved the sound of his voice. Turning around to face him, she said, “No, just enjoying the wonderful view.”

“You like it?”

She thought it peculiar that he asked the question with surprise in his voice and hesitated as she considered her response. “No,” she replied, shaking her head as she started, “‘Like’ is too mild a word. This changing landscape entralls and inspires me, begs me to discover what splendors are hidden, welcomes me, and never ceases to amaze.”

Her confession earned her a deep smile. The softness in his eyes made her heart leap.

In that moment, she knew without a doubt she had fallen in love with Konrad Anselm Huntsman Strauss IV and the realization frightened her. Except for Lily, everyone in her life who had meant anything to her had died.

“Come inside, I want to show you something.”

She did not know what to expect, and hesitated, overwhelmed by her emotions.

“This way,” he said as he took her hand, his touch causing her stomach to flutter. He guided her down the side hall toward the kitchen. When she entered the large space, she saw an army of ingredients laid out on the wood-block table. “I am going to teach you how to make Lebkuchen. ”

She halted in surprise and stared up at him.

“Don’t look so surprised, I told you my oma taught me. She believed that men should be useful in the kitchen at least once a year,” he said with a teasing grin.

The following hour passed in sublime bliss as he taught her to make his great-grandmother’s recipe for spiced cookies. When the dough was ready, they used the decorative wood engraved cookie molds to create fantastical shapes of Christmas

trees and rocking horses, then baked their creations.

“Next is the icing.”

Eva watched in amazement as Hunt combined sugar, milk, and vanilla with such ease. She still had little confidence in her kitchen skills despite the lessons she’d received.

When he placed the pan full of ingredients over the heat, he called her to the stove. “This mixture needs to warm, but do not let it boil. Just keep stirring it.”

She picked up the spoon and stirred the contents the way she thought she was supposed to.

“No, you need to be gentle.” He placed his large hand over hers and guided her hand in circular movements. His voice was low and seductive as he said, “That’s it, nice and slow.”

She leaned back into him. She could feel his rising heartbeat against her back. As he dipped his head and nibbled her earlobe, the hairs on her nape rose in response. Her insides melted, and all thoughts of icing and spiced cookies disappeared. She did not even think about the fact they were in the kitchen where anyone might walk in and see them.

“I’ve been dreaming about you all day,” she heard him say just above a whisper. “I want to show you pleasure.”

Lost in the seductiveness of his voice, she tried to imagine the pleasure he spoke of.

All of a sudden, he pulled away from her, breaking the spell.

Brought back into reality by the loss of his body heat, she heard Aunt Carol in the hallway with a screaming Lily and barking Nero.

“Sorry to interrupt...oh, dearie, you have to watch that closely. It has already started to burn.”

So caught up in the nearness of Hunt and what they had been doing, Eva had not even realized the icing was spoiling. She glanced up guiltily. “I guess I need more practice.”

She heard Hunt mutter under his breath, “Lots and lots of practice.”

* * *

Aunt Carol excused them from her kitchen and instructed them to start decorating the Christmas tree that Mr. Walker and Devon had brought in earlier that day. Hunt was happy for the diversion. He could not stop thinking of Eva, nor the thrill of what she had said on the veranda.

She loved this land as much as he did .

When she had spoken those poetic words, Hunt had known he'd lost his heart. He was in love with her. The problem he now faced was how to get her alone and confess his feelings. They always seemed to be getting interrupted. Just the thought of exposing himself made his heart quicken and body sweat. Perhaps tonight he would find the privacy and the courage to tell her how he felt.

He was holding Lily and helping her place tinsel on the tree. The wee one was fascinated with the shimmering decoration. Every time he looked at Eva, her cheeks warmed in a blush. He was enthralled with every delicate movement she made. She would place an ornament or tinsel on the tree and then stand back to evaluate her

work. Sometimes she would change the positioning, but most of the time she would simply utter, “Perfect,” and continue on with her task.

She was stretching up on her tiptoes, trying to place a decoration on an uppermost branch with little success. With Lily on his arm, he went over. “Let me help you.” He took her hand in his and guided it to a sturdy branch while rubbing the soft spot between her thumb and index finger.

“Well, isn’t this a cozy scene.” He heard an all-too-familiar and unpleasant voice speak from the doorway, followed by Nero growling. He glanced up just in time to see his Aunt Roberta annoyed glare before she hid her emotions behind her regularly composed facade.

“Nero, down boy, come here,” Eva called to the pup. With great reluctance, the dog came over to where she was standing, but not before he turned his head to growl at the intruder one last time.

“Aunt Roberta, cousin Hayley, when did you arrive? We were not expecting you for several more days.”

Aunt Roberta was the widow of Hunt’s late uncle, Donald, and not a pleasant person to deal with. Her daughter from her first marriage, Hayley, was the most annoying female he had ever encountered in his life. The girl was rude, demanding, ignorant, and a liar—the exact opposite, he realized, of Eva.

“We arrived in Warm Springs yesterday. Where is the hired man? He needs to bring in the trunks and tend to the horses.” Roberta’s tone was cold and harsh. Hunt suspected that his aunt, as usual, was none too pleased with him and what she perceived as his lack of hospitality.

“Oh, my dear Roberta,” Aunt Carol cried as she came running from the hall with a

half-eaten cookie in her hand. Hugging her sister-in-law, she said, “We are all so pleased that you and Hayley could join us for the Christmas festival.”

Hunt watched his aunt try to control her emotions. Sniffing back a sob and shaking all over, Carol continued, “It was always Donald’s favorite event.” His aunt had been very close with her brother, who had passed almost a year ago. When Donald had died of heart failure, Carol decided to mend fences with her domineering sister-in-law, telling Hunt her brother would have wanted it that way. Since Carol lived with him, he knew he had no choice but to deal with the unpleasant Roberta’s visits.

Aunt Roberta glanced over at Eva and spoke with disdain, as if she were a common servant, “It has been a long journey from Chicago. Are our rooms ready?”

Eva stood, looking confused as Hunt took control of the situation. He would not allow his aunt to take advantage of Eva. “Aunt Roberta, may I introduce Miss Eva Kenward. She is a guest and will...”

His aunt turned to glare at him. “Whose baby is that?” the cantankerous old woman had the nerve to interrupt him. He did find it amusing though, that his aunt was getting all worked up over a little child.

He knew Roberta had demanded to have a nanny to care for her own daughter, and had made it clear to Uncle Donald prior to their marriage that she wanted no more children. For reasons that would remain unknown, his uncle had still married the woman.

“This is CeCe’s baby, Lily.”

Hayley, who had been silent up to this point, took the opportunity to enter the conversation, ignoring Lily. With an overabundance of excitement, she glimpsed about and asked, “Oh, is she here? I would love to see her again. It has been so long

and?—”

“CeCe died of a fever several months ago. Miss Kenward brought Lily to us.”

“Oh, Hunt.” Hayley reached out and patted his arm. “I am so sorry.”

He didn’t miss the sly look on her face. Both Haley and her mother had not failed to comment often on the scandal CeCe had brought on the family.

“It is quite shocking to lose someone so young,” Aunt Roberta began in a flat voice, “Generous of you, Miss Kenward, to take care of our dear kin.”

Hunt could not take their artificial sincerity. He knew what his aunt was about. She held no remorse for his loss. Her goal was to find a husband for her daughter. Since Nelly died, she had been pushing Hayley on him.

No sooner had his aunt expressed her insincere condolences than she was back to her usual conniving self. “Hayley has been looking forward to seeing you since summer.” Then she turned and addressed Eva. “They have always been very close.”

“I hope you reserved the violet room for Hayley. It is the prettiest room in the house...” Eva stopped listening to Mrs. Strauss as she droned on about their needs. She had only just met the woman, but she knew already she did not care for her. She was nothing like Aunt Carol. Of course, the two women were only related by marriage.

As soon as Mrs. Strauss came up for air, Eva decided to make her escape. “It is time for Lily’s nap. If you will excuse me, I will take her upstairs.” She turned to Hunt’s aunt and cousin. With the impeccable manners that had been instilled in her in childhood, she said, “It was a pleasure to meet you both.” And with that, she took Lily from Hunt’s arms and proceeded up the stairs.

The untimely arrival of Mrs. Strauss and her daughter had ruined the pleasant afternoon she'd been experiencing.

The day only continued to deteriorate when Mrs. Strauss took control of the dinner conversation. Eva watched the interaction between Hunt and his relatives. Aunt Carol made every effort to make her sister-in-law feel welcome, while Hunt, who under normal conditions did not say much, kept silent throughout the meal. Bloody hell, she thought as she fidgeted in her seat, this is absolute torture.

"This is exquisite beef stew!" Aunt Roberta exclaimed with more enthusiasm than warranted. "Did you grow the meat yourself, Hunt?"

Even as ignorant as Eva was about cattle ranching, she knew that one did not "grow" meat. Hunt glanced her way with a twinkle of laughter in his eye, before turning to address his aunt. "Yes." Eva assumed that, rather than explain to his aunt and involve himself in the conversation, it was far easier to give a one-word response and be done with it.

As the meal progressed, Eva could not help but notice how smitten Hayley was with Hunt. She had been batting her eyelashes at him for most of the evening. By the time Mrs. Walker brought the hot peach cobbler to the table, Eva had a headache from clenching her jaw. She was afraid if she spoke at all, she would make an inappropriate comment and ruin Aunt Carol's attempt at family harmony. Although Hunt paid Hayley no attention, the whole episode had Eva all out of sorts.

For the first time since she'd arrived at the ranch, Eva excused herself right after dinner. She heard the others adjourn to the parlor for wine and cider, while Aunt Carol related a story from last year's Christmas festival.

"Eva." She heard Hunt call her name into the dark but did not stop climbing the stairs. She did not feel like keeping company with anyone but Lily this evening, and

looked forward to climbing into bed beside the sleeping baby.

When she reached the top landing, she heard heavy footfalls behind her, then gasped as she felt herself being turned around and none too gently backed up against the wall as hungry lips sought hers. “I’m sorry you had to endure that,” Hunt whispered against her ear before kissing her again, sending a thrill of warmth into the very core of her womanhood.

His touch was like magic. Parts of her tingled that she did not even know to name, while she felt his rising desire against her stomach. Her wanton thoughts shocked her—she wanted nothing more in that moment than to explore what lay beneath his thigh-hugging pants.

“Hunt?” she heard Hayley call out from downstairs. “Did you find that wine Mother requested?”

“Always interrupted,” he murmured against her temple, then gave her a quick kiss. “Duty calls,” was all he said over his shoulder as she watched him disappear down the dark staircase.

The evening ended, leaving her with longing, but still much better than it had begun.

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Chapter Seven

The next few days were spent in a whirlwind of activity as everyone prepared for the Christmas festival. To complicate things, Aunt Carol took ill with a case of catarrh and was not supposed to be up and about. It was only when Hunt threatened to lock her in her room during the festival did she obey the doctor's orders. Although she kept to her bed, she still continued to dictate what needed to be done.

Despite Eva's initial reservations about Hunt's aunt and cousin, they managed to get along. Hunt was absent from the house most of the time, much to Hayley's dismay.

They were sitting around the dining table decorating the final batch of Lebkuchen when they heard the front door open and felt a cold wind sweep through the house.

"Oh, Hunt?" Hayley called out in a sweet tone.

Eva could sense his reluctance as he walked into the room. He did not answer, just stared at Hayley, waiting for her to speak.

"Mr. Walker said you were riding into town today. May I join you?"

"The weather is turning. Taking the carriage will be too slow." Eva could not recall Hunt's tone ever being so abrupt and harsh, not even when he had slammed the door on her more than two weeks ago.

Despite his tone, Hayley was not to be deterred. "I'll ride on horseback."

It was then Roberta Strauss's turn to chime in in support of her daughter, "Let her go with you, Hunt. She will be no bother. With the baby napping, Miss Kenward and I can have these decorated in no time."

"Fine. Five minutes," Hunt said, shaking his head before he turned and muttered something under his breath. As quickly as he entered the house, he walked back outside, shutting the door with such force that a painting on the wall shifted.

Hayley turned to Eva, clearly pleased with herself and, seemingly oblivious to Hunt's anger, said with a triumphant smile, "I am a proficient rider. You have to be in these parts." And with that, she stood up, smoothed down her split-leg, brown suede skirt, and left the room in a flurry of childish giggles. It had not dawned on Eva until now that Hayley was already wearing suitable riding attire. Eva suspected she had been planning this outing with Hunt.

Just the thought made her blood boil. Without realizing what she was doing, she crumbled the cookie she had been decorating, and then snatched up another with equal force.

"Careful, if you continue to break cookies, we won't have enough for tomorrow," Mrs. Strauss said before making casual conversation about the following day's festival. "It is always great fun. Hayley has led the singing for several years now, ever since Hunt's..."

Eva had been listening with only half an ear, but the change in Mrs. Strauss's tone caught her attention. "Ever since?"

"Oh, never mind. I'm sure Hunt will tell you one of these days." There were only a few more cookies left to decorate when Mrs. Strauss changed the subject yet again. "How long do you think you will stay at the ranch?"

Eva felt uncomfortable all of a sudden at the woman's smug look. She also thought it terribly rude of Mrs. Strauss to ask so directly about her plans, but over the last couple of days, had come to know being forward was just her way. Regardless, Eva had no intention of discussing her future with this woman when she was so unsure of it herself.

The only person she intended to speak to regarding that subject had been avoiding the house ever since the arrival of his aunt and cousin.

Attempting to be vague and protect her feelings for Hunt, Eva focused her attention on the cookie she was holding as she casually replied, "I am not able to continue my journey at this time."

Mrs. Strauss raised a brow with interest and studied her, then narrowed her eyes.

Eva wondered if she had said the wrong thing.

"Are you short on funds?" Mrs. Strauss asked in a calculated way.

Eva stared at the rude woman and shrugged, unwilling to answer the prying question, and continued on with decorating the cookie in her hand, but not before noticing Hunt's aunt had a curious look in her eyes.

"My dear, I had no idea. It is a dreadful position to be in. Having been on my own once, with no family, I know what it is like to have nothing. If you ever want to leave Montana sooner, or need money, anything...anything at all, you come to me." She ended her speech by patting Eva's hand with supposed affection.

Flabbergasted that the woman had made a correct assumption, before Eva could wrap her thoughts around what Mrs. Strauss was really saying, Lily let out a tremendous scream. She was thankful for the interruption.

* * *

Hunt was pleased the day had turned fine. The storm clouds that had threatened yesterday had disappeared over the western horizon, leaving nothing but glorious sunshine for the festival.

The large red barn was the main site of the festivities. Garlands of red and gold paper draped the huge double doors, and long tables decorated with Lebkuchen, colored lanterns, and paper ornaments had been pushed up against the walls around the inside perimeter of the structure.

In the center stood a bare pine tree that Devon and Smythe had brought in just that morning. It was tradition that, when the children arrived, they would decorate the tree with the ornaments and cookies. By the end of the evening, the fragrant pine would be covered, with no hint of green peeking through, and everyone would gather around and sing “ O Tannenbaum .”

That had always been the highlight of the day for Hunt. Glancing about, he was pleased the afternoon was going well. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, especially Eva. She was sitting with Aunt Carol, surrounded by children, at one of the tables that had been set up for them to use to decorate their spiced cookie treats. Lily was sitting on her lap, gumming a cookie in the shape of a tree, while Nero was curled up at Eva’s feet. The pup had become most devoted to Lily and was never too far away. Hunt suspected the devotion had something to do with the food that Lily always managed to drop onto the floor.

Ever since that day in the stable, something changed between him and Eva. It was not simply physical, but so much more. She loved the world he lived in, and it was as if she was made to belong here. He’d wanted to tell her how he felt, and had just about mustered up the courage the other day when he was interrupted by the arrival of his aunt and cousin. Since then, the household had been in a state of utter confusion.

Watching Eva now, helping the children embellish their spiced cookie shapes, there was no doubt in his mind what she meant to him. She stirred a deep longing that he had ignored for far too long. He wanted a wife and children. He wanted to create his own traditions that would be handed down for generations to come.

Walking up behind her, he rubbed his hand across her shoulder. She glanced up at him with a bright smile. He was just about to bend down and kiss her cheek when Hayley hollered to him in a very unladylike voice.

“Hunt, can you help us over here?” she called from the far end of the table. Funny, he had not even seen her sitting there. He was sorry now he had not taken time to speak to Hayley privately. This was certainly not the time or place to tell his cousin that he had no intention of making her part of his future, not that he had ever even remotely considered it.

With great reluctance, he moved away from Eva. He stopped when he saw the young Bradberry girl struggle with decorating a cookie shaped like a rocking horse. Everyone in town knew the poor child was slower than all the other girls her age, and she spoke with a stutter. Although that never seemed to bother her. Little Jessica was one of the happiest and most caring children he’d ever met.

“May I help you with that, Miss Jessica?”

She giggled in response, too shy to answer. Hunt sat down beside her. Taking a dollop of icing, he smoothed it all over the surface. He reached for various candies and sweets, placing the vast assortment in front of her. With little hesitation, she started to adorn the rocking horse, never saying a word. When she was satisfied with her creation, she stood up and gave Hunt a quick kiss on the cheek before running to her mother to show off her creation.

Hunt glanced up just in time to see Eva’s warm smile.

* * *

Several hours and many full stomachs later, it was time for everyone to gather round and sing Christmas carols. Eva had been looking forward to this in particular all evening. Guests, young and old, formed a large circle around the tree that the children had dressed with love and excitement. Each held a single lit candle.

The soft glow from the candlelight created an ethereal effect, light and airy. As the musicians began to play the last carol, “ O Tannenbaum ,” Eva felt magic in the air. For the first time in her life, she belonged.

What started as a soft hum soon gained momentum as guests raised their voices in song, celebrating the joys of the season. Eva rocked Lily back and forth, singing softly into the baby’s ear. Lily cooed and giggled, raising her voice in competition with the others. Her little angel seemed to know that this was her home, her family too.

When the evening came to an end, Hunt and Aunt Carol passed out a decorative holiday tin filled with treats to each family. Each child also received a special wrapped gift with his or her name on it. Eva watched in wonder at the generosity displayed by the Strauss family. She could not wait to confess her feelings for Hunt. She wanted the moment to be just right, and decided she would tell him on Christmas Eve, after church, two days hence.

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Chapter Eight

“A unt Carol! Mrs. Walker!” Eva heard Devon, one of the old cowboy ranch hands, shout out in desperation from the entry.

She came running downstairs with Lily in her arms and Nero at her heels. “What’s the matter, Devon?”

“Larkspur...is in...labor,” he began with breathless gasps. “We need help. She’s too worked up and ain’t gonna make it.”

“Smythe took Aunt Carol, Mrs. Strauss, and Miss Hayley to Warm Springs to visit Mrs. Arnold this afternoon. They aren’t due back till tomorrow morning,” Mrs. Walker said from behind Eva. “Mr. Hunt’s gone to town.”

Oh, she wished Hunt were here, but he would not be back for a couple of hours yet. Eva had to think fast. Biting her lower lip, she glanced about, unsure what to do. And then, in a firm, controlled voice, she took charge. “Devon, calm yourself. Go back to Larkspur’s stall, and I’ll be there straight away.” She did not know exactly what assistance she could offer, but she knew she had to do something, if only to smooth down Devon’s agitation, which would not be helpful in any case.

Turning to the housekeeper, she pleaded, “Can you keep Lily with you? I don’t know how long this will take.”

Eva knew this was a terrible imposition. Ever since their arrival, Mrs. Walker had wanted nothing to do with tending to the baby. However, the woman must have

sensed the urgency of the situation, and without argument, took Lily. Nero followed the pair into the kitchen.

Eva ran upstairs and put on her warmest clothes. Snow flurries had left their mark earlier on. The sun was still high in the sky, but the stables were sure to be cold.

Inside Larkspur's stall, Devon and Mr. Walker were trying to help the struggling mare. Eva did not know anything about birthing horses, or any animal for that matter, but she could bring some organization to the chaos of the stall.

She moved a bucket and a pitchfork to the side out of the way, hung a jacket one of the men had shed, and ran back up to the house to see about a meal for both of them. Then she begged two old towels from Mrs. Walker and carried a jug of fresh water back to the barn, along with the food.

Once the food was deposited on the table, she went to the stall. "What can I do to help?" she said as she settled down by the horse's head.

"Keep her calm, miss. That'll help," Devon said.

How did one keep a horse calm? She noticed that Larkspur wasn't really putting up much of a fuss. Bloody hell. Unsure what to do, she let her instincts guide her and began stroking the mare's forelock. To her, the horse seemed hot and unresponsive. Her heartbeat quickening and sounds around her fading into a mild hum, Eva focused all her energy on Larkspur. Tucking the edge of her skirt under the horse's head, she continued to stroke her, massaging down her neck and up again, hoping that the movement would soothe the animal.

She watched Larkspur's stomach rise and fall with shuddering breaths. She did not know how many hours had passed, but she was exhausted. Larkspur was not out of danger, and according to the men, she wouldn't be until the foal was born.

For the hundredth time, she wished Hunt were here.

“I see something coming,” Devon cried out.

Eva continued to stroke Larkspur’s head and rock back and forth. “Please don’t die,” she whispered over and over as hot tears streamed down her cheeks. “Your baby needs you.”

* * *

Hunt’s business in town had taken longer than expected, but he wanted everything to be perfect. To make matters worse, after it had grown dark, wet snow had begun to fall again and made the way icy.

The main house was a welcome sight indeed. He wondered if anyone would still be up. As he got closer, he could see a faint light coming from the stables.

Urging the weary horse on, he picked up the pace. By the time he reached the stable yard, he could hear commotion from within. Larkspur must have gone into labor. He’d been afraid this would happen. It was not the best time of year for a horse to be birthing, and he suspected from the size of her belly the unborn foal was big.

His heart stopped as he made his way back to the mare’s stall and saw Eva, sitting in the hay stroking Larkspur’s head.

She was openly crying while rubbing the horse’s neck. “Please don’t die. Your baby needs you,” she said over and over, crooning to the mare.

A tremor ran through him as he watched her, lost in some kind of trance.

“Please don’t die. She can’t grow up without a mother.” Eva continued with her

pleas. “CeCe, please! You must fight it!”

“Oh, dear God,” Hunt muttered under his breath. Eva must be reliving the day his sister died. He went to her and scooped the startled woman up into his arms. He had an uncontrollable urge to hold her. Eva buried her face in his chest and continued to sob.

The two hands had not even seemed to notice Hunt’s return, they were so focused on Larkspur. It was only when Hunt, concerned about the state Eva was in, barked out the fact he was taking Miss Eva up to the house that they looked up. He knew he could trust his ranch hands to do right by the horse.

Right now, Eva needed him.

As he carried her through the yard, the snow was coming down even harder and ice crunched beneath his fast steps. By the time he reached the veranda, Eva was soaked, and he could hear her teeth chattering. He needed to get her inside by a warm fire and into dry clothes. He took her straight up to her room, set her down on her feet by the bed and stripped off her soaked dress and shift, trying to keep his eyes averted from her lovely body.

Only after her clothes were off, and she was wrapped in a blanket and perched on the side of the bed, did he remove his winter coat, boots, and wet socks. He built up the fire, and then brought the rocker closer to the warmth.

Gathering Eva within the warm blanket in his arms, he carried her over to the rocker, and sat cradling her in his arms. She seemed stunned by the events of the evening and her recollection of CeCe’s death. Hunt felt helpless as he held her and she wept, but at least she was no longer shuddering with cold.

“I tried to help her but there was nothing I could do,” he heard her cry into his chest.

“Shh, no one is blaming you.” He kissed the top of her head. She smelled like a sweet rose on the first day of spring after a long winter of deprivation. He stroked her damp cheek. There was one question he needed to ask, and perhaps it would help both of them to let go of the past. “May I ask you something?”

She did not speak, but nodded her head in reply.

“Did CeCe suffer much?”

Shifting her head to one side against his chest, she said, “I...don’t know...she...” He felt her body jolt as she began to sob again. “She was...delirious from...”

“Shh, I’m here,” he said as he rubbed her back with gentle circles.

For the first time that evening, she looked at him. Her eyes were swollen and red from hours of crying. He saw the anguish there and wanted desperately to take away the pain.

Kissing each puffy eye, then showering her cheek and jaw with more kisses, his desire for her rose as all the tension he had been harboring for years began to fade. He paused only for a moment before he took her mouth in soft, sensual possession.

Eva responded with a sweet sigh. If she would allow him, he would take away all the pain.

“Hunt.” He heard her whisper his name with the same urgent desire he felt. “I want to be yours, only yours.”

It was the only encouragement he needed. He had wanted her from the first moment he’d seen her. He had not trusted her back then, but he’d still hungered for her.

Over the course of the intervening weeks, he had come to know her and found her honest and sincere, caring and genuine. There were no ulterior motives, no demands. He was confident she was all that she appeared to be.

He pulled the blanket down, exposing her breasts to the warm glow of the firelight. He traced her nipple with one finger. Eva's eyes softened and her breathing increased with his touch. He bent his head and took the now taut nipple into his mouth and suckled her sweet flesh.

Eva was lost to the emotions Hunt awakened in her. Every part of her stirred to life and ached with want. She wanted him to untangle her from the warm blanket cocoon and expose her flesh to his growing passion. She stroked his shirtfront over his chest, loving the feel of his firm muscles beneath her hands. She worked her way up his neck and then intertwined her fingers in his dark hair, pulling his head closer to her breast.

"More," she whispered into the silent night, "more."

Hunt must have understood her plea. In one swift movement, he stood and carried her to the bed. He placed her on the soft surface and pulled the blanket off her naked form. He gazed down at her. "You are so beautiful."

He wasted no time in divesting the remainder of his clothes. There was no shyness or hesitation, only a fluttering of anticipation in her chest. Though she was entering the unknown, she felt safe with him. She had never felt this way in her entire life. In that moment, it did not matter to her that they were not married, or that he had not declared his intentions. All that mattered was their mutual desire and this one perfect moment.

When he joined her on the bed, stretching out alongside her, her body begged for the passion that his hands had promised to unleash. The same finger that had done

exquisite things to her breast only moments ago now wove an intricate pattern down her stomach and over her thatch of curls. Everywhere he touched tingled to life. She shivered in anticipation as one cool finger, and then another, entered her, slowly stroking the inner folds of her womanhood.

“You’re so wet.” The awe in his words made her warm all over. She was thankful that the room was cast in shadows, hiding the blush she was certain spanned the entire length of her body.

He bent his head and took her mouth in a deep kiss, while his fingers mimicked the same motion as his tongue. She could feel a quivering excitement rise from within. He shifted his weight over her as he removed his fingers. She reached for his hand to pull him back but found the loss was only momentary as she felt the tip of his manhood at the entrance of her most delicate spot.

“This might hurt,” she heard him whisper with restraint. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss, impatient with need. In one swift movement, he penetrated her to her very core. When she cried out, he stilled, his breathing labored.

“I’m fine,” she said, trying to reassure him. He did not speak, but showered her face with soft kisses. Her breathing increased as his hips moved with gentle ease back and forth. The pain was gone, replaced by pleasure.

The excitement from within began to build again. He ran a rough hand down her torso, and lower still, cupping her bottom and squeezing hard. As she arched her hips to get closer, another wave of pleasure that had started from the depths of her soul consumed her.

“Oh, my...Hunt,” she uttered into the night. A moment later, she felt his body shudder and relax against hers.

He rolled onto his back, taking her with him, rubbing her back with affection. Eva nuzzled into him, feeling his warmth and strength surround her. She heard him whisper, “My English rose,” before she drifted off into sweet slumber.

* * *

By the time Eva awoke, the sun had been making its presence known in the sky for several hours. She did not want to get up, but Mrs. Walker had been tending to Lily all night and was most likely in need of a break. Her body ached, but it was a good ache, the kind from being loved. She smiled as she stretched her limbs and wondered where Hunt had gone off to. She could not wait to tell him how she felt. After last night, she had no doubt that their feelings were mutual. It promised to be a good day.

She went about her toilette and dressed in her new suede skirt that Aunt Carol had bought her for the Christmas festival. Her heart fluttered anew as she reflected on the events of the past evening, when the sound of a horse whinnying caught her attention.

Sunlight filtered into the ample space as she pulled back the curtain. Mrs. Strauss had just arrived from town and seemed all in a huff over something. She wondered what had happened to cause the woman to become so agitated and red in the face. Hunt was now at his aunt’s side and they exchanged words, which only seemed to aggravate Roberta more.

Eva knew that she shouldn’t pay attention to other people’s business, but curiosity had got the better of her. She pushed the curtain farther aside, careful not to be seen, unlocked the window and raised it, trying not to make a sound.

“I just came from Mrs. Bluitt’s, and she told me that she found Nelly’s locket.” She heard Mrs. Strauss say.

“What of it? It is none of her business.” Hunt’s tone was harsh in reply.

“When are you going to tell that poor girl about Nelly?”

Who was Nelly, Eva wondered, and what poor girl needed to know about her?

Hunt made some response, but Eva could not make out the words. Unfortunately, not only did she hear the next sentence that spewed from Mrs. Strauss’s mouth, she felt pain pierce right through her heart.

“Nelly is your wife! You owe Miss Kenward an explanation. Now, if you can’t be honest...” Mrs. Strauss’s words trailed off as Hunt stormed away in the direction of the stables, yelling for his horse to be saddled.

Married? Bloody hell, how could he have kept this from her? Eva realized she was the poor girl Mrs. Strauss referred to. She felt ill. And where was his wife? More pain sliced through her chest and she sank to the floor.

She was not going to be any man’s mistress, regardless of how much she loved him.

She rocked herself back and forth, trying to decide her best course of action. She could not bear the thought of hearing a string of excuses from Hunt. Everything that she had believed of him had been shattered.

He had already humiliated her by treating her like a trollop. Just the word trollop made her stomach reel. She closed her eyes, trying to regain her countenance. There would be no future here for her, no happy ending.

Her mind was made up. She would not stay. She would pack her meager belongings and be gone before Hunt returned.

With unsteady hands, she pulled her small tapestry bag out from underneath the bed and stuffed her few things inside.

She went to the bureau and her eyes filled with tears as she studied all the little mementos she had been collecting since she'd arrived. Colorful rocks that she and Hunt had found down by the stream, a feather from a hawk, and a length of the gold ribbon used to decorate the Christmas tins were all part of her collection.

Instead of recalling good memories, the items only served to remind her of Hunt's betrayal. Opening the top drawer, she pulled out the blue and white cameo that had belonged to CeCe. A week ago, she'd tried to give it back to Hunt, but he would not take it, saying his sister would have wanted her to have it.

Now, she wanted nothing to remind her of this place, or her time with him. Sighing heavily, she placed the cameo in the center of her collection.

Hastily, she left the room and snuck down the hall. Her heart was racing as she tiptoed down the stairs and headed toward the back door. She was almost to her destination when she heard a woman gasp.

"Miss Kenward, where are you going?" Mrs. Roberta Strauss questioned.

Sucking in her breath, not wanting this woman to see her humiliation, she simply stated, "I think it best I leave, Mrs. Strauss. Start my own life."

If the woman suspected that Eva had overheard her conversation with Hunt just a short time ago, she did not let on. "I'm sorry to see you go. Is there anything I can do?"

"I require a ride to the train station, and..." Eva hesitated. She had not thought this through. What would she do without funds? Mrs. Strauss had once offered assistance. Would that offer still stand? "A loan. I would pay you back with interest?—"

"No need, my dear." Mrs. Strauss's tone was sweet as she said, "I am all too pleased

to help you leave and start a new life.”

Eva detested having to ask the woman for assistance, but at this point she was so humiliated she did not care what Roberta Strauss hoped to gain from her departure. It would not be the first time, or the last she suspected, that she would have to swallow her pride.

The horses had not yet been unhitched from Mrs. Strauss’s arrival a short time ago, and the carriage was still ready for travel. Mrs. Strauss brought the conveyance round to the back where Eva stood waiting at the door. She could feel the warmth of the house behind her, begging her to stay, as she descended the steps. No matter how much she wanted to, Eva was not going to look back. Head held high, she stepped up into the carriage.

As they traveled down the muddy lane in silence, the winter wind whipped through her and rattled her senses. She could hear Nero howling in the distance. Hopefully Hunt would be kind to the dog...and Lily.

How she would miss that little girl.

She blinked away the hot tears that threatened to spill. If it were possible for a heart to break from sorrow, hers had just shattered.

She wrapped her arms about herself, her firm grip clutching her coat. She stared straight ahead, not wanting to take in her surroundings. She did not want to remember anything about this place, especially her wanton behavior last night. Leaving was her only alternative. She would not come between a man and his wife.

* * *

Hunt was in a foul mood. His encounter with his aunt that morning had left a sour

taste in his mouth. As soon as he returned from his short ride, he was telling the woman he wanted her and her annoying daughter on the next train out of Cottonwood.

He brought Dakota to a slower gait. The ranch house stood as a proud sentinel on the vast horizon. A sense of pride enveloped him. Everyone that meant the world to him was here—Aunt Carol, Lily, Eva...especially Eva. He had made amends with his past the day he placed Nelly's locket on her grave. It was time to live in the present and create a future.

As he approached, Mrs. Walker rushed out the front door, holding Lily, who was wailing. Nero was howling, and Mrs. Walker was crying out to him, "She's gone!"

He did not know what the woman was about, but his gut told him she wasn't referring to his aunt. He rode straight up to the veranda and didn't bother to dismount.

"Who's gone?" he growled out through gritted teeth, suspecting he was not going to like the answer to his question.

"Eva," she started sobbing as she explained, "Lily was fussing. I figured she wanted Eva. When I went to her room, it was empty. Her things are gone."

"Where's my aunt?" His muscles tensed as his heartbeat increased, his anger at a boiling point. He had no doubt who was responsible for this state of events.

"I don't know. Smythe said she took the carriage back out, but he did not see Eva."

Damn Roberta. He'd known she was up to no good this morning when she confronted him about the locket. He was going to tell Eva everything about his past, but it wasn't easy for him to talk about his feelings. And now she was gone.

Turning the horse around, he kicked Dakota into a full gallop and headed toward town. Time seemed to stand still. Although he had not even been riding for thirty minutes, it felt like days. When he caught sight of the carriage about five hundred yards away, he let out a sigh of relief. He wasn't too late.

Once they were clear of the main house, Mrs. Strauss became quite the chatterbox, much to Eva's dismay.

"Now, once you reach San Francisco, go straight to Mr. Jarvis. He's a business associate of my late husband and will set you up with employment. And don't fret over the money, consider it a gift. I am just pleased to help you leave Montana." The woman rambled on and on about how pleased she was to help Eva, how this was the beginning of a new life.

Eva rubbed her aching temples and wished she had the ability to strike the woman dumb.

Despite her initial unwillingness to look about, the land called to her. White puffy clouds dotted the vast blue sky, and the surrounding snow-capped hills looked like a landscape painting, too perfect to be real. Perhaps, one day, she would look back on this time as just a beautiful dream that had never really happened. She heard birds chirping above the sound of the carriage wheels. But it was another sound in the distance behind that caught her attention.

When she turned around, her voice caught in her throat, and her pulse quickened. "Hunt," she whispered out on a sob. He was galloping at a breakneck pace and only slowed when he was upon them.

"Stop the carriage!" he shouted out. Eva could see his aunt's hesitation before she pulled on the reins, causing the horses to neigh in protest.

Without so much as a word to Eva, Hunt reached over and plucked her from her seat, dragging her across his saddle and settling her in front of him.

Her body tingled all over, betraying her heart. She opened her mouth to protest, but before she could muster the words, Hunt spoke first. "Not now!" The anger in his tone startled her into silence. Whipping his head around to face his aunt, he growled out in a tone that brooked no argument, "I want you and Hayley gone today. Do not ever come here again." He turned Dakota back towards the house and nudged the horse into an easy canter. He looked down at her. "Why did you leave?"

Glaring at him as if he had lost his mind, Eva swallowed hard and said, "You are married!" She shifted her body, trying to create at least some distance between them. She would not make the same mistake twice. "I will not come between you and..."

She could hear the remorse in his voice as he uttered into her ear, "Eva, she's dead. Nelly died five years ago in childbirth."

Eva gaped at him and did not know what to say. She had almost made the biggest mistake of her life. Tears streamed down her cheek. She wiped them away, hoping that he had not noticed.

The silence lingered on as they rode to the stables. Smythe approached to help her down, and then turned and took the reins from Hunt, who had just dismounted.

When Hunt looked at her, she could see the sorrow on his face. He reached for her hand and guided her into the large, well-maintained barn.

The look of sympathy Eva had just given him did not sit well. He wanted to set things straight. No more secrets. But the last thing he wanted was her pity.

The stables had always been a place of comfort, a sanctuary for him. Breathing in the

scent of hay and horses, he began, “I married Nelly six years ago, the day after I graduated college. I thought she wanted to share my life on the ranch, but she was only interested in a rich husband. Turned out she hated ranch life.”

He glanced down at Eva as he continued to explain, “Her family had been wealthy at one time, but her father lost everything in a sour business deal. Within a couple of months, it was clear that our marriage was in trouble. I thought that we could work things out. I had to take cattle to market. Aunt Carol had not moved here yet, and I didn’t want Nelly to be alone, so I moved her into town. By the time I returned from the long cattle drive, she was pregnant with another man’s child.”

“I’m sorry...”

Running a frustrated hand through his hair, he scolded, “I am not telling you these things because I want your sympathy. I am telling you because I do not want any secrets between us. Despite rumors, I did not harm her. I would never have hurt her or the child.”

Eva reached up and cupped his cheek. He loved the feel of her soft hands on him. “I believe you. Despite your hard facade, you are quite lovely underneath.”

The words she spoke went straight to his heart. He would spend the rest of his life ensuring her happiness. The morning had not turned out as he planned, but he would make it up to her.

“I have a surprise for you.” As he took her hand in his, he could feel his soul—that had laid dormant for so long—spark to life. When they reached the far end of the stables, he pointed into the last stall. “Look.”

Eva did not know what to expect when she peered in, but the sight of Larkspur with her foal was the best gift she could have ever asked for.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She hiccupped on a sob and asked with hesitation, “She...she is going to be all right?”

“Both mother and foal are doing fine.”

Eva was so overcome with emotion that she had not noticed that he was down on one knee until he began to speak. “I may not be a man of many words, but I love you and will see that you want for nothing if only you will be my wife.”

Her hands shook in his, as the tears continued to flow. With unrestrained happiness, she said, “I don’t need anything but you.”

He jumped up and caught her in his arms, twirling her around as he kissed her senseless. “I love you, my English rose.”

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There had not been enough time to make a new dress for the most important day of a young woman's life. Aunt Carol had had one of the old trunks that had belonged to Hunt's mother brought down from the attic, and the two ladies had spent the better part of an afternoon rummaging through the elegant, albeit outdated, clothing.

Eva knew the moment Aunt Carol lifted the exquisite robe and petticoat of blue silver lamé from the tissue that she had found the perfect dress. The silk rosettes along the edge of the skirt reminded her of England in the springtime, a time of renewal. Her life in Montana had become her springtime.

The following morning, Aunt Carol left Eva in the capable hands of Mrs. Walker, stating that there was still too much to be done. She wanted everything to be perfect. Everyone knew that when Aunt Carol was in this sort of mood, it was best to stay clear and let her have her way.

Several hours later, Eva eyed her reflection in the mirror, pleased with what she saw. A soft knock sounded, followed by Aunt Carol's head peeking around the door.

"Oh, my dearie, you are a fine vision on this Christmas Day." Her praise warmed Eva's heart. Sniffling back her tears, she continued, "My dear sister-in-law would have been most pleased to see you in her dress."

"Do you think Hunt will like it?"

Aunt Carol nodded her head. Eva saw the tears welling up in the old woman's eyes. "He is the luckiest man in Montana."

Eva walked over and embraced the woman who would soon be family. Family. That thought made her giddy with delight. In less than an hour, she would no longer be alone in this world. She would be a wife, a niece...a mother.

Colorful blown-glass ornaments illuminated by candlelight graced the mantle, creating an aura throughout the room. The Christmas tree held a place of honor between two windows that overlooked the vast expanse of the ranch. Aunt Carol had prepared another batch of Lebkuchen , the smell of spiced cookies wafting throughout the house.

Only a handful of guests that had made it through the snow were in attendance. Which suited Hunt just fine. He had not seen Eva since yesterday morning and was eager to have his bride all to himself. Lily crawled on the floor, oblivious to all activity happening around her, much too enthralled with the unopened presents scattered about. Nero followed the baby, never letting her stray far from his watchful gaze.

Aunt Carol appeared from the hall and, with a bright smile, announced, "It's time."

Hunt waited in excited anticipation. When Eva walked into the room, she stole his breath away. She wore a pale blue dress that accentuated her womanly curves. Long blonde tendrils cascaded down her back. Her brown eyes were soft with love and desire. The blush on her cheek told him that she, too, was thinking of the passion that awaited them. Years from now, he knew he would never be able to describe what she wore, but the look on her face would be imprinted in his memory for all eternity.

Mayor Tuck began the ceremony. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together on this fine Christmas day to join..." All words faded into oblivion as Hunt watched Eva. Her soft smile and loving gaze filled his heart as never before. It was as if the world existed only for the two of them.

When the mayor asked for the ring, Hunt drew out a carved agate rose cameo ring

from his inner pocket and placed it on her slender finger.

With a brilliant smile on her face and tears in her eyes, Eva said, “It’s beautiful.”

“So are you, my English rose.” Without waiting for further instruction, Hunt kissed his bride with all the love he felt in his soul.

No matter what the future held, he knew as long as they were together, their love would triumph.