



# The Banker's Bride (Whiskey River Brides #5)

**Author:** *Theresa Oliver*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** She lost everything and wants a new start. He can't let go of his past... until he meets her. Although both are strong-willed, can they find a compromise and let love in?

Megan Shannon is no stranger to struggle. Having lost everything and everyone she holds dear, she set out from her beloved Ireland to seek a new life in America. When her thirst for a new life lands her in the untamed frontier of Whiskey River, she finds that a free spirit has no merit in her new husband's home. Emboldened by her desire to be her own woman, Megan clashes against the powerful men who would see her demure and silent.

For Dallas King, Whiskey River is not a safe haven for the bold and the brave, but rather a chance to rise as a powerful man of society. Having left behind a dark and twisted childhood, Dallas sets out to become the man his father wasn't. In the pursuit of his narrow dream, Dallas finds himself at odds with the beautiful woman he has brought to the frontier to be his wife.

An epic battle ensues between what one wants and what one expects as danger lurks close by. Will Megan and Dallas come to terms with their troubled pasts in pursuit of a perfect future? Or does Whiskey River have something entirely different in mind?

In a battle of wills and wit, danger and desire take the reins as we return to the untamed banks of Whiskey River in *The Banker's Bride*.

**Total Pages (Source):** 21

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Meagan

New York, New York

September 1871

“It’s about time ye got off work, Meggie!” Liam teased his sister when she walked out of the factory. “It’s freezin’ out here!”

“Oh, ye’re a tough lad! Just count yer lucky stars ‘t isn’t December!” said Megan Shannon, his sister. She let out an exaggerated deep breath as she smoothed her shiny auburn hair back into place. “I’m sorry ye had to wait so long. The foreman wouldn’t let us out until the last of the day’s pieces were finished.”

He scoffed as he walked beside her. “Why don’t ye tell that man to kiss yer broad Irish arse an’ just walk out of there?”

Megan slapped his arm as he playfully raised his fists. “For yer information, me arse is not broad!”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe that’s why ye haven’t landed a husband yet.”

She huffed, raising her chin. Autumn was swiftly approaching, and it was getting cold at night. She regretted not wearing her heavy coat. “Liam Shannon! I’ll have ye know that I don’ have a husband yet because I haven’t met anyone that strikes me fancy.”

Megan and her brother had moved to New York from Ireland after their parents had

died. As a woman, the jobs she could get were few. Factory jobs were plentiful in New York, but not for Irishmen or women. Signs hung in the windows stating IRISH NEED NOT APPLY. She was lucky to have gotten one.

Liam sighed, shoving his hands into the pockets of his trousers, his expression suddenly serious. “I worry about what would become of ye if something were to happen to me.”

“Liam, ye know I don’t like that kind of talk.”

In Ireland, their parents had died of starvation. They would have been next if they hadn’t sold everything they owned and purchased two steerage tickets on a steamer headed for the United States in hope of a better life. But since their arrival, they’d had to work like dogs just to survive.

In Ireland, she had heard stories that the streets in America were paved in gold, and that all one had to do was to claim their share. But the journey on the steamship had been brutal.

When they arrived, they were greeted with bigotry. The only job Liam could get was as a laborer, building the new Brooklyn Bridge; and Megan in a factory.

The pay was minimal, but between the two of them, they could afford a small, one-bedroom, run-down tenement that they shared with two other families. Megan slept in the bedroom with the women, and her brother slept in the living room with the men. Both clutched what few belongings they had to their chest while they slept, bundled up in pillowcases, for fear that one of the other dwellers would steal them blind. Megan took the pillowcase containing another dress, a hairbrush, and her mother’s locket with her to work every day.

Megan often felt bad about how they had to live, but it was the best they could do

under the circumstances, and her brother protected her from the other tenants. As the eldest, he had always been protective of her, even when they were children.

“That job of yers is too dangerous.” Megan wrung her hands as they walked home. “Could ye not find a safer job? One that won’t result in yer gettin’ sick from working in that frigid water? Ye could freeze to death!”

Liam laughed as he ran his fingers through his dark brown hair. “I don’ take any chances. Don’ ye be frettin’, Meggie. I can take care of meself.” He stopped and held his arms out and flexed his muscles. “I’m as fit as a fiddle and as strong as an ox.”

“Well, ye’re not too strong for me to take a ladle to when I have ta,” she barked as they rounded a corner, trying to keep from smiling. “Don’t ye be forgettin’ that.”

He laughed as he slid his arm around her shoulders. “Oh, ye love me and ye know it.”

She pulled away, feigning anger. “Get off me, ye big ox!” She pulled the shawl around her shoulders again. “And that fightin’ ye do! Ye’ll be killed!”

He let out a deep breath. “It’s called boxin’, and I’ve won several nice purses from it. Or have ye forgotten?”

She shook her head in disbelief. Liam was a great boxer, very skilled, and the money was good when he won, but it was just too dangerous. Oftentimes, he had come home from boxing matches with both eyes blackened and stumbling in through the door, but smiling and happy as a lark as he held up a pouch filled with coins. “I worry that ye’ll be killed. We don’ need the money that badly.”

He shoved his hands in his pockets, his laughter ringing through the streets as they turned a corner. She loved the sound of it.

Suddenly, his laughter died, his body grew rigid, and all conversation stopped. “Stay close to me.”

She knew well his body posture and that tone of voice as her head snapped up. A group of men were gathered on the street corner. They chortled menacingly, and from the way they eyed her, they were up to no good. One man fell off the curb as another grabbed the bottle he was holding.

“Don’t let that good whiskey go to waste,” he ordered in a strong Italian accent.

Megan’s heart fell. There had been rivalry in New York between the Irish and Italians for some time, and lately, it was getting worse.

“Let’s turn back,” Megan whispered, slowing.

Liam nodded, wrapping his arm around her shoulders as they turned around. They were almost out of harm’s way when one of the men yelled, “What do you have there, paddy?”

Liam stiffened at the racial slur, but Megan clung tightly to his arm, shaking her head. “No! Let it go, Liam! Let’s go home.”

He let out a deep breath and started walking again, but then he looked over his shoulder at the men.

“Yeah, that’s right! I’m talking to you, you Irish mick! Bring back that Irish whore and I’ll show her what a real man can do!” the Italian man yelled.

Liam pulled his sister to a stop.

“No, Liam!” Megan begged, holding his arm. “Ignore him! He’s just a brute! Let’s

go!”

Laughter rang out from the men as they approached. “A brute, am I? Well, I could show you a better time than this Irish mick could.”

Liam pulled her behind him. “Leave her alone! She’s me sister.”

The man laughed as he wobbled, his brown derby almost falling off his head. “All the better, then.” He leered as he reached for her, slurring his words. “Come here, miss, and I’ll show you what a real man is.”

Quicker than Megan would have thought possible, Liam’s fist flew at the man’s nose, knocking him to the ground. “I said, leave her alone, dago!” While the man was trying to recover himself and his friends attended to him, Liam wrapped his arm protectively around his sister. “Let’s go.”

She nodded as they hurried away, but there were footsteps quickly approaching from behind. All of a sudden, a hand appeared on Liam’s shoulder and spun him around. Liam ducked a punch just in time and got in a few good licks before the others ran up.

“Hold him!” one of them yelled, grabbing his arms.

“No! Leave him alone!” Megan hit one of the men’s back. He turned around and pushed her to the ground.

Fury shone in Liam’s eyes as he broke free and knocked three of them to the ground.

“Help!” Megan screamed as she hurried to the main street, looking for someone, anyone, who could help. “Men are attacking me brother and he needs help!” But the men passing by kept walking. She grabbed one man’s arm. “Please, help! Some men

are beatin' me brother! They're going to kill him if ye don' help!"

He shrugged out of her grasp as the woman on his arm huffed. "Get off me, woman! Go back to Ireland." Then he hurried away with his wife.

The people of New York had become accustomed to the gang fights between the Irish and Italians, and they didn't interfere.

"Please! Someone, help!" Tears streamed down her face as she stood in the street, looking for anyone who could help. Unable to find anyone, she hurried back, and her brother was lying in the street, bleeding. "No!"

One of the men saw her. "Let's get out of here!"

"Not without her," replied the drunken slob.

But another man grabbed his arm. "Leave her! Let's go before someone comes!"

The drunken man in the brown derby let out a deep breath as he wiped the blade of his knife along his pants, glancing over at her. Then he nodded once and they ran off down the street in the other direction, leaving Liam lying in the street, bleeding.

"Liam! No!" Megan yelled, rushing to his side. When she pulled his hand away, blood covered his stomach. "No! Liam, stay with me!" Megan slipped off her shawl, balled it up, and pressed it to the wound, tears streaming down her face. "I'll get some help—"

"No, Meggie." He grabbed her arm, leaving streaks of blood on her dress. "Don' ye leave me." He coughed, and blood ran from his mouth. "I won' be here to take care of ye anymore. I want ye to find a suitable husband for yerself and get married. Someone who will love ye and care for ye...." He coughed again and more blood

poured from his mouth.

She wiped it away with her sleeve, tears running down her cheeks. “Liam, don’t ye be talkin’ like that—”

“Megan, promise me....” With more strength than she would have thought he had, he shook her shoulder. “That ye’ll take care of yerself... promise me....”

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she held his shoulders, understanding. “I promise.”

He smiled as he wiped a tear away from her cheek with his thumb. “Don’t cry fer me, Meggie. Have a good life... and remember that I love ye.” Then, his hand fell limp onto her lap.

“No, Liam!” She rocked his lifeless body back and forth in the street. “Don’t ye leave me!” After a few minutes, her rocking slowed as she wiped the blood away from his face with her sleeve and then kissed his forehead. “I love ye, too, Liam. Thank ye. Thank ye for always being there for me, and for being a great brother.”

She sobbed as she cradled his body to her, wishing she could turn back time, wishing that things could have worked out differently.

Finally, some men came and tried to pry his body loose from her arms.

“Miss, let him go,” one man cooed. “We have to get the body out of the street... take it to the morgue—”

“Where were ye when I called fer help?” Megan pulled away from them, clutching her brother’s lifeless body. “Where? I called fer help, but no one came! But ye come now that me brother’s dead!”



The man sighed. "Sorry, lass, but no one wants to get involved."

She gestured over her brother's body. "Well, take a good look! This is what happens when no one wants to git involved!"

"Miss." Another man's kind voice was low behind her, placing his hand gently on her shoulder. "Let me take you home."

She pulled away and leaned down to pick up her shawl, covered in blood, lying by her brother's lifeless body. She bit her lower lip as she brushed her hand across his cheek one last time. "I promise," she whispered. The man gently touched her shoulders, but she shrugged away as she rose to her feet. Then she picked up her pillowcase and her brother's containing their worldly possessions, lifting her chin with pride. "I can walk meself, thank ye."

The man nodded. "Where can we find you... for your brother?"

Megan thought for a moment. There was no way that she was going to give these men her address. "I'll meet ye at the morgue."

She took a closer look at the man, but the look in his eyes seemed different. He was wearing a cowboy hat, unlike the derbies so fashionable with the other men in New York. "I'll take you home, miss. I'll keep you safe. I promise."

Megan looked into his eyes. He appeared trustworthy enough and she was tired. "Okay, but don't ye be trying any funny business."

One corner of his lips almost smiled, looking at her with pity. "No funny business. I'll just walk with you... to make sure you get there safely."

She stared at him for a long moment, and then looked at her brother's lifeless body.

The other men lifted him and placed him in a black carriage used for this purpose... to carry off the dead from the street. She bit her upper lip, stifling another wave of tears, relenting. As she and the man walked away, she looked into his kind eyes. He seemed different than the other men she had encountered that night.

“What’s your name?”

“Trent Jericho.”

They walked in silence through the streets of New York until they reached the morgue.

True to his word, Trent Jericho had been a perfect gentleman and had even stayed with her at the morgue while she made the arrangements. Since she had very little money, her brother was buried in a pine box. But instead of burying him in a pauper’s cemetery, Trent had insisted on paying for a lovely plot under an oak tree in a Catholic cemetery. She had tried to object, but Trent had insisted.

After the arrangements were made, Trent walked with her to her door. “I’ll be back tomorrow to escort you... to his funeral.”

She smiled in appreciation. “Thank ye, but ye’ve done enough.”

“No, I insist. You shouldn’t have to go through this alone.” He bit his lower lip and released it. “What happened to your brother was....” Trent let out a deep breath, leaving the thought unfinished. “Please, do me this honor.”

She tried to smile, but she’d had been through too much. “Thank ye, Mr. Jericho. I would be delighted if ye would accompany me tomorrow.”

“I’ll be here in the morning.” Concern filled his eyes. “Will you be okay tonight,

miss?”

“Yes, I will.”

He paused for an awkward moment. “Well, good night, then.”

“Mr. Jericho,” Megan stopped him. He turned around, his eyebrows raised. “Thank ye so much... fer everything.”

Trent forced a smile, tipping his hat to her. “I’m so very sorry for your loss, ma’am.” He started to walk away, but then turned back. “I just wish I had arrived sooner.”

Megan wished he had, too. It was nice to see that there were still good people left in the world. After he was gone, she walked into the house and closed the door behind her.

“Where have ye been?” Mrs. O’Malley blocked the entryway with her hands on her hips. “And where is that brother of yers?” Obviously, the woman was upset over something, which was nothing new.

“He’s dead.”

Mrs. O’Malley clutched her chest as her mouth opened. And for once, the woman was speechless.

Tired beyond words, Megan walked into the living room and collapsed onto a rocking chair and surrendered to grief. Everyone looked on in silence. For once, she wished she could be alone.

As she sobbed, she couldn’t blame Liam. He had defended her honor. And she couldn’t blame anyone other than the men who had killed him in cold blood, but she

realized that she would probably never see those men again. As tears poured down her cheeks, she willed herself to remember the face of the man who had done the deed, hoping that one day she would see him again. And God help him if that day ever came.

After a while, she walked into the bedroom where Mrs. O'Malley and two of her children were sitting. "I want to clean up."

"Hmph!" Mrs. O'Malley scoffed but said nothing more to her as she took the children's hands. "Come along." Then she marched out the door.

When she was alone, Megan washed her face in the porcelain wash basin, vowing to take a bath in the communal bathhouse on the bottom floor when she could. No one stopped her or made a fuss. In fact, no one said anything at all. When she was finished, she opened the door so Mrs. O'Malley and her children could come back in, and then sat in a rocking chair in the corner, clutching hers and Liam's pillowcases balled up in her lap. Unable to sleep, she lit a candle. From the bed, Mrs. O'Malley huffed but turned over and said nothing. As Megan rocked back and forth, thoughts of her promise to Liam ran through her mind: to find a husband and live a better life than the one they had been living. And she had every intention of keeping that promise.

Megan turned over in the chair and an ad in the newspaper lying on the side table caught her eye. She picked it up and read. Banker seeking wife in Wyoming. Interested parties inquire with Madame Samantha Chase, Matchmaker. Then it gave the address.

Megan yawned, closing her eyes. Could she do it? Could she marry someone she didn't know for a chance at a better life? She opened her eyes and looked around. She was living in a tenement with two other families and no privacy. This wasn't the life she had been meant to live. No, something had to change. At that moment, Megan

vowed not to go back to the factory. If she hadn't had to work so late, Liam would still be alive.

Megan looked at the ad once more. If she married a banker, her life would change, and money would no longer be an issue. But what if he was a cad? She let out a deep breath. Anything would be better than the life she was living now.

And what of love? She scoffed. Love. What had it gotten her? She had lost everyone she had ever loved. No, it would be better for her never to love anyone again. Megan yawned, vowing to see the matchmaker the next day... after her brother's funeral. Soon sleep found her clutching the ad to her chest along with hers and Liam's meager possessions, remembering her promise.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Dallas

Whiskey River, Wyoming

“Hold it right there, mister.” A man wearing a black cowboy hat cocked his gun, walking into the Whiskey River Bank with two other men. Three more waited outside, standing guard. The leader pointed his six-shooter at the bank teller. “Give me all your money... now.”

“Nobody move!” one of the men with him shouted, pointing his gun at the other men in the bank. “If you try to stop us, you’re all dead!”

The other bank teller and a few other men held up their hands. Virgil Williams, a muscular man in a dark brown suit guarding the bank, reached quickly for his gun and killed one of the robbers, but the leader killed him before he could get off another shot.

“If anyone else tries to stop us, you’ll be lying there right beside him.” He motioned with his gun to Virgil lying dead on the floor but made no effort to check on his man that had been killed.

Dallas King slowly pulled two guns out from under his desk, holding one in each hand, and stood. “Drop your weapons, gentlemen, and I just might let you live.”

Both men laughed, along with the other three standing just outside keeping watch.

Dallas shrugged. “Have it your way then.” He shot one of the men between the eyes,

and the man wearing the black cowboy hat ran out the door, alone.

The three men outside jumped on their horses and rode off, along with the man in the black cowboy hat, carrying a bag filled with money.

“Susan, go get Doc Morgan!” Dallas yelled, running out the door. Susan Mallory was his secretary.

Dallas jumped on a horse and tore out after the riders when Sheriff Daxton Clark and Deputy Colton Hill caught up with him. They whipped out their six shooters and fired, and the gang fired back. Dallas shot one and he fell off his horse. Colton shot another as the sound of horses’ hooves pounded against the ground, resonating around them. The last man, wearing the black cowboy hat, got away.

Dallas pulled his horse to a stop and ran over to one of the men lying on the ground. He had taken a bullet in the shoulder and was panting hard. “Who the hell are you, and why did you choose to rob my bank?”

“Go to hell!” The man tried to scoot away, reaching for his gun a few inches from him.

Dallas stepped on his hand, and the man screamed. “I asked you a question.” He picked up the man’s gun and shoved it into the back of his trousers.

The man snarled. “And I gave you an answer! Go to hell!”

“You first.” Dallas stepped on the wound on his shoulder, and he screamed in agony.

“My brothers are going to come after you for this!”

Dallas kept his foot on the man’s shoulder and leaned in when Daxton and Colton

rode up. “Did you get ‘em?”

Sheriff Clark shook his head. “One got away. But I’ll go over the Wanted posters to see if I can find him.”

Dallas stepped harder on the man’s shoulder as he screamed in pain. “I have a better idea.”

The sheriff tapped Dallas on the stomach twice with the back of his hand. “Let him up. We’ll find out what we need to know when we get him to the jail.” He pulled the criminal to his feet. “Okay, buddy. Time to go.”

“When my brothers hear about this, they’ll shoot you down!” he yelled as Daxton tied his hands and shoved him across the saddle. “Oh, come on! At least let me sit in the saddle!”

Colton laughed. “For what? To let you ride off and warn your ‘brothers’?”

“You just wait!” He squirmed, trying to free his hands behind his back. “Mark my words! My brothers will come for you, and they’ll kill everyone in this town!”

“And we’ll be waiting.” Dallas punched him in the jaw, knocking him out, and then straightened his gray morning coat. “I was getting sick of hearing him anyway.”

Sheriff Clark’s eyes opened wide. “Good for you!”

Colton smirked. “I didn’t know you had it in you.”

Dallas’s head snapped up, frowning as he slid onto his horse and took the reins. “Just because I own a bank doesn’t mean I can’t handle my own affairs.”



Colton suppressed a smile.

Dallas shook his head, knowing why Colton had smiled at the mention of affairs. Colton had fallen in love with Dallas's former fiancée, Ella Raines, when she had come to town as Dallas's mail-order bride. But now she and Colton were happily married with twins.

But Dallas had no hard feelings toward either of them. After all, everything had seemed to work out, except that he still didn't have a wife. And in society, important men always had lovely wives.

"Well, I'll leave you to it, then." Dallas mounted his horse. "I need to get back to the bank and check on everyone."

Sheriff Clark mounted his horse, and so did Colton. "I'll come by later to check on things."

Dallas nodded. "Thanks, sheriff."

Colton arched an eyebrow, his expression serious. "How many were killed?"

Dallas let out a deep breath as they all headed back toward town. "Three. Two were criminals and the other was one of my men."

Sheriff Clark nodded sympathetically as Colton turned somber, listening. "Who?"

Dallas sighed. "Virgil."

"What about Butch, Milo, and Jake?"

"They're still standing, so they're fine."

“And the tellers?”

Dallas laughed without humor. “Probably scared out of their wits, but I’m sure they’re okay. I think they were hiding behind the counter.”

Sheriff Clark grinned.

Yes, Russell Reyna and Alonzo Slater were good tellers, but they weren’t fighters. Dallas smiled, remembering the look on Russell’s face when the outlaw pulled the gun on him. His blood boiled at the thought.

On the way back to the bank they picked up the other criminal, who had been shot in the leg. He took one look at his brother, lying limply across the horse, and yelled, “Brock! What have you done to him? You killed him! You killed my brother!”

Dallas slapped him hard across the face with the back of his hand. “No, he’s alive, you idiot. He just has a glass jaw.”

“And if you don’t shut up, you’re going to join him.” Colton bound his wrists and pulled him to his feet.

“Hey! Watch it!” the man yelled.

“And what are you going to do about it?” Colton asked, amused.

“My brothers will—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sheriff Clark helped Colton throw him over the back of the horse with his brother. “We know. Your brothers are coming for us. They’re going to kill us all. Blah, blah, blah.”

The man looked at him, his eyebrows pulled together, confused. “Yes,” he agreed, and then recovered himself. “They’ll be here in three days’ time.”

“Shut up, Gentry,” Brock ordered groggily, coming to. “You always did have a big mouth.”

“Shut up before I kill you both!” Dallas mounted his horse. But this time, he waited for Sheriff Clark and Colton.

Colton chuckled, enjoying their discomfort a bit too much.

When they got back to the sheriff’s office, Colton helped Daxton throw Gentry and Brock into separate cells.

“Aren’t you going to take us to the doctor?”

The sheriff laughed. “You aren’t going anywhere. We’ll bring the doctor to you.” He stepped close to the bars, a smile lighting his lips. “When he’s finished disposing of your two brothers.”

Gentry grabbed the bars and the sheriff backed away. He looked over and his eyes fell on Dallas. “You there! You’re the one who killed my brothers!”

Dallas shrugged. “Well, that’s what happens when you rob a bank... my bank.”

Gentry’s face screwed up as it turned red, gripping the bars of the jail cell so tightly that his knuckles turned white. “When my brothers hear of this, they’ll come after you!”

Dallas lifted his chin. “Let them come.”

“I’m going to kill you, banker!” Gentry yelled, shaking the immovable cell bars. “You’re a dead man! Do you hear me, banker? They’ll come after you!”

Dallas ignored the outlaw, nodding his thanks to the sheriff as he walked out. Gentry’s voice became muted as the door swung tightly closed behind him.

The following Monday, the U.S. Marshall came from Laramie to take away the two men who robbed Dallas’s bank. Dallas wanted to be there when he came. He figured that the sheriff and Colton would need all the help they could get.

“My brothers will come for you!” Brock yelled, pointing his finger at Dallas, as the sheriff and Colton pulled the two men out of the jail, kicking and screaming the whole time.

“Yeah, yeah,” the U.S. Marshall mumbled, shoving the outlaws into the back of a tumbleweed wagon—a prison cell on wheels—flanked by several armed guards and a driver. “Tell it to the judge.” Once inside, he chained the prisoners to the floor to prevent escape.

“Yeah, mark his words... er... my words! Our cousins will come for you!” Gentry didn’t seem as bright as his brother, and that was saying something.

“You can’t do this to us!” Brock yelled, grabbing the bars of the tumbleweed wagon, pressing his face against them, snarling like a caged animal.

“The hell we can’t.” The U.S. Marshall walked over to Daxton and offered him his hand. “Sheriff Clark, thank you for the apprehension of these men. We’ve been looking for ‘em for a while.”

“You know them?” Sheriff Clark shook his hand as Colton and Dallas looked on.

The U.S. Marshall nodded. “They’re part of the Yates Gang.” He looked around at the surrounding country. “A friendly word of warning: Watch your back. These men don’t work alone.” He let out a deep breath as he took off his hat.

“How many?” Daxton asked.

The marshal ran his fingers through his hair and then put his hat back on. “Not sure, but quite a few. There’ve been a lot of robberies in these parts attributed to them.” He mounted his horse, preparing to leave as the men who were with them did the same.

“You need any help?” Daxton adjusted his hat. “I can ride with you while Colton stays here to watch the town.”

The U.S. Marshal shook his head. “No, we’ll be fine.” A sly grin spread across his lips. “And I’m not alone. I have plenty of help.”

The four other men with him chuckled.

“Fair enough.” Daxton shook his hand. “Thanks for taking these two off my hands. They were so loud they were giving me a headache.”

The marshal laughed. “Glad to do it.”

“Be careful on the way back, marshal.” Dallas shook his hand.

“Will do.” Then the U.S. Marshal turned to his men. “Let’s go!”

“I’ll get you, banker! Mark my words!” Brock yelled through the steel bars.

Gentry chimed in, too. “Yeah, we’ll get you!”

“Shut up, Gentry!”

“No, you shut up!”

The two took turns yelling and arguing as the wagon pulled away.

“I don’t envy the marshal.” Colton chuckled, shaking his head as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “He has his hands full.”

“They all do.” Dallas laughed.

Later that night, Dallas sat by the fire in the parlor of his ranch house, enjoying a brandy and a cigar after dinner, rocking back and forth in a rocking chair. He took a puff and blew out a smoke ring as the sweet cigar scent filled the air.

“Would ye be needin’ anything else before I go?” Mrs. Daly asked as she slid her reticule onto her wrist and adjusted her cloak. She had been working for Dallas King since he came to Whiskey River. “I’ll be retirin’ here momentarily.”

Dallas smiled. “No, thank you, Mrs. Daly. I can manage.”

She nodded. “Very well, then. I’ll be here bright and early in the morn’, sir. Don’t ye fret.” Mrs. Daly and her husband had moved to Whiskey River from Ireland when they were newly married. When Dallas moved to Whiskey River, he needed a housekeeper, and she fit the bill. Dallas had also hired Mr. Daly to help with the horses. Come to find out, he was a good horseman. Dallas had set up a private cabin for the two of them a good ways away from the bunkhouse for privacy.

Over the years, Dallas had come to depend upon Mrs. Daly. She did his laundry, cooked his meals, and cleaned the house. But what he lacked was companionship.

Dallas swirled the brandy around in the glass before taking another sip, letting the alcohol warm him. He ticked off the names of the women of marrying age in Whiskey River but none of them interested him. That was why he had contacted Madame Samantha Chase, Matchmaker, and had taken out another advertisement for a mail-order bride. He just hoped that he had made the right decision... and that it worked out better this time than last.

His mind went to his failed foray in the mail-order-bride business a few years before. Ella Raines—now Ella Hill—had been his mail-order bride, but she had fallen in love with her escort, Colton Hill, on the way. But when Dallas made arrangements with Madame Chase this time, he'd made sure to tell her not to send an escort with his betrothed.

He took another sip of his brandy, swirling the caramel-colored liquid. It reminded him of his father, a drunkard whose entertainment was beating his wife and children when he was drunk. When he was sober, he was the nicest, most caring and charismatic man in the world. But when he drank, it was another story; he became another man entirely.

Luckily, alcohol had never affected Dallas that way; it just soothed and relaxed him. But he was also sure to drink in moderation. However, he had to work to control his temper which he inherited from his father. It was an aspect of his character that he was working on.

Dallas guessed that he inherited his sense of perfectionism from his father, as well. Not that his father had been a perfectionist. Oh, heavens no! But over the years, Dallas had worked hard to achieve perfection in an effort to break the bonds of his past.

When he was growing up, Dallas felt he always had to be perfect. If he had been, then he wouldn't have received the beatings. Looking back, it seemed that Dallas had

always done something to set him off, triggering the beatings. But of course, the beatings always happened when his father was drunk. And the more his father beat him, the more perfect Dallas tried to be. After all, his father was beating him because of his imperfections, wasn't he? Dallas found that the less mistakes he made, the less attention he attracted from his father when he was drunk, then the less beatings he received.

As a child, Dallas wondered why his father beat him. He had come to this conclusion early in his life: Because of his imperfection, he was unlovable. After all, if his mother had loved him, she would have stopped the beatings. Wouldn't she? And if his father had loved him, why would he beat him? Being unlovable was the only conclusion he could manage.

Dallas had also grown up poor and remembered walking for what seemed like miles—sometimes in snow and rain—to get an education in a one-room schoolhouse in Minnesota. His own father, John King, had been educated at home by his mother and had never received a formal education.

John's father, Wesley King, would expect him to work in the fields during harvest time, and school was pushed to the wayside. Wesley had never gone to school and believed that an education was a waste of a man's time, preventing him from learning the meaning of a hard day's work. Every hand was needed at harvest time, no matter how small. The survival of the family became much more important than an education.

As a result, Dallas's parents had struggled to support him as a child and money was scarce. Christmases often consisted of fruit, a few pieces of store-bought candy, and the treats that his mother made for him.

Learning from his childhood, Dallas had been determined to break the cycle of poverty. Although John scoffed at his getting an education in his youth, he never



stopped Dallas from going to school. And the more he learned, the more he craved. And Dallas soon found he had a nose for business.

John taught Dallas how to farm so he would always have a trade to support himself. But Dallas was eager to make a break from his life and was determined to make something more of himself. Dallas's teacher, Mrs. Menton, had taken a liking to him and had helped him to apply to a university. As a result, Dallas left home for the University of Chicago in May 1861 at the age of seventeen. His teacher had graduated from the same university. Stories she had told the class about her time there had captured his fantasies and hope for a different life.

When his teacher asked him if he would have rather applied to a local university, Dallas balked, telling her that he wanted to start a new life. Miss Menton had cautioned him not to forget where he came from, but it didn't matter to Dallas.

In college, Dallas's grades were so good that he received a scholarship, but he had to work in the cafeteria and took odd jobs tutoring other students to make enough money to stay. That was when he met Charles Whitfield.

He and Charles became fast friends when three students had cornered Charles in a dark alley. Dallas was on his way to the dorm from the library after a long night of studying. When he saw what was happening, he stood by Charles's side. Together, they took on the three other students. When they were finished, no other student bothered Charles again.

Dallas eventually learned that Charles came from a very well-to-do family in New York, the Whitfields. They were as wealthy as the Astors and Rockefellers, maybe wealthier. Charles could have gone to any university in New York but had decided to attend the University of Chicago to get away from the influence of his family's name and achieve success on his own.

Charles reminded Dallas a lot of himself, and the fact that Charles came from money had never mattered to Dallas. Over the years, Charles and Dallas had remained friends through thick and thin.

In an effort to repay Dallas and to help him get started, Charles set Dallas up in business as manager of the bank in Whiskey River. Dallas had balked at first, telling Charles that he didn't have to do this because they were friends. Charles had insisted that it was because Dallas was so good in business, but deep down, Dallas knew better. In truth, Dallas was one of the few people that Charles could trust.

Over the next few years, Dallas had saved and persuaded Charles to sell him the bank. Charles gave him a loan and soon Dallas had paid back every penny with interest. Despite their business dealings, he and Charles had remained friends over the years. In fact, Charles was the closest friend that Dallas ever had.

Now, watching the fire, Dallas took a drink of his brandy as thoughts of taking another mail-order bride went through his mind. Would it work this time, or would it end in disaster just as it had the first time? But he guessed that the first endeavor hadn't been a total failure. After all, there were two other lives in the world now because of it, and Ella was happy. And it wasn't as if Dallas had ever loved her. Now, he was happy for her. It was better this way.

He glanced over at the table and noticed a letter that he hadn't seen when he first walked in. Mrs. Daly had probably picked it up for him from the postmaster when she was in town. He stood and strode over to the table. He fingered the edge of the letter as he read the return address label: Madame Samantha Chase, Matchmaker. It had a New York postmark.

"Don't tell me she's found me a bride so soon," Dallas mused aloud, his heart pounding. He picked up the letter and sat back in the rocking chair. Could the woman in this letter be the bride he had been looking for?

Dear Mr. King:

Thank you for your kind request for a mail-order bride. I have good news! Out of all the women who have answered your advertisement, I feel this young lady is the most suitable for you. Her name is Miss Megan Shannon. As per your request, I have included a photograph and added it to your bill, but she has light auburn hair and green eyes. She is lovely and has a great personality. If it is not objectionable to you, she is also from Ireland but is now an American citizen.

Let me know your thoughts. She is willing to travel soon.

Best Regards,

Madame Samantha Chase, Matchmaker

Dallas smiled as he read. Not objectionable? His housekeeper and stable manager were both Irish and it hadn't mattered to him one bit. But in these times, he guessed it had to be said. So many people objected to the Irish coming here and taking the available jobs. He let out a sigh.

When he looked at the photograph, his breath caught. Even in black and white, the woman in the photograph was beautiful. He could imagine what she looked like in real life.

But this time, he planned to marry her right away, not wanting history to repeat itself. He would talk to Reverend Caleb Henley, the town preacher, to see if he could marry them upon her arrival.

Without delay, Dallas sat down at his writing desk and penned a letter to the matchmaker, stating that Miss Shannon was the perfect choice and that he couldn't wait to meet his new bride. He also wrote that she should come as soon as possible,

and that he planned to marry her upon her arrival in Whiskey River.

Dallas just hoped he was making the right decision... this time.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Megan

Megan looked in the mirror one last time and adjusted her hat again and smoothed back a lock of her wavy auburn hair. She had pulled it neatly up into curls and pinned it into place, leaving tendrils on the sides to frame her face. As a final thought, she pinched her cheeks for color.

“Gather your belongings!” The steward’s voice bellowed, his heavy footfalls resonating down the hallway. “We will arrive in Laramie soon!”

After she buried her brother, Megan went to see Madame Samantha Chase, Matchmaker, to answer the ad. She had never done anything this insane before, but she hadn’t had much choice. Megan had her doubts about marrying a man she had never met before, but her situation was dire. If it hadn’t been for the kindness of Trent Jericho, she wouldn’t have even been able to afford to bury her brother. In a short time she had come to realize that, although money wasn’t everything, it was important to survival. Perhaps more important than love. Now, she had to make a change in her life and this one was the best option. So, she cast caution to the wind and made her decision.

Megan wanted a life with a husband, children, and protection, just as she had promised her brother. After she answered the ad, everything happened so fast it made Megan’s head spin. Madame Chase had her go immediately to a photographer, where she posed in an uncomfortable position for a photograph. Then once she heard from Mr. King, Madame Chase had sent a carriage for her and Megan’s adventure began. Madame Chase was kind and had taken her out of the tenement, insisting that she stay with her in her fine home until Megan left for Whiskey River.

Madame Chase had even bought her a new dress, courtesy of Mr. King, and allowed her to bathe. She even gave her a room to stay in until she left... all to herself. That night, Megan had the first decent night's sleep that she had had in a very long time.

The next morning over breakfast, Madame Chase had instructed her that the train would leave in three days and that she was to stay with her until then. During that time, she had given her the fine points of etiquette and society, right down to how to use the silverware and in what order, and how to properly pour tea, among other things.

When the day came for her to leave, the thought of leaving Liam behind was crushing, but she knew that he wasn't really in New York and that she would carry him with her in her heart no matter where she went. But she owed it to Liam to go on with her life.

On the train, Dallas King had spared no expense. Everything was first class all the way, from the spacious cabin to the meals. The waiter had offered her caviar, which she had never had before. She had her doubts when she found out that it was fish eggs but tried it anyway. To her delight, she liked the salty flavor. But the money and grandeur would take some getting used to. At least she would be saved from the fate of her parents and her brother.

Megan just hoped that the man she was betrothed to was a good man, one who would treat her with kindness, and who would care for her and their future children.

As a mail-order bride, at least she wouldn't have to worry about love. After all, she had lost every person in the world that she had ever loved. She didn't know if her heart could take falling in love with a man and then losing him, too.

When they arrived in Laramie, Megan's heart pounded as the train started to slow and then lurched to a stop. She looked in the mirror one last time and smoothed her new

dress. It was green, setting off her auburn hair. She had just one other dress, a work dress, in the pillowcase that she still carried. She just hoped that Dallas would see her for who she was on the inside and not for what she wore.

“Well, this is it!” she said aloud as she screwed up her courage, adjusted the matching hat, and picked up the pillowcase carrying all of her worldly possessions. Then she opened the door and strolled down the hallway toward her new life, joining the other disembarking passengers.

“Here you go, miss!” The conductor happily held out his hand to help her off the train.

She nodded her thanks as butterflies beat against the walls of her stomach. Cool air rushed to her as her feet touched the wooden platform. Her eyes traveled around, and she spotted the banker, Mr. King, right away, just from the description that Madame Chase had given her. He had impeccably groomed blond hair along with the immaculate light gray suit he wore. Megan’s breath caught. She had never seen a man so handsome before. He was standing by a fine carriage and had two other men with him. One was the driver, and she figured that the other may be a guard. Megan’s heart stopped as their eyes met and a smile curled Dallas’s lips, revealing a dimple in one of his cheeks.

Dallas quickly closed the distance between them and offered her his hand. To her surprise, a surge of electricity ran through her body at his touch. She had hoped that she would like him, but she hadn’t expected her body to react this way.

“Well, your photograph didn’t do you justice. You are quite breathtaking.” He lifted her hand to his lips, bringing a blush to her cheeks.

“Thank ye,” she replied. “‘Tis a pleasure to meet ye.”

A smile spread across his lips. "I assure you, the pleasure is all mine." He offered her his arm. "Did you bring any luggage with you?"

She clutched the pillowcase that held all of hers and her brother's worldly possessions. Megan held it up. "No, this is it."

"Well, we'll have to remedy that." Every emotion flitted across his face, unfathomable to read since she didn't know him yet. "Shall we?" Dallas offered her his arm. "Preacher Henley is waiting to marry us today in Whiskey River. I would have had the preacher here in Laramie marry us, but I wanted Preacher Henley to do the honor. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Yes, of course." After all, she had come to Wyoming to marry him, hadn't she?

She took his arm, her heart pounding wildly as he led her to his carriage. He helped her inside like a true gentleman. The two other men climbed to the top of the carriage, and Dallas slid in beside her and took her hand, sending another wave of electricity through her. Never had she felt such attraction to a man before, especially someone she had just met.

"I trust your trip went well?" he asked, his blue eyes sparkling.

"Very well, thank ye."

"And how did you find the accommodations?" He arched an eyebrow, awaiting her answer.

A smile spread across her lips. "Wonderful, thank ye. In fact, ye didn't need to go to so much trouble fer me."

He chuckled. "'Twas no trouble at all." He curled his hand around hers.



She let out a nervous laugh. “I guess I’m just not used to such fine things.”

Dallas smiled. “Well, you’d better get used to it. As my wife, I’ll see to it that you have the best of everything.”

She nodded, but her smile faded. “Thank ye.” She would have been satisfied with a roof over her head and food in her stomach, but she had never expected him to lavish such treasures on her. Inside, she knew that having money shouldn’t matter so much, but the level of poverty she had endured made her think otherwise. But extravagance was another thing. “Although I expect not to struggle... financially... extravagance is another matter. We should save money for a rainy day.”

He placed a finger under her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. “Yes, you’re right. Extravagance isn’t necessary, but now that you’re here, I’d like to spoil you. Please, do me that honor.”

She smiled, enjoying his company and being treated like a princess. Would this be her new life? A life equivalent to that of a princess? She wondered if one day it might include love, but she pushed the thought quickly aside. Whether they loved each other or not was of no consequence. After all, many women marry for security, don’t they? No, she wouldn’t let love get in the way of a favorable marriage. After all, if she could have married to save her parents and her brother from their fate, she would have. But no matter what happened between Dallas and her, Megan vowed to be the best wife to him that she could possibly be.

“After we’re married, you’ll stay at my ranch,” Dallas continued, his attention focused solely on her. “I hope you don’t mind not going on a honeymoon right away. I thought we’d get settled in first. Then when things are settled with the bank, I’ll take you wherever you’d like.”

Megan smiled politely. “That’s fine.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

She shook her head. “No, not at all. It’ll give me a chance to get the house in order. I could give it a thorough cleanin’ and set up the kitchen—”

“I have a chef and a housekeeper for that,” Dallas cut her off, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “The only thing I’d like for you to do is to settle in and get used to running a home as the lady of the house.”

Warmth filled her body at his touch as blush colored her cheeks. For a moment, she wondered what it would be like to be intimate with this man. She hoped he would be as kind and gentle as he was now. He hadn’t forced his affections upon her yet, and she hoped he wouldn’t. But one thing was certain: If he or any man laid a hand on her in any way that wasn’t respectful, he would be feeling the backside of a frying pan against his skull, husband or not. But so far, he had given her no cause for alarm. He was romantic, in fact. So, she quickly pushed the thought aside.

Dallas prattled on as they rode, and she mainly listened. He had a nice, manly voice, a voice she could listen to for the rest of her life, which she planned to do.

Soon, they pulled into a small town. They came to a dress shop to the right and the carriage pulled to a stop in front.

“A dress shop? Now?” Megan asked when the driver opened the door. “I thought we were going to be wed—”

“Yes, that’s why we’re here.” Dallas stepped out and held out his hand for her. He looked over her dress. “Your dress is lovely, but it won’t serve as your wedding gown.”

“That’s not necessary—”

“Nonsense!” Dallas cut her off, holding out his arm. “I told you that I intend to spoil you and that begins now.”

“Well, then, a practical dress is fine... something I can wear again—”

“No.” He leaned in conspiratorially, a smile curling his lips. “I want you to have a dress that our daughter can wear on her wedding day... an heirloom.”

Megan blushed as she took his arm and let him escort her to the door. She had gone from being completely poor and alone, to being rich and planning a family... all in the course of one day. It was a lot to take in. She wondered why he was doing this. Surely, a man with his credentials, means, and money could have any woman he wanted. But she pushed the thought aside, not wanting to give him reason to change his mind.

“Well, if ye insist—”

“I do.”

Before he could open the door to the shop, it flew open and a woman with auburn hair—a bit lighter than her own—flung open the door. “Why, Mr. King! You didn’t tell me your new bride was so lovely!” She looked Megan up and down and then extended her hand, palm down. “My name is Kenzie Baker. ‘Tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Her accent was a combination of an English accent and an Irish brogue.

Megan was immediately intrigued, wondering about her story, but she quickly pushed the thought aside. After all, this was her wedding day. “The pleasure is mine.”

Kenzie’s head snapped up as she linked arms with her. “Are you from Ireland?”

“Yes, I am.” Megan nodded.

Kenzie smiled. “My parents were originally from Ireland, and they moved to England when I was young.”

Dallas cleared his throat behind them.

“But we’ll have plenty of time to get to know one another later. Let’s go inside. After all, today is your wedding day.” In the store, Kenzie led her to a beautiful white gown hanging on a dressmaker’s form. It was floor length, fitted at the waist and bustled in the back with a huge silk bow in the back. The fine lace overlay shimmered in the sunlight that streamed in through the window. “Well, what do you think?”

Megan gasped. “No!” She looked at Kenzie, her eyes open wide. “This is... fer me?”

Kenzie smiled, clearly enjoying her reaction. “If you don’t believe me, then ask your fiancé.”

Megan snapped her head toward Dallas, unable to believe what she was seeing.

Dallas smiled, taking her hands in his own. Then he lifted them to his lips and kissed each hand. The gesture was simple, yet so intimate that she blushed. “Anything for my bride.”

“But ‘tis too much....” She turned her head to look at the dress again. “Back home, ye could feed a village for a week with the money that—”

“Shh....” He placed a finger gently to her lips. “Let’s have no mention of money. Not today. I want everything to be perfect for you... for us... just this one day.” He glanced up at her through his eyelashes, his eyes pleading. “Please?”

The intensity in his eyes was more than she could bear. “If it pleases ye—”

“It does.” A broad smile spread across his handsome face. Dallas turned to Kenzie, taking charge. “Miss Baker, would you assist my bride?” He took out a pocket watch and looked at it, checking the time. Then he jumped with a start as he snapped it closed. “Megan, I’ll send a driver for you.” He took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “We’re due at the church at four o’clock. I’ll meet you there?”

Megan gave him a nervous smile and nodded as a thrill ran through her body. It appeared as if the fairy tale she had been waiting for was coming true at last. “I’ll be the one in white.”

“No need to send for a driver,” Kenzie said, her voice soft. “I’ll make sure she gets to the church on time.”

Megan glanced over at her, panicked. “But I need to bathe—”

“My home is right upstairs, over my store.” Kenzie took her hand. “And I have a bathing room downstairs with a bathtub.”

Megan’s eyes grew wide. “This store... is yers?”

Kenzie nodded as a broad smile spread across her face. “Lock, stock, and barrel.”

“My, my!” Never before had Megan met a woman who owned property, let alone a business.

Dallas gave her one last wave from the door. “I’ll see you at the church.”

Megan smiled, feeling like her fairy tale had now begun. “I’ll be on time. Don’t ye be worryin’ ‘bout that none.”

Dallas blew her a kiss, and then walked out the door. Watching his carriage pull away, Megan found that she missed him already. Don't fall in love with him, she thought to herself. Like him, yes, but don't love him.

"Now, to get you ready...." Kenzie quickly took charge, leading her to a table. "You sit here and have a cup of tea while I prepare your bath."

Later that day, Megan found herself in Kenzie Baker's buggy, headed toward the church. She was freshly bathed and dressed in the white, shimmering gown, with her hair pulled up on the sides and loose curls cascading down her back. A tulle veil was attached at the crown and hung down her back, showing her curls beneath. And the slippers on her feet were made of white satin. She truly felt like a princess.

Holding the reins of the horse, Kenzie looked into her eyes. "Are you well?"

Megan nodded. "Yes, I'm fine."

Kenzie let out a deep breath as she pulled the horse over to the side of the road and then to a stop.

Megan's eyes grew wide. "What... what are ye doin'?"

Kenzie ignored Megan's alarm. "Are you sure this is what you want? It's not too late to change your mind, you know. You don't have to do this, if you don't want to."

At that moment, Megan realized that Kenzie was giving her a choice, and probably at great peril to herself, should Dallas find out. Megan could see that Dallas was a powerful man and could probably ruin Kenzie, if he chose, although she hoped he wouldn't. Megan could also see that Kenzie was a good woman, not much older than herself. She was quite accomplished for someone so young and had much to lose.

Megan smiled. “Yes, I do. I want to do this.” She sighed as she looked out over the cool, colorful countryside, which would soon turn cold. The leaves were changing, casting the land in varying shades of yellow, orange, red, brown, and green. As she looked over the land stretched out before her, decorated in a blanket of color with snow-capped mountains rising majestically in the distance, Megan had never seen anything so beautiful. “Never have I seen anything so lovely, except back home in Ireland.” She smoothed a hand over her dress. “Never have I seen such finery, such riches.” She bit her lower lip, trying to find the right words. “I know that it seems that I care only about money. But, Miss Baker, try to understand. Me parents died of starvation, and me brother and I lived in a tenement in poverty with two other families when we came to New York. I’d like to say that money isn’t everything, but it helps. I need to marry Mr. King to survive, but I plan to be the best wife that I can possibly be.”

A crease formed between Kenzie’s eyes. “And what of love?”

Megan knew she should tell her that it was none of her business, but she liked her already. Kenzie had been so kind to her, she didn’t want to hurt her. So, she thought that the truth should be explanation enough. “I’ve lost everyone I loved. I like Dallas, and for now, that should suffice.”

Kenzie patted her hand, appearing to be satisfied. “If you’re sure, then I think we have a wedding to attend.”

“Yes, I think we do.” Megan’s lips curled into a smile. “Well, dressed like this, I don’t think I should be goin’ to a factory to work.”

Kenzie chuckled. “No, I don’t think you should. Besides, they may think you’re a princess and put you on the next boat to England.” Kenzie shook the reins, and the horses trotted again.

Megan laughed. “No, they’d get one listen of me and ship me back to Ireland.”

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.” Kenzie smiled. “Besides, I’m sure Dallas would track down anyone who tried, especially today.”

“Miss Baker?”

“Kenzie, please.”

Megan nodded. “Kenzie... thank you for your concern.”

Kenzie reached over and gave her hand a quick squeeze. “‘Tis my pleasure.”

Megan looked up and a beautiful stone church came into view, surrounded by trees before a backdrop of mountains. “‘Tis lovely.”

Kenzie smiled proudly. “Yes, it is. I was told that it was the first permanent structure built here in town.”

Carriages and buckboards set about. “It appears that Mr. King has lots of friends.”

“It looks like the whole town is here.” Kenzie shrugged. “He told everyone you were coming.”

Megan’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Really?”

Kenzie gave her a wink and pulled the buggy to a stop. “It’s not every day that the town banker gets married.”

Megan giggled. “Well, I hope not!”



Kenzie chuckled as she tied off the reins. “Come on. Let’s go.”

A man approached the buggy, opened Megan’s door, and extended his hand. “Please forgive the intrusion, but Mr. King asked if I could escort you into the church.” The man was tall and brunette, reminding her of her brother, Liam.

At that moment, a tinge of pain tugged at her heart, wishing Liam—and her parents, for that matter—were here to celebrate this day with her. But deep down inside, she knew they were.

“By all means. Thank you.” Megan took his hand and then glanced over at Kenzie, on the arm of another dashing man that was either her beau or another man sent by Mr. King to be her escort. It appeared that he thought of everything.

The gentleman escorting Megan smiled. “Mr. King will be waiting at the altar for you.”

Megan smoothed a hand over her dress as Kenzie gathered Megan’s train and followed behind her. The gentleman escorting her followed discreetly behind.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Kenzie straightened her train, and then pulled her in for a quick hug and handed her a wildflower bouquet. “I’ll see you inside,” she whispered. Then she released her and walked in.

“Ready?” The gentleman smiled, looking down at her as they stood in the doorway of the church.

She nodded. “But first, what ‘tis yer name?”

“Jake. I’m one of Mr. King’s guards. It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am. I think the world of Mr. King and wish you both the very best.” He offered her his arm. “Shall

we?”

She smiled. “Yes, let’s.” Her heart fluttered in anticipation as she approached the doorway of the church. When the doors opened, Dallas stood at the other end of the aisle by the altar, as handsome as ever in a black suit, crisp white shirt, and black shoes that gleamed in the sunlight. Another man stood to the right of him, but no one was standing at the altar on her side.

“Kenzie!” Megan stopped her as she walked past.

Kenzie eyebrows rose.

“Could ye stand up with me?” Megan knew it was a lot to ask, especially since Kenzie hadn’t planned on it and they had just met.

Kenzie cocked her head to the side for a moment, smiling. “Why, yes! Of course I will.” The gentleman escorting her took her coat and folded it across his arm, smiling graciously, and then took his seat in the church. Nearly every seat in the church was taken.

When the music started, Megan gave Kenzie a nod and then she walked down the aisle. Then the music changed, signaling that it was Megan’s turn. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach, but when she saw Dallas waiting at the altar, his gleaming smile and his beautiful blue eyes, she knew she was making the right choice. Marrying this wonderful man was not only a choice she had to make, it was the choice she wanted to make. She had a feeling that everything else would work itself out.

Jake escorted her down the aisle and placed her hand in Dallas’s, then went over to sit with the other guests. When Megan looked into Dallas’s eyes, she knew this was right.

The preacher smiled at Dallas and Megan as he held a Bible. “Ready?”

Dallas looked over at her, giving her a choice, despite everything. When she smiled and nodded, he looked back at the preacher. “Yes, Preacher Henley, we are.”

Preacher Henley nodded as he faced the congregation. “Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to celebrate the joining of Dallas King and Megan Shannan in Holy Matrimony.” Then in the words as old as time itself, Megan and Dallas, each repeated the words that would join them as husband and wife.

When it was Dallas’s turn, Megan wasn’t prepared for the look in his eyes. It was indescribable. Was it love? But he had just met her. How could that be? Then he took her hands in his and gazed into her eyes and said “I do” with conviction.

When it was Megan’s turn, she replied “I do” with no regrets. She just hoped she could live up to the respect and adoration in his eyes.

Then Reverend Henley turned to the gathered guests. “May I present to you for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Dallas King!”

Everyone clapped and cheered as Megan took Dallas’s arm and let him lead her through the church to the back. They spent the next few minutes shaking hands as everyone left the church, but Megan had a feeling they weren’t really leaving.

“Congratulations, Mr. King!” Reverend Henley smiled as he shook his hand. “Now that you’re a family man, does this mean that I’ll be seeing you on Sundays?”

Dallas slipped his arm around Megan’s waist and pulled her to his side, smiling. “That just depends upon my lovely new wife here.”

Megan nodded. “Well, then. If it’s up to me, then count us in. We’ll be here.”

Then she noticed a blonde woman hanging back with two small children. Reverend Henley reached for her about the same time. “May I introduce my wife, Mia, and our children Shane and Hailey. Mia, this is Megan Shannon.”

“Megan King now,” Megan corrected as she turned to Mia. “‘Tis a pleasure to meet ye.”

Mia gave her a warm smile. “I can assure you, the pleasure is mine.” She pulled Megan in for a quick hug. “I’m sure we’ll have plenty of time to get to know each other. But now, I think you have a reception to go to.”

Megan’s head snapped up toward her new husband, raising her eyebrows.

Dallas chuckled at her expression. “Yes, we do.” Then he offered her his arm. “Shall we?”

She slipped her arm in his. “I’d thought ye’d never ask.”

“Are you hungry?” Dallas asked as they walked over to the reception hall.

Noticing the firm muscles beneath his suit, Megan realized that she was now married to this magnificent man. Heat filled her body, and her cheeks flushed at the thought. “Yes, I’m getting a wee bit hungry. I haven’t had anything to eat since this mornin’ on the train. Kenzie made me some tea, though.”

“Well, we’ll have to remedy that now, won’t we?” He winked as he slid his arm around her waist and guided her toward a separate building. “This is the Recreation Hall. The congregation built it a few years ago.”

When he led her inside, everyone cheered. To the right were tables filled with food, which included dishes from people within the community as well as different kinds of

meats, vegetables, and desserts that looked as if they came from a restaurant.

A tall man approached with a muscular frame and dark brown hair, wearing a cowboy hat. “I trust everything’s to your satisfaction? I did everything to your specifications, Mr. King.”

“Everything looks perfect. Thank you.” Megan, this is Harrison Curry, owner of the only restaurant in town.” After Megan nodded, Dallas turned to Harrison. “Everything looks perfect. Thank you.”

A broad smile spread across Harrison’s face. “I’m glad to hear that. Congratulations on your marriage. May it be blessed and filled with happiness.” Then he tipped his hat toward Megan. “Ma’am.”

Megan smiled graciously. “This is too much,” she whispered after Harrison walked away. “Too extravagant—”

“Shh....” Dallas looked around as he pulled her off to the side. “Please, don’t say that in front of everyone and embarrass me like that.”

“Excuse me?”

“As my wife, you need to get used to having fine things.” Dallas bit his lower lip and released it. “Megan, I’m a very rich man and you’re going to have to get used to extravagance.”

Megan stepped up to him, her gaze never wavering. “I’ve listened to ye speak, now ye listen to me, Mr. Dallas King. First of all, I will not be spoken to in this manner. Secondly....” She gestured around the room. “How many of these people are truly yer friends? Or are ye just trying to make a good show in front of ‘em?” She shook her head as she looked into his eyes. “We need to save money for a rainy day. And

believe me, I've seen plenty. You don't have to buy things and make a show—"

"Stop," Dallas cut her off, continuing in a calm, soothing voice. "Let's not do this today. It's our wedding day, after all. I just wanted to show you a good time." He paused for a moment, as if searching for the right words. "Megan, I know you've had a rough life, but I'd like to change that... if you'll let me. Please."

His eyes were so pleading, how could she say no? "Okay. Jus' this once."

A broad grin spread across his lips. "Music, please!" he yelled to the crowd and then turned back to Megan. "I'd like to dance with my lovely bride."

Megan blushed as her new husband swung her effortlessly across the dancefloor. In his arms, she forgot about such things as money and status. The only thing she could think of was this wonderful man that she would now call her husband. Other couples soon joined them on the dancefloor. And as they swayed to the music and the night wore on, lamps were lit, creating a romantic glow. It was the most magical day that Megan could ever remember.

Soon, the music came to an end, and everyone clapped. "Are you hungry?" Dallas asked again and then laughed. "Sorry. I was going to feed you when we walked in but got distracted."

Megan smiled. "That's okay." She gave his shoulder a friendly nudge. "Besides, I'm a big girl and can take care of meself, thank ye very much."

Dallas bent down and leaned his forehead against hers. "I just love your accent."

She pushed gently against his chest. "Oh, I think ye better be letting me eat, unless ye'd like to see me pass out."

One corner of his lips curled into a smile. “Come on, then. The ham is exquisite. Paul, the cook at the restaurant, makes the best.”

“Sounds delicious.” Megan tucked her arm in his and he led her to the buffet table.

Being a true gentleman, Dallas took a plate off a stack at one end of the table. “What would you like?”

Megan smiled, reaching for the plate. “That’s okay. I can get it meself.”

“Well, if you insist.” He handed her the plate and then took one for himself. “The fried chicken is fabulous, and so is the corn on the cob. Since it’s October, we probably won’t have fresh corn for a while....” Dallas prattled on, pointing out different dishes and telling her about them as he made his own plate.

As Megan looked over the table, she was suddenly so hungry that she could have eaten everything, including the dishes. She had never seen such delicacies, nor had she ever had her choice of this much food before. Not wanting to look foolish, she took a little of this and a bit of that, but by the time she reached the end of the table, her plate was filled.

Dallas did a double take at her plate and nodded in understanding. Then he placed his hand behind her head and bent down to kiss her forehead. “If I have anything to say about it, you’ll never go hungry again.”

Megan smiled sheepishly as she let her new husband lead her to a table. The scent of the delicious food wafted toward her, and she was so hungry that her stomach lurched. Not bothering with a fork, she picked up a chicken leg and took a huge bite, closing her eyes in ecstasy. Before long, she had cleaned it down to the bone and set it aside.

When she was finished, Megan glanced over at Dallas, who was watching her. But instead of saying anything to her about her manners, he pointed his fork at the ham on her plate. “You really must try it. It’s honey cured.”

This time, Megan picked up her knife and fork, cut into the ham, and took a bite. The juices immediately filled her mouth, causing her to moan in delight. She had never tasted anything so delicious before in her life.

Dallas smiled proudly, pleased with her reaction. “What did I tell you? Paul makes the best ham in the county, even better than my chef.”

Megan almost choked. “You have a chef?”

“You mean we have a chef,” he corrected. “And a housekeeper. Mrs. Daly is an absolute delight. You’ll love her. She’s from Ireland, too... well... she and her husband.”

For a moment, Megan wondered again why this exquisite man hadn’t married a local girl instead of sending for her, but she quickly pushed the thought aside, thanking the Lord for her good fortune.

She took another bite, moaning in delight. “Dallas, I’m not sure if I’ll ever get used to such luxuries.”

He leaned in and whispered, “As my wife, you’d better get used to it. I plan to spoil you... along with our children.”

Megan blushed. Of course he would want children... and soon, too, she guessed. “How many children would ye like?”

Dallas smiled, nuzzling her close. “As many as you can give me, or none at all. I’ll be



happy with whatever the good Lord has in store for us. But for now, I want to enjoy it being just us. As I said, I want to spoil you.”

“Ye already have.” Megan breathed a sigh of relief, thankful that he wasn’t going to press her to have children right away. They would just have to take things naturally, one day at a time.

Later that night, Megan felt like a princess as Dallas helped her into the carriage and they waved their goodbyes. Dallas took her hand and held it on his lap. “Bill?” he called up to the driver. “To the ranch.” Then he pulled Megan close and kissed the top of her head. “I’ll have my chef make us something to eat when we get home, if you like.”

Megan leaned back and placed her hand on her flat stomach. “Oh, I couldn’t eat another bite. If ye don’t mind, I’d rather just go home and freshen up.” Megan leaned her head on his shoulder, enjoying watching the scenery pass by, blue in the moonlight. She was nearly asleep when Dallas spoke.

“I’ll take you shopping tomorrow.” Dallas smiled against her hair.

“Shopping?” She glanced up as a thrill ran through her.

Dallas nodded. “Of course! You’ll need a full wardrobe. The latest fashions.”

Although she appreciated the gesture, it was just a bit too much. After all, he had already spent a king’s ransom on her trip and their wedding. “I can purchase some fabric and make some clothes. You’ve already spent too much—”

“Nonsense!” He gently squeezed her hand. “Kenzie Baker has designer plates and makes custom orders. Tomorrow, we can buy a few things ready-made, and then we can draw up some designs for a whole new wardrobe for you. She’s actually quite

good.”

Megan nodded. Although she had no wardrobe at all, it felt odd for a man she’d just met to lavish such treasures on her. But he was her husband, after all. He had said that she had better get used to it, but she didn’t know if she ever could.

“I’ll also take you into Laramie for jewelry,” Dallas rambled on. “You’ll need necklaces, earrings”—he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it—“and anything else that a lady needs.”

“Ye don’t have to spend such money or lavish such treasures on me.” When she saw his dejected look, she added, “Nevertheless, thank ye for yer kindness, but just spending time with ye is enough. I really am looking forward to getting’ to know ye better.”

“I am, too.” He kissed the back of her hand once more, never taking his eyes from hers. The gesture was so simple yet so intimate that she blushed. She really could get used to being married to this wonderful man.

Soon, they pulled in front of a two-story wooden house with a wraparound front porch set in the midst of colorful trees. In the moonlight, she could see that it was made of beautiful logs and a garden adorned the front. She had never seen anything so beautiful before in her life. It looked like a mansion to Megan. “It’s lovely.”

Dallas gently squeezed her hand, pleased with her reaction. She noticed his muscles flex under his suit coat, and his eyes were the most vibrant blue she had ever seen. He didn’t appear to be stuck up about his striking good looks... and he was gorgeous. He gave her a smile as he turned to her. “Are you ready?”

Megan gave him a nervous smile, not quite sure what would be expected of her. Of course, she had never been intimate with a man before. “Be gentle with me.”

“Don’t worry. You’re safe with me.” He bent down and pulled her into his arms. His lips descended upon hers, gently at first, and then filled with passion. Megan’s heart pounded wildly, imagining what was in store for them. But at the moment, the only thing she could think of was this wonderful man. A moment later, he pulled back and stroked a stray lock of hair away from her face. “I’ll come around to help you down.”

Overcome with emotion, she nodded and smiled, unable to speak.

Dallas slipped out of the carriage and then opened the door on the other side. He placed his hands on her waist to help her down and then pulled her in for another kiss, leaving her breathless.

The driver stood a discreet distance away, pretending not to notice.

Dallas gazed into her eyes. “Of course, I’ll be gentle. If I hurt you, let me know. And Megan, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

His eyes were filled with such intensity that she was overcome with emotion.

Then he kissed her with a fierceness unmatched by man. She had no idea that such passion even existed. And in one fluid motion, he swept her into his arms, causing her to swoon. The driver must have held open the door for them, because Dallas carried her across the threshold and up the stairs to their bedroom, never breaking the kiss.

When they reached the door, Dallas kicked it closed behind them and laid her gently on the bed. “Don’t worry. We’ll take it slow.” He gently brushed back a strand of her hair, gazing deeply into her eyes. “Megan, I know we just met, but I do love you. I... just wanted you to know.”

Before she could answer, his lips descended upon hers as passion filled them both. And at that moment, Megan knew she was finally home.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Dallas

When Dallas woke the next morning, faint rays of golden sunshine peeked around the drapes as the events of the day before ran through his mind. Megan was curled up on her side, her lovely auburn hair fanned out across the pillow. He turned onto his side and watched her sleep, pushing her hair gently away from her face, careful not to wake her. The way the sunlight brushed across her soft pink cheeks was lovely.

Usually, he would have been up and out of bed before sunrise, but this was the morning after their wedding day, and they needed the day to sleep in. He lay next to her, listening to the steady sound of her breathing, enjoying the sight of this beautiful woman in his bed. Never had he thought that married life could hold such bliss. Why no man had snatched her up before now baffled him. It was truly a miracle that God had given her to him.

A few moments later, she rolled toward him and laid across his chest, her hair falling gracefully over one shoulder, leaving her other shoulder bare. “Good morning.”

He smiled as he kissed the tip of her nose. “Good morning, love. Did you sleep well?”

A broad smile spread across her face. “Yes, when ye let me go to sleep, that is.”

Dallas chuckled, unabashed. “Are you well? Did I hurt you?”

“No, not at all.” She smiled, pushing playfully against his chest.

“Well, good!” He rose from the bed and slipped into his clothes, preparing for the day. “Because we have some shopping to do.”

As he dressed, Dallas saw that she was watching him. He liked that she didn’t turn away. He slipped into his trousers and turned away as he zipped them up.

Megan looked so attractive—propped up on her elbow with her bright auburn hair draped over one shoulder—that he almost climbed back into bed with her. Instead, he sat on the edge of the bed and ran his fingertip along her jawline. “What were you thinking about just then?”

She sat up, covering her breasts with the sheet, wrapping her arms around her legs, her gorgeous long hair falling over her shoulders and down her bare back. “I was jus’ thinkin’ of how lucky I am... to have ye fer a husband.”

“I, my dear, am the lucky one.” He smiled as he gently pressed his lips to hers. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, deepening the kiss, but he pulled away. “You, my lady, need to get dressed. You have some shopping to do today.”

A dejected look appeared in her eyes. “Aren’t ye going with me?”

Dallas smiled, enjoying her reaction to wanting to spend the day with him. He walked over, propped his arms on both sides of her body, and gave her a long, lingering kiss. “Of course I’m going with you.” One corner of his lips curled into a smile as he tilted his head to the side. “I want to show you off.” Then he stepped away as the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs outside their door grew louder. “I’ll send Mrs. Daly in to help you dress. She just came up the stairs.”

“That won’t be necessary—”

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

Dallas winked, a smile curling his lips. “And there she is.”

“No!” Megan looked quickly under the sheet at herself, horror coloring her face, causing him to smile. “But I’m not ready!”

He shrugged, enjoying watching her trying to cover herself, even though she was completely covered by the sheet, except for her shoulders. “I’ll meet you downstairs, love.”

Mrs. Daly waited until Dallas was gone, and then barged in on Megan. Mrs. Daly was the type of woman who liked to take over, but if he knew his new wife, she wouldn’t stand for it for long. Dallas smiled to himself as he skipped down the stairs, the happiest he’d been in a very long time.

Dallas walked into the kitchen and his chef, Jacques Baranger, was making breakfast . While on a trip to Paris, Dallas had hired him from a wonderful French restaurant as his personal chef. After a short conversation and a sampling of his fare, Dallas had brought Jacques back with him. His magnificent dishes and pastries had proven to be a good investment.

Jacques glanced up at Dallas and frowned. “What are you doing in my kitchen, monsieur ?” he yelled in his distinctive French accent. “Out! Please wait in the dining room. Your breakfast will be ready momentarily.”

“But this is my kitchen—”

“No one, but no one, enters the chef’s kitchen but the sous chef and the chef’s helpers.”

Dallas smiled to himself as he left the room. “Well then, I guess I’ll wait in the dining room.” After arriving in Whiskey River, Jacques had a hard time adjusting at first.

But now, Dallas suspected that Whiskey River had grown on him, too, just like it does everyone. Dallas sat at his place at the table, but Jacques was hot on his heels.

Jacques looked around. “And where is Mrs. Daly this morning?”

Dallas suppressed a smile when he heard a bit of yelling coming from their bedroom. “She’s upstairs, attending to my wife.”

Jacques rolled his eyes as he set a cup down in front of Dallas and poured the coffee. “I think your wife may need a private maid. Mrs. Daly usually helps me.”

Dallas laughed, shaking his head. “I think she’s having a hard enough time letting Mrs. Daly help her, let alone a personal maid. But, we’ll see.”

Jacques nodded slightly. “So, Mr. King, what would you like this morning?”

One corner of his lips curled into a smile. “Surprise me.”

A slow smile spread across Jacques’s face. “Well! This is a change!”

“What can I say? My new wife is rubbing off on me.”

Jacques leaned over conspiratorially. “I’m glad to see that you’re in a good mood this morning. I’ll have your breakfast ready shortly.” He walked away and then yelled in his heavy French accent. “And it will be a surprise!”

Dallas chuckled, guessing that this was the happiest that Jacques had been in a while, too. Although he felt a bit bad about not taking Megan on a honeymoon right away, he didn’t want to wait to marry her. After what had happened with Ella, he wasn’t taking any chances this time.

A few minutes later, Megan arrived in the dining room, followed by Mrs. Daly. Megan was frowning.

Mrs. Daly mouthed over her head, "We have to talk." Then she pointed at Megan.

"Thank ye, Mrs. Daly," Megan said curtly. "That will be all." Then she turned to face her, her hands on her hips. "And I saw ye out of the corner of me eye! If ye need to say something 'bout me, please tell me directly."

Mrs. Daly stared at her for a long moment and then "hmphe" and walked out.

"I'll talk to her." Dallas stirred his coffee, waiting for Megan to calm down. "Are you hungry?"

Jacques must have heard her because he barged into the room carrying a pot of coffee and a fresh cup. "Well, well! 'Tis certainly a pleasure to meet you, madame! I do hope you like coffee?"

Jacques set the coffee cup on the table in front of her, but Megan stopped him. "Thank you, but I prefer hot tea instead. I hope it's no trouble."

Jacques smiled graciously. "It's no trouble at all! I shall return momentarily." He refilled Dallas's cup, and then walked out of the room.

Megan took the napkin off the table from beside her plate, shook it out, and laid it across her lap. "I'm so sorry about Mrs. Daly, but I'm not used to people waiting on me or bossing me around."

"No, no." Dallas reached across the table and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "You're the lady of the house now. But be patient with her. It may take her a while to get used to there being another lady here now. When Mrs. Daly gets something in her



head, it's hard for her to change her ways.”

Just then, Jacques barged in through the swinging door from the kitchen. “Here is your tea, madame.” He held the lid of the pretty porcelain tea pot and carefully filled her cup. Then, he set the teapot on the table on a beautifully crocheted doily. No doubt, the handiwork of Mrs. Daly. “I’ll be right back with your breakfast.”

Megan pushed her chair back and was about to stand. “Here, let me help ye—”

“Oh, no!” Jacques held out his hand, stopping her in mid-crouch, preparing to stand. He must have scared her half to death because she froze. “I and I alone am the only one to cook in my kitchen!” Megan’s eyes opened wide as Dallas bit his lower lip, suppressing a smile. Eyeing her reaction, Jacques lowered his voice. “I shall return momentarily with your breakfast.”

Megan sat down, her eyes darted to Dallas. “Really?”

He chuckled at her shocked expression. “Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“Well, at least it gives us a moment to get to know one another better.” She bit her lower lip, probably remembering what they had been doing the night before.

It seemed strange to need to “get to know” a woman whom he had been intimate with. But many people these days married without getting to know each other first. They could always do that after they were married.

“You look nice today.” He smiled as he took another sip of his coffee.

Megan was wearing the readymade dress that he had bought for her the day before. It was strange that it had only been one day. To Dallas, it seemed that he’d known her much longer.

“Thank ye.” She laid the spoon next to her tea cup and gazed into his eyes. “So do ye.”

“Here we go!” Jacques came in carrying a tray filled with pancakes, syrup, and bacon. Megan’s eyes widened. Jacques smiled, obviously pleased with her reaction. After he set the tray on the table, he came back a moment later with a plate of toast and marmalade. “Well! Don’t be shy! Eat up while it’s hot.” He smiled as he headed toward the kitchen but looked back at her once more and smiled.

Megan looked up at Dallas, her eyes wide.

“Go ahead.” Dallas smiled as he motioned toward the tray, enjoying her reaction. It reminded him of where he came. He, too, remembered a time when he was hungry. But Lord willing, those days were behind them now.

Megan placed two pancakes on her plate and poured syrup over them, and Dallas did the same. She took a bite, moaning in pleasure as she closed her eyes.

“Good?” Dallas cut into his pancakes and took a bite, too. Jacques really outdid himself. They tasted delicious.

“Yes. I don’t remember ever having pancakes that taste so good. They’re light and fluffy, too.” Megan took another bite, chewed, and swallowed.

Dallas smiled in delight. “I’m so glad you’re enjoying them.”

“So, do ye have to go to work today?” Megan asked between bites.

He took a sip of his coffee. “No, not today. I wanted to spend time with you and get you settled before I go back.”

She nodded as she continued eating. Dallas had a feeling that they could be good friends in addition to being husband and wife. Besides Charles, it had been a while since he had made a true friend. “Go ahead and finish. We’re going shopping in a bit.”

Megan set down her fork, dabbing daintily at her lips with her napkin. “Dallas, we could just spend the day together. Ye don’t need to spend money on me to make me happy.”

Dallas took another sip of his coffee. “You need clothes and I’m sure some other things, too. As my wife, you’ll be expected to dress and act appropriately at all times.”

“Appropriately?” Megan’s voice suddenly turned acid. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dallas set down his coffee cup. “It means that you are now part of society and are expected to act as such.”

“Oh, really?”

Dallas could see that his new wife had a quick temper.

“Here we go!” Mrs. Daly barged into the room, carrying a pot of coffee. “Would ye care fer more coffee?”

Dallas raised the napkin to his lips and wiped his mouth, and then laid it on his plate. “No, thank you, Mrs. Daly. We were just finishing up.”

Megan snapped her mouth closed, folded her napkin, and laid it neatly next to her plate. She started to get up, but Dallas rushed around the table to hold her chair for

her.

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Megan rose from her seat. “I can get up meself without ye help.”

“You’ll have to get used to being treated like a woman of substance.”

Megan’s mouth formed a straight line. “A woman of substance, huh?”

“Well, I’ll just put this up.” Mrs. Daly looked between them and then headed back toward the kitchen, giving them privacy.

“Are you ready?” Dallas asked, still holding her chair.

Megan rose from her seat. “I don’t know. What is a ‘woman of substance’ allowed?”

Dallas nuzzled her neck. “Come on, love. Don’t be cross. I’ll teach you. Don’t worry.”

She huffed and gently pushed him away. “I take it that I’m not to help clear away the dishes?”

Dallas gave her a weak smile and shook his head.

“I’ll be right back. I need to get me hat.” Megan headed toward the door.

“There’s a reticule on the top of the dresser.”

Megan huffed and then walked out. “I’ll meet ye at the door.”

Yes, it was going to take a while for his new wife to get used to being treated like a

lady.

In the carriage on the way into town, Dallas had been excited at the possibilities. The possibility of having a life together, of spending the day with Megan, and the possibility of grooming her to be the wife he wanted. She was already beautiful, but with the addition of fine clothes and jewels, she would be stunning and the envy of all his friends. But after this morning, he knew better than to tell her. At least, for the moment.

“What were ye thinking about just then?” Megan’s auburn hair was pulled up at the sides, letting the waves flow down her back, her lovely hat pinned forward into place.

“I was just thinking about you.” He reached out and stroked her hand. “You truly are a vision.”

“Thank you.” Megan smiled, a delicate flush coloring her cheeks.

In addition to her beauty, she was kind. Megan glanced over at Dallas with vulnerable eyes, but he sensed a strength in her, too. As they rode to Whiskey River, he’d wondered what her story was, what her past life was like, and what had happened to make her so strong, yet so vulnerable. But now wasn’t the time to ask. He didn’t want anything to spoil their day together.

Megan yawned as she snuggled against his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” Dallas smiled. “I probably kept you up too late last night.”

Megan chuckled. “No, it’s okay. It’s just that I didn’t get much sleep on the train, either.”

Dallas slid his arm around her, holding her close as she snuggled against his chest.

On the way, white snow-capped mountains rose in the distance, a contrasting backdrop to the yellow, red, orange, and brown leaves dotting the landscape. “I never sleep well on trains either. Too much jostling, I suppose.”

Megan nodded against his chest.

“So, how was your trip otherwise?”

When she lifted her head, her eyes lit up. “Wonderful. Thank ye for the caviar.”

“‘Twas my pleasure.” He thought for a moment. “Did you meet anyone along the way?” Dallas held his breath, dreading her answer. After what had happened with Ella, he didn’t want it to happen again.

Megan shook her head as she sat up. “No, I spent most of the time in me cabin.”

Smiling, he kissed her forehead. “What do you like to do? Do you have any hobbies?”

Megan looked as if she was about to say something more, but then stopped herself.

He placed his finger gently under her chin, forcing her to look at him. “Tell me what you were going to say. Please, don’t hold anything back from me.”

She shook her head as her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink.

He laughed. “Oh, come now! It can’t be that bad. Tell me.”

“Oh, no ye don’t.” Megan pulled back, her Irish brogue even more prominent. “Ye won’t be gittin’ no secrets out of me.”

“I bet I can.”

She shook her head, smiling.

He took her hand and kissed it, and then began kissing his way up her arm.

“Okay, okay! Ye don’ play fair,” she relented, pulling her arm away. “I was about to say that when ye’re poor, ye don’t have many choices fer hobbies. Surviving becomes yer hobby.” She checked her hat to ensure that it hadn’t become dislodged, and then turned to look out the window. “But of course, ye probably know nothing of that.”

“You’d be surprised.” Dallas squeezed her hand, claiming her attention. “Megan, I grew up poor, too. My father was a sharecropper.”

She arched an eyebrow in disbelief.

“No, it’s true. My father didn’t believe in education, but he did believe in hard work.”

“And what do ye believe in?”

Dallas’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “I believe in both.” Perhaps he had learned something positive from his father, after all. He took her hand and kissed her fingertips. “Perhaps you can develop hobbies that you can teach our children one day.” He lifted his eyes to hers, judging her reaction.

“You’d like to have children?”

A smile lit his lips. “Yes, of course.” She had the most incredible green eyes that he had ever seen. She smiled as he continued to kiss her fingers. “I need heirs.”

Megan's smile faded as she pulled her hand back. Then she turned to look out the window again, leaving him to wonder what he had said wrong.

Before he could ask, the carriage pulled to a stop in front of The Ladies' Dress Emporium. "So, are you ready to shop?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am. I'd love to see Kenzie again." Then Megan placed her hand on his arm to stop him. "Dallas, you don't have to spend a lot of money on me. I'll just get a dress or two."

"Nonsense!" He patted her arm. "Get what you want. Money is no object."

When Bill opened the carriage door and let down the step, Dallas stepped out and offered her his hand. As she stepped out of the carriage, she looked like the princess he had been wanting his whole life. Megan's eyes opened wide when she looked around the town.

"Miss Baker is waiting for us." He leaned in, smiling as he offered his new wife his arm. As he led her toward the shop, one thing was certain: He was going to enjoy spoiling her.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Megan

When Megan walked into The Ladies' Dress Emporium on Dallas's arm , it was lovely. The day before, she had been too nervous to notice much. A few fine dresses hung in the windows and book patterns set on a table on the far wall. Her heart leaped with excitement as she looked over at Dallas.

"Good morning, Mr. King." Kenzie Baker nodded, bowing slightly. Then a broad smile spread across her lips as she turned to Megan. "Mrs. King! It's so good to see you here again so soon! I take it you're here to design your new wardrobe?" Her eyebrows rose, hopeful.

Dallas nodded. "Yes, we certainly are." He lifted Megan's hand to his lips, gazing into her eyes as he spoke. "My wife is already gorgeous, but I want her to be a showpiece."

Megan's smile quickly faded.

Kenzie glanced over at Dallas and smiled. "Well, that won't be difficult! Your wife has a lovely figure." Then she looked over at Megan. "Shall we get started?"

"Yes, Miss Baker." Megan liked Kenzie already. Kenzie wasn't much older than her, and she didn't seem to intimidate easily.

Kenzie slid her arm into hers and started to lead her away. "Oh, come now! No need to be so formal with me. Please, call me Kenzie."

Megan smiled. “Only if ye call me Megan.” Then she glanced over at Dallas, lifting her eyebrows. “I’ll see you later?”

Dallas smiled, obviously enjoying seeing Megan’s delight. “I’ll be at the bank when you’re ready.”

Megan stepped close to him and whispered, “Dallas, thank you.”

He surprised her when he leaned in and kissed her cheek. “Take your time and enjoy yourself. Come to the bank when you finish.”

Megan nodded, giving him one last glance over her shoulder when she walked back to Kenzie.

“You know, I’ve never seen him so happy before.” Kenzie gently squeezed her hand. “I wish you both all the best.”

Megan smiled. “Thank you. I’ve never been happier.”

“I’m so glad to hear that.” Kenzie sat at a small table and indicated another chair for Megan. Spread across the table were clothing designs. “Now, for your wardrobe—”

“These are exquisite!” Megan gushed, in awe as she looked over the designs. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. Did you draw them?”

Kenzie smiled with obvious pride. “Yes, of course. I’m a clothing designer. Right now I make most of the clothes, too, but I just hired someone to sew part time. Do you sew?”

Megan smiled. “I do, but not well.”

“Well,” Kenzie leaned in conspiratorially as she touched her hand, “then leave it to me. I’ll make all the dresses you would like.”

Megan laughed. “I can’t imagine what Dallas would think of that.”

“When he arranged for you to come here today, he told me to make you anything you wanted.” She smiled, sliding the sketches in front of her. “I have a feeling that you’re going to be one of my best customers.” Kenzie giggled. “Now, for your wardrobe. I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of sketching some designs with you in mind.”

Megan studied the designs and loved what she saw. “Kenzie, if you were in New York, you’d make a fortune.”

“I used to design in New York, and in London before that.” Kenzie shrugged. “Maybe I’ll go back some day, but for now, I’m enjoying being here.” She looked up at Megan and a crease formed between her eyes, as if she were trying to figure something out. “Pardon me for asking, but what part of Ireland are you from?”

“Dublin. Are ye from London, then?”

Kenzie nodded. “I was born in London, but my parents are from Ireland.”

“Oh?” Megan asked, clearly intrigued. “What part?”

“Galway,” Kenzie answered, smiling. “That’s why I have a mixed-up accent. Half British, half Irish.”

Megan giggled. “It’s lovely. But when we met yesterday, I couldn’t figure out where ye were from... until ye told me.”

Kenzie chuckled. “People rarely can. Now, as for your designs...”

They spent the rest of the morning designing Megan’s wardrobe. Although she felt a bit guilty for spending so much money, she soon relaxed and found herself enjoying it. Kenzie only left her when she was needed by another customer, and then she went right back to working with Megan. Megan admired her work ethic as well as her spunk.

After everything had been decided for her wardrobe, Kenzie led her to the back of the store and took her measurements for the wardrobe. She was very good at judging her size and Megan liked her style. When she was finished, Kenzie helped her order three corsets and undergarments from a catalogue, as well.

“Well, I think Mr. King and I just spent all his money,” Megan teased as she looked over the sketches and engravings that Kenzie had brought to her.

Kenzie laughed. “I’ll speak with Mr. King and then I’ll have everything delivered as soon as it’s ready.”

“I hope this isn’t too much.” Megan blushed, looking over the long order that Kenzie had written. “We can take some of these things off.”

Kenzie placed her hand gingerly over hers. “You’ll do no such thing. Mr. King said to purchase you a fine wardrobe and that’s exactly what we did.”

“But it’s just too much—”

Kenzie leaned in conspiratorially. “Megan, that’s how men like Dallas King show they care about you. They buy you things.”

Megan shook her head. “But he doesn’t have to spend money on me to show me that

he cares.”

Kenzie shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. Just enjoy yourself. Let him spoil you.”

“Yes, but I would be just as happy with a smile.”

“Honey, a smile is nice, but you can’t wear a smile when you’re going out for an evening,” Kenzie teased. “Come on. Let’s order you some shoes.”

“You sell shoes, too?”

Kenzie shrugged. “Like the corsets, I don’t have them here, but I can order you anything you want.”

Megan held her breath. “Where do you order them from?”

“New York.”

Megan gasped.

“Madame, you’re going to have to get used to such things.” She gave her a wink. “Stick with me. I’ll be glad to show you.”

Megan giggled, relenting. She had thought of ordering something special for Dallas but had no idea what his sizes were or what he would like. Meagan had a lot to learn about her new husband.

When they finished, she had ordered four new pairs of shoes in different colors to match just about any dress she wore. Kenzie had also ordered her three new hats, as well. By the time she left, Megan was exhausted but felt great at the same time. She had never had so much fun in her life.

After she said her goodbyes, Megan walked to the bank, knowing that she could get used to such special treatment and attention. Although she knew Dallas was just buying her what she needed, Megan made a mental note to have a talk with him about lavishing such expensive gifts on her.

She sighed, knowing she was already starting to have feelings for Dallas, but she made a mental note to keep her heart to herself. After all, she had lost everyone she ever loved, and she couldn't stand to lose anyone else. She quickly brushed the thought from her mind as she opened the door to the bank.

"There she is!" Dallas announced proudly as she walked in, gaining the attention of everyone within earshot. "Everyone, I'd like you to meet my new bride, Miss Megan Shannon."

Megan nodded, greeting everyone with a smile. "'Tis a pleasure to meet ye, but I'm now Mrs. Megan King." She gave Dallas a wink.

One by one, everyone approached, greeting her warmly. Somehow, she already felt like a part of this community, of Dallas's world. Her heart pounded as he pulled her to his side, the happiest she had ever been. She had just stepped into a fairy tale, and she hoped she never woke up.

On the way home, Megan enjoyed the scenery from the carriage as the cool October air rushed in. The sun was beginning to set, and the night cooled in preparation for winter. A shiver suddenly ran over her.

"Cold?" Dallas asked. When she nodded, he pulled her close. "Better?"

"I'm fine." Megan thought for a moment, enjoying the feel of this wonderful man against her. "Dallas, what did ye mean when ye said ye wanted to make me a 'showpiece'?"

Dallas leaned his head against hers. “I meant it figuratively, but yes. As my wife, you will be expected to live up to a certain... standard.”

Her head snapped up, her eyes meeting his. “Standard?”

Dallas shrugged. “Standard of living. I’m very rich and people expect to see us dressed in fine clothes, driving fine carriages—”

“So, ye didn’t do all this fer me, but to impress other people.” Megan couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

He tried to pull her back into his arms, but she moved away. So, he folded his hands on his knee. “Of course not! I did it for you, Megan. But we are expected to live up to a certain status.”

She bit her lower lip and released it. “And where do I fit into this ‘status’?”

Dallas let out a deep breath and turned his attention to the sun, hanging low in the sky outside the carriage window. “Well, now that you mention it, you’ll be expected to take elocution lessons, lessons on etiquette—”

“Ye don’ like the way I speak?” Megan was hurt. One thing he said that he liked about her was her accent. Although she knew she sounded different than just about everyone here, she didn’t think she spoke badly enough to warrant elocution lessons.

Dallas took her hand, but she pulled away. “Yes, of course I like the way you speak. I love your accent.” He shrugged. “I just thought that you’d like to take lessons to fit in a bit more.”

“Fit in?” Megan folded her arms across her chest. “Mr. King, if you haven’t noticed, this isn’t New York.” Even in New York, she hadn’t been spoken to in this way. But

then again, she hadn't been expected to fit in to society there, either.

"And what do you mean by that?" Dallas narrowed his eyes.

"Well, this isn't exactly 'society' here in Whiskey River."

When he turned to face her, his eyes flared. "I have you know that I have prominent friends that come here to visit from time to time. And I will not be embarrassed by a wife who doesn't know her place."

"My place?" Megan's voice raised a few octaves. "And what 'place' might that be?"

Dallas bit his upper lip, obviously trying to calm himself. "As my wife and the mother of my children, you'll be expected to live up to a certain standard."

"Yer children?" Megan shook her head in disbelief. "Dallas, when we do have children, they'll be our children."

He turned his attention out the window. "Yes, of course."

"And what did ye mean when ye said that ye 'didn't want to be embarrassed'?"

Dallas turned back to her, narrowing his eyes. "Never mind." He took her hand and patted it. "We'll just get you some lessons, so you know how to act properly."

She pulled her hand away again. "Mr. King, I have ye know that I have no intentions of 'embarrassing' ye. And if me accent and the way I speak bothers ye so much, why did ye marry me in the first place? Ye knew I was from Ireland, did ye not?"

"Yes, I knew." Dallas sighed. "As I said, I love your accent. It's just that your actions, mannerisms, and the words you say need... refinement."



“Refinement?” Megan’s voice raised again.

“Stop shouting,” Dallas ordered. “You will not speak to me in such a manner.”

Megan smirked. “Oh no? Ye will not tell me what to do, wife er not! And I will speak to ye in any manner I choose.”

Dallas narrowed his eyes. “You have a lot to learn about being a wife and submitting to your husband.”

“And ye have a lot to learn about how to treat a wife.” Megan turned her attention out the window, hurt. She had to admit that he lavished fine things on her, but he also wanted to change her, who she was, and that was something she wasn’t willing to do.

Dallas pulled her back abruptly, hurting her arm. “Don’t you turn away from me like that!”

Megan looked down at the grip he had on her arm. “Let go of me or ye’re going to feel the backside of a frying pan.”

Dallas laughed. “You don’t have one.”

“We’ll be home soon enough.” She looked him squarely in the eye, never wavering. “Now, let me go now and don’t ye ever lay a hand on me again.”

Dallas smirked as he released her arm. “I’m going to enjoy taming you.”

“Good luck trying.”

They rode in silence the rest of the way home. Soon, they pulled down the long driveway leading to his ranch. How could such a wonderful day end so badly? When

the carriage pulled to a stop, the sun was beginning to set behind the cabin.

“Ye could have asked about the lessons, and I would have considered it. But ye will not order me to do anything.” Megan jumped out of the carriage before Dallas or the driver could open the door.

Dallas jumped out behind her. “Megan, you will do as I say.”

“You will ask me.” Megan lifted her skirts and started to walk away, but then turned back to him. “And another thing. Don’t bother coming to me bed tonight.”

He smirked. “And you think a locked door will keep me out?”

Megan smiled, her eyes twinkling as she thought of the frying pan. “Well, enter at yer own risk.” Then she stormed into the house and into the kitchen.

“What is the meaning of this?” Jacques’s voice bellowed, filling the room.

Megan ignored him as she looked around, her eyes settling on a cast iron frying pan. She grabbed it and stormed up the stairs to the bedroom and locked the door, gripping the pan tightly.

The sound of boots stomping loudly against the stairs grew closer, louder as he reached the top. He tried the door handle and stopped. Then he kicked in the door, sending it flying against the wall, still attached to its hinges.

She held up the frying pan and glared at him. “Don’ ye dare come near me!”

He stomped toward her and ducked when she swung the pan at him. Then he grabbed the pan from her as she fought and threw it across the room, sending it crashing to the floor. He pulled her roughly into his arms and his lips descended upon hers. She

pushed against him and pounded her fists on his back, but then passion overtook her, and she melted into his arms.

Then he pulled back abruptly, his lips curling into a devilish smile. “Don’t ever lock a door to me again.” Then he picked up his hat that had fallen onto the bed, slid it on and tipped it to her, smirking. “Good night, my lady. Sleep well.” Then he walked out.

“Why, you!” Megan picked up a hairbrush and threw it at the doorway as he walked out. Then she stormed over to the door and slammed it shut. It would no longer lock, but she knew he wasn’t coming back that night anyway. He had made his point and that was enough. “That man is so infuriating!”

Megan had intended to stay the rest of the night in the bedroom, but as the night progressed, hunger got the best of her. She tiptoed across the floor and opened the door. In the hallway, she looked around and, seeing no one about, she crept down the stairs.

On the first floor, she looked around the cabin, amazed by its size, and walked in the direction that she hoped led to the kitchen. To the right was a drawing room with a fireplace and Dallas was there, watching the fire, holding a glass containing a dark colored liquid. She had a feeling that it wasn’t coffee.

Megan walked into the kitchen and there was a plate of leftover roast, so she sliced some bread and some roast beef and made herself a sandwich. She put it on a plate and then poured some lemonade.

After she put everything away, she picked up the plate and the glass, walked into the dining room, and sat at the table. She had thought of eating in the bedroom but was determined not to show Dallas any fear. She picked up her sandwich and took a bite when Dallas strolled in, carrying the glass.

“What are ye drinkin’?” Megan asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“Brandy.” He held out the glass to her and smirked. “Want some?”

She shook her head and turned her attention back to her sandwich as flashes of him breaking through their bedroom door came to mind.

“Would you mind if I dined with you?” Dallas asked, waiting.

She started to get up from her seat. “I’ll fix ye a sandwich.”

He placed a hand gently on her arm, stopping her, and set his glass down on the table. “No, I’ll get it.”

He started toward the kitchen when Megan called after him. “The roast beef is on the counter!”

“I see it,” he yelled back. A moment later, he came back in with a sandwich and a glass of lemonade. Pushing the brandy to the side, he sat across from her and took a bite, as if nothing had happened between them earlier. “Umm... this is delicious.”

Megan nodded and then took another bite of her sandwich. “Look. I’m sorry for overreacting. But just to let you know, you can ask me to do something, but never order me to.”

He nodded as one corner of his lips curled into a smile. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He took another bite of his sandwich. “So, what do you think of the house?”

She set down her lemonade. “It’s lovely. And the main hall is so huge! What is that room exactly?”

Dallas smiled, obviously pleased by her reaction. “It’s the living room, but I only use it when company arrives and for parties.” His eyes twinkled. “Speaking of which, I plan to throw a party before the weather gets too bad.”

“A party?” Megan asked in disbelief. “Dallas, you’re spending too much money. We should save some—”

“I know, for a rainy day.” He reached over and took her hand. “Megan, I have money and you’re going to have to get used to it.”

“Yes, you have money....” She rose from the table. “But ye don’t have to flaunt it. I’m going to bed.”

Dallas stopped her, taking her hand. “Megan, I want to have a party to show you off and to introduce you to the townsfolk.”

Megan let out a deep breath and sat down, pulling her hand away. “Dallas, I’m not a showpiece for ye to show off and flaunt.” She looked into his eyes, touching his cheek. “I’m your wife.”

Dallas took her hand and sat back in his chair, pulling her onto his lap. “I know that. I meant no harm.”

Megan bit her lower lip, wrapping her arms around his neck, wondering if she should ask, unsure if now was the right time. “Dallas, what happened to ye?”

His eyes opened wide, but he quickly recovered himself. “What do you mean?”

Megan placed her hand on his cheek, forcing him to look into her eyes. “What happened to make ye think that money is the most important thing in life?”

“Well, isn’t it?”

She let her hand drop from his cheek. “Dallas, you know that I was poor and have never known money. My parents died of starvation in Ireland and then Liam and I left to escape the same fate—”

“Liam?” Dallas’s eyebrows pulled together in concern.

Megan rose to her feet, wondering what to make of the jealousy in his eyes. “Me brother.”

He let out a deep breath, nodding in understanding.

“Anyway....” She sat back in her seat and took a sip of her lemonade. “The stories we heard in Ireland was to come to America, that the streets were paved in gold.” She sighed, shaking her head. “But when we arrived, the only job I could get was in a factory and Liam under water, helping to build a bridge....” Dallas gasped, but she continued. “And the only place we could afford to live was in a tenement with two other families.” She took his hand. “And to answer yer question: Yes, money is important. Without it, ye can’t survive. But there are other things that money can’t buy that are important, too.”

Dallas let out a deep breath. “I know that.”

“Just don’t ye be losin’ sight of it.” She walked around the table, sat down in the chair next to him, and gave him a light kiss.

“What happened to your brother?” Dallas’s eyebrows rose as he held her hand. “Is he still in New York?”

She shook her head as tears rimmed her eyes. “No, he died defending my honor from

some Italian street thugs. He was walking me home late one night from the factory after my shift when we were attacked.”

He took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Megan, I’m so sorry.”

She nodded. “But I made him a promise to have a better life, to marry and have children. But most of all, he made me promise to be happy.”

Dallas smiled, his eyes filled with sincerity. “I’m going to help you keep that promise.”

Her lips curled into a slight smile. “So, now that ye know my story, why I came here, what’s yers? What happened to ye, Dallas?”

He sat back, holding his lemonade with both hands. “I’m not sure now is the time. Come on. It’s time for bed.” He started to get up, but she stopped him.

“Dallas, I want to know.”

He sat back down as a faraway look came into his eyes. “My father was a difficult man. As I told you, he was a sharecropper and we didn’t have much while I was growing up, but there’s more.” He bit his lower lip, obviously wondering how much to tell her. “He was a drunkard. And when he drank, he beat my mother and me.”

Megan gasped.

Dallas sighed and continued, “In my young mind, I thought that it must have been my fault. That I had done something wrong that caused him to beat me. So, I tried to be perfect. I wanted to have the perfect job, live the perfect life in the perfect town—”

“And have the perfect wife,” Megan finished, cutting him off, understanding him

much more now. “Dallas, no one’s perfect... especially not me.”

Dallas kissed her fingertips. “Megan, I know that—”

“Dallas, ye don’t have to try to impress people with yer money.” She pulled her hand away and placed it on his cheek. “People will be more impressed if ye let them in.”

He sat back abruptly. “What do you mean?”

“If ye let them see you... the real you....” She leaned close, placing her hand over his. “If ye let them into yer heart, then people will like ye for who ye are and not fer yer money.”

He raised her hand to his lips. “Well, my wife, you have given me a lot to think about. But now, I think it’s time we retire for the evening.” Then he raised his eyes to hers, a mischievous smile curling his lips. “That is, if I’m allowed in.”

She laughed. “Why don’t you take me upstairs and we’ll find out.”

With that, he scooped her into his arms and walked out of the dining room and through the living room, headed toward the stairs.

Megan laughed, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Do ye intend to carry me to bed every night?”

He nuzzled her neck. “Until I’m an old man.”

As this wonderful man carried her up the stairs headed toward their bedroom, she wondered if they would ever be able to escape their pasts and have a good life together... or were they doomed from the start.



## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Dallas

Dallas looked in the mirror and finished tying his tie. He and Megan had spent the last several weeks preparing for this party. Dallas had taken care of preparing the house, and Megan had made the arrangements for the food with Jacques. He chuckled to himself, remembering how she and Jacques had argued about the meal preparations. She had insisted on helping and he kept insisting that she stay out of the kitchen. Finally, she had relented, but she oversaw the menu, and nothing was to be prepared without her approval, much to Jacques's chagrin. When Jacques had come to him complaining, Dallas had simply told him that she was the lady of the house now, and as such, her word was law. Jacques had stormed off, but didn't give Megan any more trouble.

In the living room, the furniture had been removed for dancing, and the wooden floor shone to perfection. He had also purchased long lengths of white fabric from Kenzie Baker and had it draped artfully from the balcony to the floor. The balcony stretched around three sides of the second floor, stopping at the front wall of the house. Several lengths of fabric were spaced apart on both sides, leaving the space to the left of the staircase for the string quartet that Dallas had brought in from Laramie. Fabric also adorned the grand staircase attached to the back balcony, draped artfully and tied off with white ribbon. This was the first big party that he had ever hosted, and he wanted it to be spectacular. It had been a while since he had been to a big party himself, let alone host one.

To his knowledge, this would be the first party of this magnitude hosted by anyone in Whiskey River and he wanted to make a good impression. Yes, barn dances were held, and dances in the church recreation hall were held every week, but this would

be the first big party that anyone had held outside of the church. Dallas had even invited Charles Whitfield, his best friend from college and business associate, and Charles had sent word that he was coming. Although he was no longer the owner of the bank, Dallas knew that Charles would want to check on the business while he was there. But Dallas didn't mind. He liked doing business with Charles.

Dallas wanted to make a good impression to show Charles that he was doing well, although not as well as Charles and his family. Wealth of that stature only came from the accumulation of generations.

After they had graduated from college, Charles had helped him to start his bank in Whiskey River, and Dallas had paid him back in full... in record time. Charles had heard of entrepreneurs with good business ideas and helped to fund their businesses to get them started if he liked the business venture. Since he and Charles were friends, it was natural that Charles had given Dallas his start in Whiskey River. Dallas owed everything to Charles. Not only was he his best friend, he had also been his financier. Dallas had learned a lot about business from him, and he was more than willing to share his expertise. Tonight, he wanted to prove not only to Charles, but to himself that he was worthy.

Dallas slipped into his suit coat, vowing to save his top coat for the party. Looking in the mirror, he adjusted his dress shirt and smoothed back his blond hair. It had just turned November and was getting quite cold out now. Dallas knew that winter would soon be upon them. He just hoped that the weather wasn't as bad this winter as the last. A blizzard had blown through, incapacitating every aspect of the town. The only thing that managed to be open each week was the church, thanks to Reverend Henley.

This year, Dallas was looking forward to spending the holidays with his new bride. He hoped that Charles could stay through Christmas and the New Year, as well, but Dallas knew that Charles liked to spend the holidays in New York with his family. Although Charles never told him, Dallas suspected that his father required that he be

with the family for the holidays.

Dallas slipped on his hat and headed down the stairs.

“Ye look wonderful today, sir,” Mrs. Daly remarked when he reached the first floor. “What are ye doing up and about so early this morn’? I thought ye were taking off today.”

“Mr. Whitfield’s train is on its way, and I want to be there when it arrives.” Dallas took out his pocket watch and looked at the time. It was seven o’clock in the morning, and Charles’s train was due to arrive at ten o’clock. But it was at least two hours to Laramie and Charles didn’t want to be late.

Every time that Charles came into town, Dallas had insisted that he stay with him at his ranch. After all, Dallas would be much more comfortable staying with him than at the hotel. In fact, Dallas kept a room at his ranch just for Charles. Although Dallas knew that he wouldn’t mind staying at the hotel, Dallas wouldn’t have it any other way. It was also an opportunity for them to catch up.

On this visit, Charles was supposed to arrive earlier from Chicago for the wedding, but a fire had broken out in early October, and he had postponed his visit until now. Charles had been in Chicago visiting friends before coming to Whiskey River. Dallas had wired him back, asking Charles if he needed help, but he had told him not to come, and that the fire had devastated the city, and he wanted to stay there to help. After reading about the fire in his issue of The New York Times and seeing the devastation, Dallas regretted not having gone to help Charles.

“Oh! Mrs. Daly.” Dallas had stopped halfway out the front door. “Please tell my wife that I will be back shortly to help with finalizing everything for the party.”

A broad smile spread across her face. “Now, don’ ye be worrying about the little

missus, sir. I'll be here to help her when she wakes."

Dallas smiled. "Thank you, Mrs. Daly." Then he lowered his voice conspiratorially. "But be sure to let Mrs. King have the last say."

Mrs. Daly narrowed her eyes, and then chuckled. "Yes, sir. Ye're the boss."

"Thank you, Mrs. Daly." After the older woman had barged in on Megan the morning after their wedding, Dallas had a talk with Mrs. Daly, informing her that his wife was now the woman of the house, and that she needed to respect her as such. It had taken some doing, but Mrs. Daly and Megan had come to a mutual understanding.

As Dallas stepped outside into the brisk morning air, he inhaled deeply, letting the cool air fill his lungs. Excitement was in the air. Not only would he have the opportunity to show off his wife to the town, it was also an opportunity for Dallas to show Charles that he had "arrived". But more than anything, Dallas was excited at the possibility of seeing his best friend and having the opportunity to catch up. Charles hadn't visited since the summer and was long overdue for a visit.

"Good morning, sir." Bill smiled, opening the carriage door. "So, we journey to Laramie this morning?"

"Yes, Bill. To the train station, if you please."

His driver closed the door. "Yes, sir."

Dallas adjusted his suit coat, preparing for the long carriage ride to Laramie, and soon they were on their way.

He looked out the window and the sunrise was lovely, sending shoots of pink and orange across the morning sky. But as they rode, Dallas's thoughts went to Megan.

She was truly a remarkable woman. To begin with, she was beautiful. But dressed in Kenzie Baker's fashions, she seemed to blossom and had bloomed into a stunning, gorgeous woman. Kenzie had not yet finished her wardrobe, but had sent over pieces as they were finished, along with the items she had ordered.

But Megan's beauty aside, it was her heart—who she was on the inside—that intrigued him the most. Despite him lavishing expensive gifts on her, she seemed just as happy going for a walk or a carriage ride. Perhaps he might find some earrings or jewelry for Megan in Laramie if he arrived early enough.

Dallas just wished he could give her more.

He let out a deep breath. In the short time that he had been married to Megan—nearly a month—he had found that she was stealing his heart. But could he let himself love her? Could she ever love him in return? It had been an advantageous marriage for them both and he hadn't considered love, but he found that he could hardly wait to spend time with her, or to have dinner with her, or to walk with her. But could he ever let her love him and give her love in return? Was he deserving? After all, his father had seen fit to beat him for little things, often for nothing at all. Hadn't he deserved it? And every time he had misbehaved as a child, his mother had seen fit to tell anyone who would listen. Between his father and his mother, that was why he had strived for perfection his whole life: So as not to attract their negative attention. As a result, he found that every time anyone got close, he pulled back. That was one of the reasons why he had sent for a mail-order bride. Love wouldn't be an issue. But now, he wondered if he could accept the love of this woman and give it to her in return, or if he should just care for her, protect her, but not love her. After all, love was a dangerous endeavor.

As he thought of Megan and contemplated love and life, Bill soon stopped the carriage in front of the train station. Dallas glanced at his watch and, somehow, time had slipped away. It was nine o'clock. He looked out the window of the carriage and

the train hadn't arrived yet.

Yes, he had time. "Bill, let's go to the jewelry store. I'd like to get something special for Mrs. King to wear tonight."

Dallas felt the carriage shake and creak as Bill climbed back up onto the top.

"Yes, sir." Evidently, Bill had been getting down when Dallas had stopped him. Dallas almost felt bad for him, but not quite. After all, he was well paid to be his driver for all hours of the day and night.

The horses plodded slowly through town, the rhythmic sound of the hooves clicking along. Dallas's heart fluttered as excitement filled his body. Although Laramie was not nearly as exciting as New York or Chicago, being in the city caused the same excitement to course through his veins.

Dallas had thought of moving his banking business to Laramie—a much bigger city, although still small—but if he pulled the bank out, Whiskey River would surely die. Dallas couldn't be responsible for that. Despite having become a pillar of the small community in what little time he had been there, he had come to care about the people in the small town, as well. Dallas was aware that the bank was the only thing holding the town together. And if the bank went, so would the town. And if the town went, what would the people do? No, moving away from Whiskey River wasn't an option.

Besides, he had everything he wanted in the town: money, respect. And now that he had married, his status in the town would now be solidified.

But he hadn't expected Megan. She was beautiful, funny, and he enjoyed seeing life through her eyes. Although she had come a long way in the short time that she had been there, it would take a while before she felt completely comfortable in her role as

a banker's wife. But he vowed to make it as easy for her as possible.

Within minutes, Bill pulled the carriage to a stop in front of the jewelry store. Dallas hopped down, not waiting for his driver this time. "I'll only be a minute," he yelled over his shoulder to Bill, holding up his hand up, indicating for him not to hop down.

Bill inclined his head as a sly smile spread across his lips. "Whatever you say, boss," he replied, obviously amused with Dallas's infatuation with his new wife.

Dallas smirked as he skipped up the steps of the store, taking two at a time. Inside, he adjusted his suit coat and strolled casually up to the counter.

"Mr. King! What brings you in here today?" The man behind the counter placed his hands on the edge of the glass case before him. It was fitting that the salesman recognized him: Dallas had become one of their best customers since he married Megan.

A smile spread across Dallas's lips. "Well, I happened to be in town, and I thought I'd pick up something special for my new wife. We're having a party tonight."

The clerk's smile broadened. "But of course, sir! What may I interest you in? A broach, perhaps? A necklace? A new ring?"

"No, not a ring." Dallas had just purchased a wedding band set with a diamond engagement ring that would make any woman swoon. Megan had taken one look at it and gasped, telling him that it was too big. Dallas smiled at the memory. "This time, I'd like to see your earrings and perhaps a necklace."

"Of course. Right this way, sir." Dallas followed the man to another glass case that held the most expensive jewels. Sunlight glistened from the precious gems: sapphires, topaz, amethyst, rubies... and of course, diamonds. Dallas had been curious as to how

the shop owner could afford to have such jewels on display in Laramie. But then again, the best that they had was only in one case and could easily be moved to a safe in the back at night.

Dallas picked out a beautiful diamond and pearl necklace, and matching earrings. His heart leaped. This was it. “Are the earrings screw backs?”

The man nodded proudly, but then his smile faded. “Are your wife’s ears pierced? If they are, we have a nice selection—”

“No, that’s quite all right. Her ears aren’t pierced.” He looked down at the case once more. “These are perfect.” Then he looked back over at the clerk, smiling. “Could you place them in a gift box for me? I’d like to surprise my wife.”

“Yes, sir,” the clerk gushed. “Right away. I’ll be right back.”

Dallas smiled his thanks, and then glanced down at his pocket watch. Nine-thirty. He still had time... unless the train arrived early. But by the time he had put away his pocket watch, the clerk was back.

“Shall I put this on your tab, sir?” The clerk smiled, carefully placing a white box wrapped in a soft white ribbon on the counter.

Dallas smiled. “No, thank you.” Dallas pulled some bills out of his wallet and laid them on the counter. “I’m in a hurry to pick up my friend from the train station. Apply the rest of it to my tab and I’ll be in soon to settle up.”

The clerk’s eyes nearly bulged out of his head as he scooped up the money. “Yes, of course, sir.” The clerk quickly stashed the money in the cash register and presented him with a paper to sign.



After Dallas signed the paper, he slipped the long, slender box into the inside pocket of his suit, and hurried out the door with a last wave over his shoulder.

“To the train station, Bill,” Dallas called up to his driver as he climbed into the carriage.

“Yes, sir.” A moment later the carriage jerked forward.

Dallas watched the people pass by outside the carriage window. Although Laramie was growing, it was still wild in nature. Within minutes, the carriage pulled to a stop in front of the train station. Dallas flung open the door and climbed out. Bill had pulled the brake on the carriage and was ready to tie off the reins when Dallas waved him off. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Bill nodded, adjusting the rifle in a holster mounted on the side of the seat. Then he relaxed, watching as Dallas hurried away.

Dallas came to a stop on the train platform and waited. He looked at his pocket watch one more time. Nine forty-five. Good. He had made it on time, not wanting Charles to have to wait. Excitement welled up in his heart as he waited, remembering when Megan had first arrived, although it hadn’t nearly been the same then.

The day Megan arrived, he had been as nervous as a schoolboy on his first day of school, waiting for her. But when she had stepped off the train, his heart leaped. No other woman had ever had that kind of effect on him before, especially not when he first met her. And then when their eyes locked and held, his heart nearly stopped. At that moment, he knew that she was the one, although her photograph didn’t do her justice. When he approached, the image of her was ingrained upon his heart.

The train whistle made a shrill sound bringing him back to reality as white steam rolled forward just seconds before he saw the train. Then the whole wooden platform

rattled as the power of the massive locomotive pulled to a stop a few feet away, a final blast of steam rolling out from under the train.

Dallas smiled, knowing he would soon see his friend. He just hoped Charles wasn't too tired from his journey and vowed to give him time to rest before the party.

The door opened on the train and the conductor helped the people disembark, holding the hands of the ladies and tipping his hat to the gentlemen. A moment later, Charles Whitfield stepped off the train and onto the platform.

Dallas chuckled as he hurried over to his friend and offered him his hand. "It's a pleasure to see you again, old friend!"

Charles chuckled, clasping his hand as he gave him a manly pat on the back. "It's good to see you, too." He let out a deep breath and pulled back, adjusting his hold on his carpet bag.

"Here, let me get that for you." Dallas reached for it, but Charles pulled it away. "No, I'll need you to help me with my trunk."

Dallas laughed, giving him a manly slap on the shoulder as they headed over to retrieve his luggage. "So, did you bring everything but the kitchen sink?"

"Nearly." Charles grinned, nodding toward a black leather trunk. "I'm thinking of staying longer than usual this time."

Dallas's head snapped up. "Really? How long?"

Charles shrugged. "For as long as you'll have me."

"Good! Well then, you'll be staying for a very long time." Dallas picked up one end

of the trunk and Charles lifted the other.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” They walked out of the train station with the trunk and headed straight over to Dallas’s carriage. Bill saw them approaching and opened the back of the carriage for them to slide in the trunk. “I don’t have to be back to New York before Christmas. So, I thought that I’d stay until I have to go, if that’s okay with you.”

“You can stay as long as you like. You’re always welcome.” Dallas gave his friend’s arm a manly squeeze as he nodded toward the carriage doors. “Let’s go. We can talk on the way.”

Bill was going to hold the door for Charles, but he waved him off. “I’ve got it, thank you.”

“As you wish.” Bill climbed back up on the top of the carriage.

Dallas slid in on the other side, narrowing his eyes as he watched his friend.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make it in time for your wedding.” Charles took off his hat and ran his fingers through his dark brown hair. Then he laid it on the seat beside him, a crease forming between his eyes. “How was it?”

“It was wonderful.” But Dallas didn’t smile, knowing the Chicago Fire, as the newspapers now called it, was weighing heavily on his friend. Dallas’s heart went out to him. “Charles, how was it in Chicago?”

Charles looked up at him but said nothing. He didn’t have to. His eyes said it all.

Dallas lowered his voice. “Charles, you know you can talk to me.”

He nodded, his eyes filling with tears, threatening to spill over. Never had Dallas ever seen his friend like this before. “Dallas, I just can’t explain it. The blaze... the fire spreading, scorching hot, blazing against the darkness of the night... and the screaming.” He let out a deep breath, shaking his head. “I tried to save them... I really tried... but I couldn’t save them all.”

Dallas’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “I’m sure you saved many. You did the best you could.”

Charles gave him a weak smile. “I tried.” He let out another breath. “The days that followed after the fire were just as bad.”

Dallas nodded. He could only imagine the atrocities his friend had witnessed, what he had endured. “Charles, I wish I had been there with you.”

Charles’s head snapped up. “No, Dallas, you don’t. I wouldn’t have wished that on anyone.” Then he let out another breath and smiled. “So, tell me of this new wife of yours.”

Dallas smiled, knowing that Charles was coming here to get away, to forget. And out of all the places he could have gone, he came to Whiskey River. He spent the rest of the ride telling Charles of Megan, how smart she was, and how funny, too.

“She sounds extraordinary.” Charles smiled, more like himself. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“And meet her you shall.” Dallas looked up as they pulled down the long drive of his ranch. “We’re here.”

Charles’s lips curled into a smile. “It’s good to be back.”

Dallas wondered how a man who was used to money, used to being in the city, in the center of business, could be so glad to be back here in this country town. But then again, hadn't he himself been thinking of how lucky he was to live in such a place?

Both gentlemen stepped down out of the carriage when it came to a stop.

"Will you be needing anything else, Mr. King?" Bill asked from the top of the carriage.

Dallas shook his head. "No, thank you. Take the rest of the day off."

Bill took up the reins. "Very well, then. Call me if you need me."

"No need." Dallas reached over and patted one of the horses. "If I need to go somewhere, I'll get one of the other men to drive me. And don't worry about the luggage. I'll get the men to bring it in."

Bill nodded as a smile lit his lips. "As you wish." Then he pulled the carriage away and turned it toward the barn.

Dallas headed toward the house where Charles was waiting. "You could have gone inside. I want you to think of it as your home, too."

Charles shook his head. "No, I didn't want to scare your new wife to death if a strange man walked into her house."

Dallas laughed as they approached the door. "Knowing Megan, she'd greet you at the door with the back side of a frying pan."

"Well then...." Charles laughed. "I'm glad I waited."

Dallas chuckled as he opened the door. "Shall we, then?"

"After you." Charles gestured.

When Dallas opened the door, Megan was standing in the living room with her hands folded, wearing a light blue dress. He loved that color on her. Her light auburn hair was pulled up with curls in the crown.

"Welcome home." Megan walked over to him with her arms outstretched.

He met her halfway, clasped her hands, and gently kissed her cheek. "Megan, this is Mr. Charles Whitfield...." Then he turned to Charles. "And this is my wife, Megan King."

Megan held out her hand to Charles. "'Tis a pleasure to meet ye."

"The pleasure is mine, dear lady." Charles smiled in delight as he raised her hand to his lips and then released it. "Dallas, you didn't tell me your wife was so lovely."

Dallas laughed. "Because I didn't want you to steal her away from me."

"You may have to watch me. I may do just that," Charles teased.

"Ye're too kind." Megan blushed. "Mr. Whitfield, ye must be tired after yer long journey and in need of rest... hungry, too. Would ye like to eat some lunch and then take a nap before tonight, or would ye like to rest first? I can have Mrs. Daly bring a tray to yer room."

"You know, I think maybe some lunch would be nice. I haven't eaten anything since breakfast." Charles offered her his arm. "May I have the honor?"

Megan smiled as she took his arm and then Dallas took her other arm. “My, my! Being escorted by two handsome gents! What’s a girl to do?”

Dallas smiled, knowing that she was just teasing, but it still rubbed him the wrong way. Was it jealousy that he felt? But he laughed it off. “Just remember who your husband is.”

The three of them laughed.

“How am I to forget?” Megan teased. “Ye remind me of it all the time.”

Charles laughed, but Dallas felt a bit foolish in front of his friend. Anger welled up inside of him. He was going to have to tell Megan privately not to make a fool of him in front of his friend, teasing or not.

She must have sensed his change in attitude, for she leaned over and kissed his cheek and whispered, “I was only jokin’, love.”

Dallas smiled and held the chair for her as she sat. “We’ll talk later.”

Then he sat down kitty corner from her at the head of the table and Charles sat across from Megan on the other side.

“Yer just in time!” Mrs. Daly announced as she walked through the door from the kitchen carrying a tray of fresh, hot bread, and sandwiches, small plates, silverware, and lemonade. “I do hope yer hungry.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Charles shook out his napkin and laid it across his lap. “I certainly am. This looks wonderful! Did you make it?”

Mrs. Daly laughed. “Oh, heavens no! Jacques would kill me if I make meself too at

home in his kitchen!”

Megan chuckled. “She’s not kiddin’. I made that mistake when I first came here. Now, I sneak in when he’s not lookin’.”

Everyone laughed.

Mrs. Daly set the tray on the table, and then set a plate before them filled with sandwiches. “Well, have fun! Let me know if ye be requirin’ anything more.” She gave one last wave and waddled out through the door and into the kitchen.

“Well, I don’t think these sandwiches will eat themselves!” Dallas smiled, but Megan folded her hands at the edge of the table.

“Shall we say grace first, dear?” Megan waited politely.

“Yes, yes of course.” Dallas folded his hands and then said the blessing over the meal. Truth be told, it had been the first time he’d prayed in a while. When the prayer came to an end, he announced, “Let’s eat!”

Megan and Charles laughed.

Charles took a bite of his sandwich, moaning in delight. “Dallas, I think your wife is good for you in more ways than you think.”

Dallas smiled, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “Yes, I think you’re right.”

They talked and laughed through lunch and before long, it was time to prepare for their guests.

Megan dabbed daintily at her lips. “Well, if ye gentlemen don’t mind, I need to get



ready for the party tonight.”

Both Dallas and Charles stood.

“I’ll walk you up.” Dallas held her chair for her as she stood.

“It was nice meeting you,” Charles added, and then nodded toward Dallas as he spoke to Megan. “Good luck keeping this one in line.”

Dallas didn’t care much for being the butt of their jokes, although he realized it was in good fun. “This is the one you have to look out for.” Dallas pointed a finger at Charles, smiling.

Charles chuckled. “But seriously, any friend of Dallas’s is a friend of mine.”

“Why, thank ye, Mr. Whitfield.”

“Please, call me Charles.”

“We’ll see you in a little while.” Dallas offered her his arm. “Shall we?”

Megan nodded and he led her up the stairs.

In their bedroom, Dallas pulled her into his arms and closed the door. Then his lips descended upon hers as his breath quickened and his heart raced.

“Slow down there, honey.” Megan pulled back, bringing everything to a stop and lowered her voice to a whisper. “I have to get ready, love. Our guests will arrive soon. And ye have to get ready, too.”

Dallas kissed down her jaw to her neck and inhaled. “Meggie, can I ask you

something?” He planted a kiss on her shoulder this time.

“What?” she asked dreamily.

He smiled to himself at the effect he was having on her. “Do you like Charles?”

“What?” Megan pulled back abruptly, her eyes wide. “What in the world—”

“I just watched you two talking and—”

“And you thought I was attracted to him.”

“Megan, keep down your voice. He’ll hear—”

“Well, let him hear!” Megan yelled even louder. She backed away and then narrowed her eyes. “For yer information, I was just being cordial and friendly and so was he.” She scoffed. “I would think that ye would like that we got along so well! After all, he is yer best friend, isn’t he?”

In the last month, they had gotten to know each other and he had told her what Charles had done for him. “Okay, you’ve made your point. Let’s get ready. Our guests will be here shortly.”

“You expect me to go after this?”

Dallas crossed the room and looked down at her. “You are my wife, and you will attend this party.”

“No.” Megan folded her arms across her chest.

Rage instantly boiled up inside him as he gritted his teeth and clenched his fists.

Then, he lowered his voice in an effort to control himself. “I am going to leave this room. While I am out, I want you to get ready... please.”

Megan let out a deep breath and then nodded, relenting. “Okay. The only thing you had to do was ask.” Then she narrowed her eyes. “But don’t ever accuse me of that ever again. I’m friendly. That’s who I am, and I won’t change. So, yer just going to have to accept it.”

Dallas slid his hand behind her head and pressed his lips to hers. When he pulled back, he replied, “Just remember who your husband is.”

She pushed him away and stumbled back, her eyes wide. “I know full well who me husband is. I’m not a flirt... or worse.”

He pulled his clothes out of the closet and walked into another room, needing a moment. Once he was dressed, he looked in the mirror and tied his ascot tie. Then he took the hairbrush resting on the counter and brushed his blond hair into place.

Before he finished, the anger had dissipated, realizing the error of his ways. How could he have been so stupid? Deep down, he knew that Megan and Charles were just being friendly. Actually, he was glad they got along. And Dallas knew that Charles would never do anything to hurt him. He let out a deep breath and looked in the mirror one last time. Then he walked out the door and down the stairs.

When he reached the first floor, Dallas walked through the spacious living room. The furniture had been moved and the wooden floor was polished, creating the perfect dancefloor. But Dallas paid no attention. He walked straight into the parlor and to the bar and poured himself a drink. Then he downed it quickly. Soon, the dark liquid did the trick and helped him to relax. Holding onto the bar, he thought of Megan. How could he have been so stupid? Charles wouldn’t do anything to hurt him and, deep down, he knew that Megan wouldn’t hurt him like that, either.

“Ready for this shindig?” Charles asked as he walked in.

Dallas nodded, but didn’t look at him.

“Care to talk about it?”

Dallas shook his head.

“Dallas, can we talk?”

When Dallas turned around, Charles was dressed in a top coat but wasn’t wearing his top hat. “Yes, of course.”

Charles slipped a hand into his pocket. “Dallas, just relax and be yourself.”

“What do you mean?” Dallas narrowed his eyes at his friend.

“No, hear me out.” Charles took a step closer, lowering his voice. “Dallas, it seems that you’re trying too hard. Just... be yourself.” He placed his hands on his shoulders and looked into his eyes. “Enjoy yourself tonight.”

Dallas smiled. He was the only one on the planet who could talk to him like this. Dallas would have dismissed anyone else who tried. But he and Charles had been friends far too long, and Dallas owed him too much. Dallas thought of him as a brother, not just his business associate. At that moment, he realized how much he had missed his friend.

“Thanks, Charles.” Dallas poured him a drink and handed it to him. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I just need to relax and enjoy myself tonight.” But it’d been too long, and he almost forgot how.

“You know I’m right.” Charles took a sip of his drink.

“You need to visit more often.” Dallas smiled. “Maybe even move here. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” Charles smirked. “And believe it or not, I’ve thought of it.”

Dallas’s eyes opened wide. “What? Of moving here?”

Charles nodded. “I love the town, and the people treat me like a ‘normal’ person. You just don’t know how lucky you are.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“You know I am.” Charles eyebrows pulled together in concern. “After what I witnessed in Chicago, it’s made me realize how precious life is... and how much I’m missing in life.”

Dallas’s eyes widened. “Charles, you have everything a man could want: Money, friends, fine things, a wealthy family, prestige... everything.” Charles had all the things that Dallas had ever wanted, and to find out that he was unhappy with his life was absurd.

Charles smiled. “No, not everything. I don’t have a wife and love... someone to love and to care about... someone to love me for who I am.”

Dallas clasped his shoulder. “You’ll always have me. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. You’re like a brother to me.”

Charles pulled him in for a manly hug. “And you’re like a brother to me, too.”

When Dallas pulled away, he said, “Charles, I want you to enjoy yourself, too. You’ve been through so much. Tonight, you just need to relax.”

“Thanks, Dallas.” Charles smiled. “I will.”

When Dallas pulled back, he remembered something. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to check on Megan. I’ll be right back.”

Dallas hurried up the stairs, taking two at a time. He knew he owed Megan an apology, too. How could he have been so stupid as to think that she was flirting with Charles? Neither she nor Charles would hurt him like that. He squared his shoulders and knocked on their bedroom door.

“Come in,” Megan’s voice resounded from the other side of the door. When he opened the door, Megan stood there, and his breath caught.

She wore a white ballgown that was off the shoulder, fitted at the waist, and bustled in the back in the latest fashion. But it sparkled silver when she moved, shimmering in the lamplight. Her light auburn hair was pulled up and rolled with a silver ribbon that set off the dress. Tendrils lay against her neck. She would be overdressed compared to the other ladies that would attend the party, but Dallas didn’t care. She looked gorgeous. Megan smiled, enjoying his reaction.

Without taking his eyes from hers, he closed the distance between them in a few short steps. Then he took her hand into his and lifted it to his lips. “You look lovely, my dear.” Then his eyes narrowed as he looked her over.

“Is something wrong?” she asked as she looked down at her dress.

He nodded. “Yes, there is. Something’s missing.”

“What could possibly be missing?” Megan asked as she looked over her dress and then raised her hands to her hair.

“This.” Dallas pulled a slender box from inside his suitcoat.

Her breath caught. “Oh, Dallas! Ye didn’t have to do that!”

Then Dallas stepped before her and opened it. Inside lay a silver locket with diamonds encrusted along the edge and a pearl in the center. With it were matching diamond studded earrings with a small pearl on a silver loop.

“It’s beautiful,” Megan gasped. “But this is too much. I cannot accept—”

A crease formed between his eyes. “Do you not like it?”

She smiled as her eyes widened. “No, I love it. It’s just that ye don’t need to lavish me with such expensive gifts.”

He smiled as he placed his hand on her cheek, causing her to blush. “But I want to. Will you not accept this small token of my love?”

“Yes, of course. Thank ye. It’s too much, but I love it.”

The necklace sparkled in the candlelight when Dallas lifted it from the case. “May I?”

She nodded as tears filled her eyes. “Yes, of course.”

He walked behind her, slid the necklace around her neck, and hooked the clasp. It fell perfectly onto her chest, bringing out her beauty.

She crossed the room to the mirror hanging on the wall and fastened an earring into

place.

Dallas smiled, pleased that she had accepted his gift. "I'm glad you like it. I picked them out this afternoon."

"You did?" she asked as she finished fastening the other earring. "You have great taste." When she turned around, the picture was complete.

His heart swelled with joy and love as he drank her in. "You are the most gorgeous woman I've ever met." Then he pulled her into his arms and held her close. "Megan, I'm so sorry about earlier. I didn't mean—"

"Shh...." She placed a finger to his lips. "All is forgotten... and forgiven. Let's just enjoy ourselves tonight."

Dallas smiled as he offered her his arm. "Shall we?"

She nodded. "Thank ye... fer everything. Ye went through a lot of trouble for tonight and I know it's going to be a success."

Dallas patted her arm. "I just want you to have fun."

Megan nodded. "I will." She pulled him to a stop, her eyes filled with concern. "Dallas, I want ye to enjoy yerself, too."

He smiled, pleased by the sentiment. "I will... as long as I'm with you."

"I feel like a princess," Megan said, a slight blush touching her cheeks.

Dallas gazed into her eyes, seeing something he hadn't seen before, and his heart fluttered with joy and anticipation. At that moment, he had never wanted a woman so



much before in his life. “You are a princess.” Then he kissed her lips, tasting her. “You deserve fine things. I would give you the moon if I could.”

She looked at him through her lashes, tugging at his heart. “Dallas, ye don’t have to keep showering me with gifts. Not all the time, anyway. All I want is you.”

He nodded, understanding. She didn’t want him for everything he could give her. She wanted him for who he was. Dallas pressed his lips to hers and she melted into his arms. He wanted to hold her, to freeze the moment and keep it in his heart forever.

She pulled back and smoothed her hands over her hair. “Do I look okay?”

“Divine.” Dallas kissed each finger on her left hand. “Simply divine. You will be turning the heads of every man at the ball.”

She placed her hand on his cheek. “Yers is the only head I want to turn.”

He kissed the back of her hand, his eyes never leaving hers. “Let’s go. Everyone will be here soon.” Then one corner of his lips curled into a sly smile. “Besides, I want to show you off.” Dallas adjusted his vest, and then offered Megan his arm. “Shall we?”

She smiled as she slid her hand over his arm. When they walked to the top of the stairs, Charles let out a low whistle. “Don’t you both look fabulous!”

Dallas smiled and patted Megan’s hand as he led her down the stairs. When they reached the first floor, Dallas felt like a prince who had finally found his princess.

Charles extended his hand to hers. “Mrs. King, you look simply divine.” He kissed her hand and then released it and looked up at Dallas, smiling. “You, my friend, are a very lucky man.”

“Why, thank you, sir.” Megan looked around, her eyes wide. “Everything looks beautiful! It feels as if you’ve transformed the house into a castle.”

Soon, their guests started to arrive, eager to meet his new bride. Dallas had introduced Megan to everyone as they arrived, and they all greeted her warmly. He also introduced Charles, and everyone welcomed him. Dallas smiled, pleased that Charles was enjoying himself. Maybe he was right. Maybe the most important thing in life was friendship, trust, and love.

After the last of the guests had arrived, Dallas took Megan’s hand and tucked it in his arm. “You’re the belle of the ball.” She blushed a beautiful shade of pink. “Are you hungry?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think I could eat now if I wanted to.”

Colton and Ella Hill were standing off to the right holding their twins, both dressed in cute clothes—the girl was in a pretty pink dress and the boy wore cute pants, a light blue shirt, and a little cowboy hat that matched his father’s. They were talking to Wyatt and Madison Nash. Wyatt owned the Whiskey River Saloon, and Madison was the town schoolteacher.

“Come here,” Dallas told Megan. “I’d like to introduce you to some people.” He had almost said “friends” but they were more like acquaintances. But he wouldn’t mind being friends with them, and there was no better time than the present to start.

“Colton, Ella, Wyatt, and Madison, I’d like to introduce my wife, Megan.” Dallas made the introductions, pointing to each person. “And these are Ella and Colton’s children, Hannah and Blake.”

“‘Tis a pleasure.” Megan greeted them with a nod and then carefully reached out to shake little Blake’s hand. “‘Tis a pleasure to meet you, too.”

The baby boy cooed loudly and then let out a chorus of “Da, da, da, da.”

Dallas’s eyes flew open wide. “He’s talking already?”

“They’re both nine months old now.” Colton smiled proudly. “That’s all he says so far, but his first word was da, da.”

Ella smiled warmly as she took Megan’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “It’s so good to meet you. Welcome to Whiskey River.”

Dallas offered Colton his hand. “Thanks for your help a while back with the robbery. Colton, I hope we can put the past behind us and become friends.”

Colton smiled as he shook his hand. “Yes, absolutely.”

“The children are so cute.” Dallas slid his arm around Megan’s shoulders. “I can’t wait until we have children of our own, too.”

“It’ll happen sooner than you think.” Colton laughed as he played with his son. “But you’ll both make good parents someday.”

Dallas smiled, and then looked at Megan. “We’ll have to come by your ranch and visit and you’ll have to do the same.”

“Sure!” Colton lifted his eyebrows in surprise. “You’re welcome to come over anytime.”

Dallas then shook Ella’s hand. “Congratulations on the children. You look wonderful, by the way.”

Colton laughed. “Oh, hey now.”

Dallas gave him a wink and chuckled. "Can you blame me?" he teased.

Megan smiled. "Congratulations. You'll have to come and visit us, too. And please, bring the children."

Ella smiled warmly as she gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Thank you. I truly appreciate that." She glanced over at Dallas. "I'm glad you found her. It's good to see you happy."

"Thank you." Dallas nodded, glad that all of them were able to put the past behind them. Although Ella was supposed to have been his mail-order bride, he was glad it had worked out the way it did. After the last month of being married to Megan, he couldn't imagine his life turning out any other way. "So, Wyatt. How is the saloon business going?"

Wyatt smiled. "It's going well, thank you. I heard you had some trouble at the bank a few weeks ago. If you ever need anything, I'm here to help."

Dallas shook his hand. "I appreciate that. And the same goes for me. If I can ever do anything for you, just let me know."

Wyatt smiled his thanks. "So, congratulations on your marriage. We wish you both the best and we hope you'll be very happy."

"We already are." Dallas slid his arm around Megan's waist as she blushed.

Everyone laughed.

"So, how's married life?" Dallas asked Wyatt.

"It's going well," Wyatt replied as he slid his arm around Madison.

“Trying to keep him out of trouble is hard work, though,” Madison teased as everyone chuckled.

Wyatt smiled down at her. “Hey, you haven’t been complaining so far.”

Everyone laughed again.

“Well, I’m so glad you came.” Dallas stepped away. “We’ll see you in a bit. Enjoy the party.” Dallas led Megan around the room, making sure that she had the opportunity to meet everyone. Dallas stopped when they reached Dirk and Gabriella, who was visibly pregnant. “Dirk, Gabriella, I’d like to introduce my wife, Megan.”

“It truly is a pleasure to meet you both.” Megan offered Gabriella her hand.

Gabriella gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “The pleasure is ours,” Gabriella replied in a rich French accent. “Do I detect an Irish accent?”

Megan smiled. “Yes, I’m originally from Dublin. Where are you from?”

“Monaco,” Gabriella replied, absentmindedly rubbing her stomach. Although she was visibly pregnant, she looked lovely. Pregnancy suited her.

“Do you know that Gabriella is a real princess?” Dallas interjected.

Megan’s eyes opened wide. “Really? How on earth did you ever move here?”

Gabriella grinned as Dirk pulled her to his side. “It’s a long story, one that I’ll have to share over tea sometime.”

Megan smiled. “I’d like that.” She moved closer. “If ye don’t mind me askin’, when are ye due?”

Gabriella moved closer to Dirk, who slid his arm around her. “Christmas.”

“Congratulations,” Megan replied and then Dallas led her away.

Dallas and Megan continued to mingle, meeting everyone in the room. He was glad to see that just about every person in Whiskey River was in attendance. Even Charles seemed to be enjoying himself.

Just then, the string quartet started playing a beautiful waltz. Dallas had brought in the musicians from Laramie. It had cost him a fortune, but it was worth it. Introducing his wife to the town was a very special occasion.

“I believe they’re playing our song.”

Megan blushed. “We have a song?”

“Now we do,” he replied, already leading her toward the dance floor. “Shall we?”

“But no one else is dancing.” Megan looked around.

Dallas shrugged. “And it’s a shame, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.” She smiled as she slid her arm over his shoulder.

Dallas couldn’t help but notice how perfectly she fit into his arms. It was almost as if they were made for each other. Megan was stiff at first but then relaxed and let him lead her around the dance floor. Before long, other couples joined them, but Dallas only had eyes for Megan as he guided her around the room. “You’re an excellent dancer.”

“I’m a quick learner.” She chuckled, arching an eyebrow. “You approve? No dance

lessons needed?”

Dallas laughed and shrugged. “If you like, I’d love to take dance lessons with you.”

Megan smiled. “Is there an instructor in Whiskey River?”

“Hardly!” Dallas laughed, shaking his head. “No, we’ll have to go to Laramie. But it’s not far. Would you like to go?”

Megan nodded. “Yes, of course. I love to dance.”

The music shifted to another waltz, and they kept right on dancing.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Dallas asked.

“Immensely,” she replied. “I’ve never had so much fun in my life.”

“I’m so glad to hear it,” Dallas said as they circled the room.

“Are you having fun?”

“Yes, I am. I’m having more fun tonight than I thought I would.”

Soon, the song came to an end, and he stepped back and kissed her hand. Megan clapped along with the rest of the crowd when Dallas saw Charles, standing off to the side of the room. Wyatt and Madison were standing at the door, so Charles turned to speak with them. Charles and Wyatt were also business partners. For some reason, Dallas’s chest filled with jealousy. Wasn’t Charles there to visit him? Dallas knew the feeling was irrational, but the green monster filled his chest, nevertheless.

“Come along.” Dallas guided her toward Charles, wanting to make sure that he had a

good time and to make a good impression on him.

When Dallas and Megan approached, Charles extended his hand, grinning. “Dallas, you really have outdone yourself. Everything looks exquisite.”

“I’m so glad you’re here. It just wouldn’t be a party without you.” Dallas beamed, giving his shoulder a manly squeeze. “I trust you’re having a good time?”

Charles smiled. “Yes, very much.” He looked over at Wyatt. “It’s good to catch up with everyone here in the town, too.” Charles looked around the room. “It appears that everyone in town came.”

Dallas smiled. “Yes, it seems so.” Then he turned to Megan. “Megan? Charles is a Whitfield, of the New York Whitfields.”

Megan nodded, her eyes wide. “Oh?”

Charles smile faded at the mention of his family, but he quickly recovered. He took her hand and raised it to his lips. “Yes, but here, I’m just me.”

Even though he had noticed that Charles frowned at the mention of his family’s status, Dallas just couldn’t help himself, wanting to impress his own importance onto everyone within earshot. “He and his family owns many businesses in New York.”

Charles’s smile faded. “Yes, but we’re not here tonight to discuss business. Are we, Mr. King?” He stressed the Mr. King part to give him a hint to stop, but Dallas ignored it.

Megan placed a hand on Dallas’s arm. “Perhaps Charles is hungry, dear?”

“Yes, of course.” Dallas turned back to Charles. “Would you like something to eat?”



“No, I’m not hungry. Thank you,” Charles replied flatly.

Megan looked nervously between the men. “Dallas, let’s dance.”

“Soon,” Dallas interrupted and then turned to Charles. “Would you like to dance with her?” Although Dallas knew he was making a fool of himself, he just couldn’t stop, determined to show Charles that he was worthy of the help he had bestowed upon him in the past.

Megan’s eyes narrowed.

Charles looked between Megan and Dallas and shook his head. “Although I would be delighted to dance with such a fair lady, I’m a bit tired at the moment.”

Charles turned back to Wyatt, but Dallas interrupted, claiming his attention. “Perhaps a drink, then?”

“Dallas, I need to speak with you... privately,” Charles replied, anger leaking into his voice.

“Dear,” Megan interrupted, sliding her hand onto his arm. “Let’s take this outside. Shall we?”

“In a moment.” Dallas patted her hand condescendingly, ignoring her, focusing only on Charles.

“Dallas, don’t do this,” Charles whispered, glancing around the room.

“But—”

“Dallas, let’s go outside... now.” Charles looked around. “Let’s not make a scene in

front of your guests.”

Dallas looked around the room, noticing that they were starting to attract attention. “Yes, of course.” He turned to Wyatt. “If you’ll excuse us.”

Wyatt nodded, his eyebrows pulling together in concern. “Yes, of course.”

At that moment, everything came to a head... the years of him being poor then struggling to make it to the top. Well, now he was at the top and by golly he was going to prove it. As he followed Megan outside, he knew he was flaunting his wealth and that of Charles before his guests, but he just couldn’t help himself. He had to prove his worth, that he was now worthy of his success. Until this moment, he hadn’t realized what a toll the years of struggle and hard work had taken on him.

Outside, Charles looked over and a few people were mingling. “Leave us, please.” The people nodded and then walked inside without incident. Charles walked away from the house and Dallas and Megan followed. Charles stopped, out of earshot.

When they were alone, Dallas grabbed Megan’s arm. “Don’t you ever embarrass me like that again!”

“Let me go!” she yelled.

Rage welled up within Dallas’s chest. “How dare you refuse to do as I’ve asked! We’re in the middle of a party!”

Megan jerked her arm away. “No, ye’re in the middle of trying to impress Charles!” She flung her hand toward Charles, who was waiting patiently to the side. “Ye were making a fool of yerself in there! Was that what this party was all about? To flaunt yer wealth at the feet of Mr. Whitfield? Is that why ye married me? To bring me out and show me off like a dancing bear when it suits ye?”

Anger welled up within his chest. “I was just trying to make him feel comfortable—”

“Comfortable?” Megan asked. “Ye call that comfortable? Ye were nearly embarrassing yerself, him... and me, too!”

Dallas took a step back as if he’d just been slapped. “So, I’m an embarrassment to you?”

Megan sighed. “No, not at all. But ye nearly embarrassed yerself in there!”

“How?” Dallas asked.

“Ye were trying too hard to please Mr. Whitfield and to impress everyone else.” Megan lifted her arm to touch his, but he pulled away. “Just be yerself and stop trying so hard. Don’t worry so much if everyone will like ye or not. People will like ye even if yer poor. I was poor, too, But I’m still going to be me... whether I have money or not. And ye were in there flaunting me! I’m not one of yer possessions that ye can—”

“I merely offered Charles a dance with you. Nothing more.” Rage filled his chest. “I thought he might like to dance—”

“But why with me?” Megan asked as her eyes filled with tears. “I’m not a trophy that ye can bring out and flaunt when the time suits ye!”

“You’re not a trophy but you will do as I ask.”

“Like hell I will!” Megan placed her hands defiantly on her waist.

Dallas took a step toward her, but Charles stepped between them.

“Dallas, I think you need to calm down,” Charles interrupted. “This isn’t really about

Megan, is it?"

Dallas stood there, his eyes flaring.

Megan stepped to the side, giving them room.

Charles took a step closer to him. "Dallas, what was that all about in there? You know I don't like to discuss my family, my wealth. Why did you do that? I thought we were friends, and I came here to see you !" Charles let out a deep breath and then lowered his voice. "But besides that, one of the reasons why I like coming to Whiskey River is because everyone treats me like I'm a normal person. No one treats me differently because of my status, or because of what family I come from, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"I'm sorry, Charles." Anger filled Dallas's chest, even though he was trying to calm down. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Then what the hell was that?" Charles flailed his hand toward the house. "What was all of that in there? I thought you were my friend!"

"I am!" Dallas yelled, his body trembling. "But you've had everything that I never had! Can't you see? I came from nothing, Charles! My father was a sharecropper! I scraped my way to the top and I couldn't have done it without your help." He let out a deep breath in defeat. "I guess I wanted to prove to you that I was worthy of it." Dallas bit his lower lip as tears came to his eyes. Then he glanced over at Charles, lowering his voice. "I guess I don't want people to see me for who my family is, either. I want people to see me for who I am, and not where I came from, too." Dallas turned away so Charles wouldn't see his shame. "And yes, Charles, we're friends. In fact, you're probably my only friend." He turned around and their eyes met. "Your friendship has meant the world to me, and I hope I haven't lost it."

Charles took a step closer and placed his hand on his shoulder. “No, of course not. Just please, don’t ever do that again. Just as you don’t want people to judge you for your family, neither do I.”

Dallas nodded. “I owe you an apology, Charles.” Dallas smirked without humor. “You may not believe me after my behavior in there, but I’ve always liked you for who you are and not for your wealth or your family.”

Charles smiled. “In college when you stood with me, shoulder to shoulder against those bullies, I’ve liked you since. You didn’t know me from Adam, yet you stood with me. It told me a lot about your character.” He placed a hand on his shoulder. “Dallas, I hope you know that your wealth, or lack of it, never meant anything to me.”

“I know. That’s one of the things I’ve always liked about you.” Dallas sighed. “I guess I was just jealous of it, though. You had everything handed to you, but didn’t want it. And here I’ve had to struggle for everything I’ve ever had.”

Charles let out a deep breath. “I guess I’ve been jealous of you, too. You worked hard and made yourself who you are.”

“You helped me—”

“No,” Charles corrected. “All I did was to give you a start. What you did with it was your doing. As you know, I’ve helped other people before and lost money. But I never stopped believing in people and wanting to help them.” Charles placed his hand on Dallas’s shoulder. “Dallas, I’d always bet on you.” He pulled him in for a manly hug. When he pulled back, he asked, “Now, can we get past this? You’re one of the only true friends I’ve ever had.”

Dallas smiled. “Yes, of course.” Then he turned to Megan. “I’m so sorry. You’re

right and it'll never happen again." He took her hands into his. "But just to let you know, I may have married for status, but I'm glad it was you."

Megan gave him a weak smile. "Let's go inside." Her voice cracked, filled with emotion.

Dallas nodded. But as they walked inside, he hoped that Megan could forgive him just as Charles had. But somehow, he knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Megan

When they walked in, Megan noticed that a few people glanced over at them with wide eyes. Some gave them weak smiles. Everyone else hadn't noticed that anything had happened out of the norm.

"I'm sorry," Megan said to Wyatt, who was still standing near the door. "I felt faint, and Dallas and Charles were kind enough to walk me out."

Wyatt smiled. "I'm glad you're feeling better, Mrs. King." He looked up at Dallas and smiled.

"I think I'm in the mood to dance now." Charles looked down at Megan. "Would you do me the honor?" One corner of his lips curled into a smile, and he whispered to both Megan and Charles, "I thought it might help. We don't want to give the gossips any more fat to chew."

Megan looked around and a few people were watching. She looked up at Dallas. He smiled and inclined his head slightly. "I'd be delighted, Charles." Then she took his arm and let him lead her out onto the dance floor, while Dallas spoke with Wyatt.

"Thank you, Mr. Whitfield." Megan looked around and smiled as if nothing were amiss. "I'm sorry about what happened... with Dallas."

Charles smiled. "For one thing, please call me Charles. For another thing, he meant no harm."

Megan lifted her eyebrows. “You’ve been friends for a while?”

He nodded. “Since college.” Charles let out a deep breath. “To make a long story short, some bullies attacked me in college when Dallas came along. He stood beside me and, together, we fought them off.” Charles chuckled at the memory. “When everything was said and done, we were beaten and bloody, but we were still standing. We’ve been friends ever since.”

Megan smiled as Charles guided her around the dance floor. “That’s amazing.” The story had shed a bit more light on Dallas, helping her to see what kind of man he really was inside.

Charles nodded. “I owe him everything.”

“You care very much for him, don’t you?” Megan looked into Charles’s eyes.

Charles grinned. “He’s my very best friend and I’d do anything for him.” He let out a deep breath, as if trying to find the right words. “Despite what he did tonight, he’s the only one who ever liked me for who I am and not for my family.”

“But you helped him, right?”

“Yes, I did. But Dallas never asked. I offered.” He let out a deep breath. “When I saw what kind of person he was inside, and how hard he was working to make a better life for himself, I said to myself, ‘Now, that’s a man I can work with.’ And I’ve been working with him since.”

Megan nodded, understanding. She could see that Dallas was a very complex man. A moment later the music came to an end and she and Charles clapped. “Thank you for the dance.”



“It’s always a pleasure to dance with the prettiest lady in the room.” Charles took her hand and led her over to Dallas. “You’re a very lucky man, my friend.”

Dallas took her hand and tucked it into his arm. “Yes, I am.”

“Well, I’m off to mingle.” Charles smiled and bowed slightly. “If you’ll excuse me.” Then he walked over to Colton, Ella, and the children, and began talking animatedly with them.

The string quartet started playing another waltz.

“It appears that they’re playing our song.”

One corner of Megan’s lips curled into a smile. “We have a song?”

“We do now.” Dallas took her hand and led her to the dance floor.

Megan’s heart fluttered as her husband led her in a waltz, letting the music fill her soul as they glided around the room.

“Can you ever forgive me for being so foolish? Not only for how I behaved tonight, but for earlier, too. I should have never accused you of Charles—”

“Dallas,” Megan cut him off, “whether ye know it or not, Charles thinks the world of ye and would never hurt ye... and nor would I. And I think the world of ye, too.” It was the first time that Megan had ever admitted that she cared for him. She hadn’t planned on it. In fact, she didn’t want to fall for him. She had lost everyone she had ever loved, and she didn’t know if her heart could take any more.

Dallas smiled and brought her to his chest, just as the song came to an end. “Thank you... for forgiving me.”

Megan pulled back to look into his eyes. “But Dallas, ye have to start trusting me.” She bit her lower lip, trying to find the right words. “Ye’ve worked hard for what ye have. But ye can’t live in fear of someone taking it away.”

Dallas nodded as a faraway look came into his eyes. As they danced, they felt the music, letting it envelop them as they glided across the dance floor. “Please, be patient with me.”

Megan nodded, knowing she would have to be, hoping they could get over their pasts, but wondering if they ever would.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Megan

Feeling a kiss on her cheek, Megan stirred and rolled over to face Dallas the next morning. When she opened her eyes, it was still dark outside. “Dallas?” she breathed against his chest, trying to orient herself. She was getting used to waking up with him every morning, but it still took a bit for her to wake completely.

He softly kissed her lips. “Darling, I’m going to work.”

“Today?” Megan sat up straight, suddenly wide awake. “But last night... the party... I thought ye were taking off today. It’s Saturday.”

Dallas pushed her hair away from her face, obviously enjoying her reaction as he looked into her eyes. “You sleep in and enjoy yourself. I’ll be home before you know it.”

Megan nodded. “Must ye? I thought we’d spend the day together.”

Dallas gave her another kiss. “Tomorrow.”

Then Megan had an idea. “Since tomorrow’s Sunday, would ye like to go to church? I think it’s about time that we join the community.”

He planted a sweet kiss on her nose and then slid out of bed. “We’ll see.”

Megan got up and pulled a work dress out of her closet, preparing to dress for the day.

“What are you doing?”

Megan froze. “What do you mean?”

“That dress.” Dallas nodded toward the work dress in her hand. “You don’t plan on wearing that today, do you?”

Megan looked down at the dress and then up into his eyes. “Yes, unless ye’d like me to clean the house in a ballgown.”

Dallas laughed. “Why on earth would you want to do that? I have staff for that. Mrs. Daly—”

“Can’t clean the whole house alone,” Megan cut him off. “And I wouldn’t feel right leaving it all to her while I lounge around all day.”

Dallas sat on the edge of the bed, took her free hand, and pulled her to the edge of the bed. “Megan, darling. We are living a certain lifestyle now. You’ll need to get used to it.”

Megan pulled her hand away. “I appreciate that, but ye can’t expect me to do nothing.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say running a house is ‘doing nothing.’”

Megan lifted an eyebrow, waiting for him to explain.

“Yes... well... since I’m not going to be here today, you can tell the staff what to do to get the house back in order.”

“Tell the staff what to do?”

Dallas nodded. “Yes, of course.” He rose from the bed and kissed her forehead. Then he crossed the room to the mirror and adjusted his tie. “You’re the lady of the house now. Which means that everyone in the house must do your bidding.”

Megan’s lips curled into a devilish smile. “Including you?”

Dallas laughed. “Hardly.” He gave her a kiss on the forehead and whispered, “Just the staff.”

Megan laughed. “Well, ye can’t blame me fer tryin’.”

“Have fun today.” Dallas smiled, giving her one last wave over his shoulder and then headed out the door.

Megan looked down at the dress she was holding as she watched him leave. “I guess I’d better get busy.” She carried it behind the dressing screen and changed. Then she crossed the room to the mirror and combed her auburn hair into a neat bun at the top of her head, reminding her of how she used to wear it to go to the factory. But she vowed to bathe and dress properly before Dallas came back home.

When she was ready, she headed downstairs. On the first floor, Mrs. Daly was passing by.

“Good morning, Mrs. King! What are ye doing up so early this fine morn?” Mrs. Daly chirped happily.

“I need yer help getting’ the house back in order before Mr. King comes back home.” Megan placed her hands on her hips.

“We can take care of that alone.” Mrs. Daly was holding some clean clothes. “Why don’t ye rest today?”

Megan sighed. “Mrs. Daly, if I don’t do something useful, I’m going to scream.”

“Well, I was just about to hang these up in Mr. King’s closet and then clean yer room—”

“Perfect!” Megan interrupted. “After ye hang the clothes, could ye help me today? Between the two of us, we’ll have the place spick and span in no time.”

“But, Mrs. King—”

“No buts,” Megan cut her off. She looked up and the huge lengths of fabric still hung from the top balcony. “That’s as good a place as any to start.”

She walked up the stairs as Mrs. Daly followed. Then, Megan headed over to one side of the balcony.

“I’ll be right back,” Mrs. Daly sighed as she disappeared into the bedroom to put away the clothes.

Megan knew that she was probably disrupting Mrs. Daly’s usual routine, but there were more important things to do at present. Megan unfastened one of the large lengths of white fabric and pulled it up easily. She folded it neatly and went on to the next. Megan made a mental note to save the fabric for the next party, sure that Dallas would want to do more entertaining now that the party was such a success. And when that day came, she would have the staff wash and press the fabric to hang once more. There was no sense in washing it now. It would need to be done again for the next party.

When she returned, Mrs. Daly went over to the next length of fabric, unfastened it, and pulled it up, as well. Before long, she and Megan had taken down all of the fabric and had it folded in a neat stack.

“I have just the place fer this!” Mrs. Daly smiled as she picked up the stack. “Don’ ye worry none.”

“Where are ye puttin’ it? I want to save it fer the next party.”

“Yes, of course.” The older woman’s eyes gleamed. “Come along and I’ll show ye were we keep the linens.”

Megan followed as Mrs. Daly led the way to a door, glad that she was being so agreeable. Mrs. Daly opened it, but instead of revealing a linen closet, it was a small room filled with shelves. On the shelves were linens, doilies, table runners, and more. “This is the linen room,” Mrs. Daly proudly announced. “When ye’d like to change the linens in the house, ye can come in here and pick out what ye want. Then ye can tell me and I’ll take care of it.”

“Nonsense! I can take care of it meself.” Megan looked through the shelves and found a white tablecloth, and some very pretty doilies. In a way, Megan felt as if she was rummaging through someone else’s things, but she reminded herself that she was now the lady of the house and vowed to make more doilies later.

“Here.” Mrs. Daly reached for the stack that Megan had assembled. “I’ll take that.”

“I’ll help.” Megan divided the stack in half and they each took one. “Come along. We have much to do.” Megan headed down the stairs as Mrs. Daly followed. “Let’s set these over here fer now.” Megan set her stack down on an end table, out of the way. She looked around the huge room, placing her hands on her hips. “Well, first thing’s first. We’ll clean this room first then we’ll have the men move the furniture back in. Then we can divide and conquer the other rooms in the house.”

Mrs. Daly scrunched up her nose. “Mrs. King, I kin take care of this. Why don’ ye rest. After all, ye had a big night last night.”

“Nonsense! If we work together, we’ll have this place spotless in no time.”

Mrs. Daly took her in, doubt filling her eyes. “Well, if ye insist.”

A broad smile spread across Megan’s lips. “I do.”

Together, they dusted all the furniture and scrubbed the vast wooden floor, careful not to leave water standing so as not to ruin it. When they were finished, Mrs. Daly went to get some men, and Megan told them to bring the furniture back in and directed them where to set it. When everything was in place, she and Mrs. Daly polished the tables and set the doilies out as Megan instructed. Then they moved on to the next room, working together until the whole house was shining and clean.

“Whew! I’m exhausted!” Mrs. Daly announced at the end of the day. “That was fun. Thank ye fer yer help.”

Megan smiled, thankful to be of use. “No, thank ye fer yer help. I think we make a good team.”

Mrs. Daly looked around the room. “I think this is the best this place has ever looked, thanks to ye.” She smiled at Megan. “I always knew that something was missing. But what it needed all along was a woman’s touch.”

Megan laughed, feeling accomplished as she looked around the house. “Well, I’d better get ready before Mr. King arrives. He won’t like to see me in these work clothes, I’m sure.”

Mrs. Daly nodded. “I’ll draw ye a hot bath. I’m sure ye could use a good soak.”

“Thank ye, but I’ll do it. Ye’ve done enough fer one day.”



“Nonsense!” Mrs. Daly replied, smiling as she took charge. “And don’ ye be frettin’ about me.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “All I’ll be doin’ is tellin’ the men to carry the buckets to fill the tub once they’re heated.” She gave her hand a gentle pat. “Now, why don’ ye go upstairs and rest while yer waitin’. I’ll let ye know when it’s ready.”

“Actually, I’m getting’ a wee bit hungry and I’m sure ye are, too. Let’s have a bite to eat while the water’s heatin’.”

A sly smile spread across Mrs. Daly’s lips. “Well, I could be persuaded.”

“What can I get for you ladies?” Jacques asked, holding a large butcher knife up when they walked in, bringing them to a halt.

Megan thought for a moment, remembering the food from the party. “Do ye have anything left over from last night? Mrs. Daly and I haven’t had any lunch.”

He held up his hands. “Say no more, mademoiselle .” He gently turned her around and nudged them both out of the kitchen. “Why don’t you rest in the dining room, and I’ll bring you something.”

“I’ll stay and help—” Mrs. Daly interjected.

“No, please,” Megan said. “Ye worked hard with me today. Come sit with me.”

Jacques smiled. “Yes, yes. Now, get out of my kitchen!”

Megan narrowed her eyes and stared at him, folding her arms across her chest.

“Please,” he added.

“Come along, Mrs. Daly,” Megan instructed, “let’s go to the dining room.”

“I’ll get us some lemonade—”

“No, no, no!” Jacques’s patience was wearing thin. “I’ll get it.”

Megan bit her lower lip to keep from smiling. But when they were in the dining room, they both burst out laughing.

“Come. Join me.” Megan sat at the table and Mrs. Daly took the seat across from her.

“I appreciate yer help today. It was nice to work with another lady again.” Mrs. Daly folded her hands and laid them on her lap. It was obvious that she wasn’t used to sitting down with the heads of the household. “Ye’re not at all how I thought ye’d be.”

Jacques brought in two glasses of lemonade and set them on the table. “I’ll be right back.”

Megan smiled and watched as he walked away. Then she turned her attention back to Mrs. Daly. “Oh? How’s that?”

Mrs. Daly took a sip of her lemonade, taking a moment to weigh her words. “Usually, the lady of the house spends her time telling the servants what to do, no offense.”

Megan took a sip of her lemonade. “None taken.”

“But ye... today... it was not at all what I expected. I’ll just leave it at that.”

Megan smiled. “I didn’t come from money, and I’m used to working for a living. Although running a household is a lot of work, it’s different than what I’m used to.”

Megan didn't tell her the level of poverty that she had come from. How her parents had quite literally starved to death in Ireland. How her brother had died defending her honor while walking her home from working late. How they had to live in a tenement with two other families. That she had promised her brother to make a new life, a better life for herself. No, it was best to keep it to herself... for now. "Let's just say that this..." Megan gestured around her. "... is quite a different lifestyle than I'm used to." She shrugged. "I guess old habits die hard."

"Here we go!" Jacques proudly announced as the dining room door swung open and he set a tray filled with food on the table. "We had a lot of food left over from the party, so I took the liberty of choosing for you. Enjoy!"

"Jacques, why don't you get a plate and join us?" Megan asked as Mrs. Daly smiled.

"Nonsense!" He took her hand and patted it. "Although I appreciate the gesture, I have much to do." Then he disappeared into the kitchen.

Megan knew better than to stand in his way. He was a man on a mission.

Mrs. Daly waited timidly. It was the first time since she had known her to be shy.

"Come on and help me eat this." Megan handed her a plate. "There's way too much for one person."

Mrs. Daly smiled. "Well, if ye insist..."

"I do." Megan took a plate for herself, and then stabbed a slice of roast and slid it onto her plate. Mrs. Daly soon forgot her hesitation and before long, both of their plates were filled. Megan smiled as she made a sandwich and took a bite, moaning with delight. "I think I was hungrier than I thought."

“Well, ye worked up an appetite, Mrs. King.”

Megan smiled. “We both did.” Megan had a feeling that after today, Mrs. Daly may be a bit softer toward her now.

“So, did ye have fun last night?”

Megan nodded. “I did.”

She didn’t tell her about Dallas’s incident, though. That was the difference between her and Dallas. Although he was generous, he wanted to accumulate his wealth to prove to the world that he was worthy. Megan agreed that having money was important, but she would give it all if it would have saved her parents and her brother. If she could have married Dallas earlier when her parents and Liam were still alive, maybe she could have saved them. Then, she wouldn’t have hesitated to marry a man of means, if it meant saving her family.

Mrs. Daly took a bite of her sandwich and swallowed. “Ye should be pleased. It appeared that everyone in the town came.”

Megan gave her a weak smile. “Yes, it was nice meeting everyone. And it was fun dressing up.”

Mrs. Daly nodded, obviously sensing there was more that Megan couldn’t say. “Mr. King is very complex, but a good man.”

“Yes, he is.” Megan pushed the bowl of fresh fruit toward her. “But I think we need to eat this before it goes to waste.”

Although it was November and getting cold out, Dallas had somehow found a way to have fresh fruit. She guessed that you could have just about anything you wanted

when you had money.

Soon, Megan sat back and placed her hand on her stomach. “Oh! I couldn’t eat another bite if I wanted to!”

“Neither could I.” Mrs. Daly sat back and rubbed her stomach. “Why don’t ye go to yer room and rest and I’ll prepare ye a warm bath. I’ll let ye know when it’s ready.”

“I can do it—”

“No, ye won’t,” Mrs. Daly cut her off, stacking the dishes onto the tray. “Ye’re tired. Go rest! I’ll come and get ye when yer bath’s ready.”

Megan nodded as she stood. Normally, she would say no, but she was just so tired. “Well, if ye insist....”

“I do.” Mrs. Daly smiled, obviously pleased. “Now, go and lie down.”

Megan’s lips curled into a smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Daly.” Megan started to leave, but then turned toward the older woman. “Thank you... for everything.”

Mrs. Daly shrugged. “It’s my job, miss.” But Megan knew it was much more than that. Mrs. Daly was the type of woman who liked taking care of people... whether it was her job or not.

Megan headed up the long staircase and flopped onto the bed as soon as she reached the bedroom. Normally, she wouldn’t have been so tired. When she was working at the factory, she would work sometimes sixteen hours a day and never felt like this. But she knew it was probably just fatigue from the party the night before.

As she lay on the bed, thoughts of Dallas ran through her mind and her heart

fluttered. He was smart, kind, generous... no, she couldn't allow herself to love him. After all, she'd lost everyone she'd ever loved. She turned over and tucked her hands under her head. No, she couldn't allow herself to fall in love with Dallas King. She had to remind herself that he could be jealous and unsure of himself, even though most of the time he exuded confidence. She couldn't allow herself to love him, could she?

"Mrs. King."

Someone gently shook her shoulder.

"Mrs. King, yer bath is ready." Yes, it was Mrs. Daly, Megan realized as she slowly regained consciousness. "Ye want to be ready when Mr. King arrives, don' ye?"

Realizing she heard a voice in the distance, Megan sat up with a start, her eyes wide. She had fallen asleep. "Oh, my goodness! Is Mr. King here yet?"

Mrs. Daly shook her head, a smile fondly lighting her lips. "No, not yet."

Megan nodded. "Well, I think I'll go into town and surprise him. Maybe I'll stop by and say hello to Kenzie Baker, too."

"Are ye sure ye wouldn't rather wait here for him?" Mrs. Daly arched an eyebrow.

Megan shook her head. "No, it'll do me some good to get out, and maybe I can talk Dallas into going to the restaurant tonight." Megan was already excited at the possibility as she jumped out of bed and started gathering her things.

"Very well, then. I'll have Jake drive ye." Mrs. Daly followed as Megan rushed out. At the bottom of the stairs, she hurried to the bathroom.

Megan hurried to bathe and dress, eager to surprise Dallas. She just hoped he didn't mind.

## Chapter 9

### Dallas

Earlier that morning, Dallas had gone to work at the bank, even though it was Saturday. Charles had tried to get him to take the day off, but Dallas was in a hurry to get back to work. He hadn't been to work in a few days while preparing for the party, and Megan would want to go to church the next day, Sunday.

Although he trusted his staff to run things, he couldn't be away from the bank that long. Dallas needed to check on the safe and the money and go over the ledger to make sure everything was in order. Although he trusted Russell and Alonzo, he just couldn't leave the welfare of the business to chance, especially not after being robbed just a few months before. The last member of the Yates Gang, the man in the black cowboy hat, had gotten away with a bundle and it had cost Dallas dearly. He had no intention of losing any more.

But throughout the day, Dallas found he missed Megan. He missed her smile, her laughter, her humor, her kindness, her strength. Yes, she was beautiful, but what he loved about her the most was her heart. Beauty was only superficial, after all, and would one day fade. No, he'd rather have a woman of substance, a strong woman like Megan. He was glad that she had been his mail-order bride.

That afternoon, the bell on the door rang while he and Charles were going over the ledger and updating his business plan.

"I'm sorry, Mr. King, I know it's Saturday, but I really must speak with you. I've tried over the last few days, but you weren't here."

Dallas looked up and Mr. and Mrs. Tucker stood in the doorway. They were a young couple who had just moved to Whiskey River. “By all means, come in. I’m sorry I missed you before.” Dallas waved them in. “What can I do for you?”

Mr. Tucker held his hat in his hands, fiddling with it nervously as his wife looked on with wide eyes. “Well, we found a spread just outside of town and was wanting to know if your bank could hold the note on it.”

“I’ll go get some coffee and let you discuss business.” Charles headed toward the back, out of earshot.

Dallas motioned toward the seats in front of his desk. “Please, sit down and we’ll talk.”

Suddenly, the sound of horses’ hooves—a lot of them—riding into town resonated outside. Then there was men’s laughter and a commotion close by.

“I can’t afford a big down payment—” Mr. Tucker continued, his young wife nodding in agreement.

“Sir, let me stop you right there.” Dallas rose from his seat. Outside, some men were harassing a lady—Megan. “Sorry, but I’ll be right back. Please, stay inside.”

What was she doing here in town? So many emotions suddenly ran through Dallas’s mind. If something were to happen to her, he didn’t know what he would do. He couldn’t lose her. Not this way. An overwhelming need to protect her filled him as he marched purposefully toward the door.

Dallas laid his hand on the six-gun revolvers strapped to his sides and took off the thumb straps. He didn’t want trouble, but if anyone was messing with a lady in his town, especially Megan, they would have to answer to him. He stepped out and



Charles was right behind him, but stood back to let Dallas take the lead.

Outside, several men were in the street, blocking the way. A horse reared up and the others were prancing, mean and spirited. And in the middle of them... was Megan standing beside Jake.

“So, what is such a delicate flower doing in such a small town?” The leader took off his cowboy hat and held it to his chest. He slid down off his horse and stepped in front of her.

Jake stepped in front of her and pulled her behind him, drawing his gun. “She’s with me, mister. And you’d best be on your way.”

“Leave us alone!” Megan yelled, trying to step out from around Jake. “I’m not that kind of girl!”

A sinister smile curled his lips. “Ah! Boys, we have an Irish lassie here!”

Another man jumped off his horse and stood on the other side of Megan, blocking her way.

“Get away from her!” Dallas commanded, walking purposefully toward them.

Relief appeared in her eyes when she saw him. One man tried to block him, but Dallas punched him, sending him to the ground. Another man pulled a gun, but Charles was faster and pressed his revolver to the man’s head. The man held up his hands and backed away.

Dallas took Megan’s hand and pulled her behind him. Jake and Charles stood at his sides, creating a wall in front of her. “I don’t know who you are, but while you’re in this town, you need to behave yourselves. And the ladies are off-limits.”

The leader held up his hands in surrender. “I meant no harm. We were just having a bit of fun.” He drew his gun and pulled back the hammer, but Dallas was quicker. Everyone had their guns drawn, pointing them at each other with the hammers pulled back, ready.

Daxton stepped out from inside the sheriff’s office with his gun drawn. “Mister, you’d better get back on your horse and go back to where you came from.” The sheriff never wavered.

Colton stepped out from inside the sheriff’s office and leaned casually against a post, watching.

The men were unfazed. “Nah, I don’t think so. We’re just getting started.”

“Go inside... now.” Dallas ordered Megan in a low, urgent voice. Mrs. Carson, the shop owner, pulled her inside the bank. Dallas glanced over and Mr. Carson had his rifle in hand, cocked and ready. Across the street, Harrison Curry stepped out of the restaurant and hotel with his gun drawn.

The newcomers watched Megan go, but thankfully, they didn’t go after her. “Yeah, this town looks like home to me. I think we’ll stay for a while.”

“You have no business here,” Dallas said. “I suggest you leave.”

The leader walked over to him and stopped a few feet away. “Sir, if you kill me, then my brothers will tear up this town.” He shook his head, smiling. “I really don’t think you want to do that.”

“Well, then....” Dallas smiled casually, his eyes never wavering. “You’ll die first. And no matter what happens next isn’t your affair because you’ll be dead.”

A silent hush came over the men, and then they started laughing and slapping each other on the back as if it was the funniest thing they had ever heard.

The click of a gun hammer was heard above everything. “Mister, I suggest you do as the banker says and get out of here,” Sheriff Daxton Clark’s voice bellowed from the wooden walkway. “And take your men with you.”

The leader smiled, looking around. “No, I rather like it here. Don’t you, boys?”

A grumble of agreement came from the men.

The leader nodded. “Oh, yes! I forgot to tell you!” A broad smile spread across his face. “We’re not leaving town until we’ve avenged our brothers. You know. The ones you shot in cold blood.” He looked between the two of them. “Now, which one of you killed them?”

Dallas smirked. They were part of the Yates Gang. “I did, of course,” Dallas smile lit his lips, tilting his head. “That’s what you get when you try to rob my bank.”

“Why, you—”

The sound of spurs jingling and the hard sound of boots against the wooden walkway resounded throughout the town as Colton stepped forward. It was known that he had been a gunslinger before, and he was fast. He was wearing his six shooters, bandana, and his cowboy hat, ready to do business. He stopped beside Daxton and struck a casual pose. “I suggest you do as these gentlemen said and leave.”

“Frank, he’s a sheriff, too!” one of the men told the leader, shifting his weight from side to side.

“No, you idiot! He’s just a deputy.” Frank smirked.

Before they could say anything more, Colton drew both guns and pointed them toward Frank and the man who spoke to him.

“Whoa! Did you see how fast he was?” another man asked, his eyes wide.

“Shut up!” Frank yelled as he held up his hands, glancing over at the sheriff. “We’ll be over at the hotel... if you need us.”

“Just see that you don’t cause any trouble while you’re here,” Sheriff Clark warned. “And that includes harassing innocent ladies. Leave all the ladies in this town alone, you hear?”

“Let’s go!” Frank growled without answering the sheriff and headed across the street to the hotel. Three of the men stood outside, watching, and the others headed inside with the leader.

Dallas’s men sat on the wooden benches in front of the bank, one on each side, watching the men standing outside the hotel.

“Don’t worry, boss. We’ll keep an eye on them,” Jake said.

Anger flooded Dallas’s body as he took Jake in. “Why did you bring her here?”

“I asked him to.” Megan had stepped out of the bank and hurried over to Dallas. “Are you all right?”

Dallas nodded, wrapping his arm around her. He let out a deep breath, relieved that she was safe. He pulled her into his arms protectively, and she laid her head on his chest. “I’m fine. And you?”

Megan let out a deep breath. “I’m fine.” When she pulled back, there were tears in

her eyes. “I was so afraid for you! You could have been killed!”

He rubbed her back as he rested his head against hers. “Shh, darling. I’m fine.”

Megan looked over at Jake. “Thank you.”

Jake nodded as he tipped his hat, and then turned his attention back to the men lingering outside the hotel.

The sheriff clapped his hand on Dallas’s back. “I didn’t know you had it in you! You showed no fear!”

Colton shook Dallas’s hand, one corner of his lips curling into a smile. “The way you faced them down was amazing. I’m impressed.”

“Thanks.” Dallas wrapped his arms protectively around Megan. “Is there any way we can get them to leave, or arrest them?”

The sheriff shook his head. “Unless they kill someone or do something stupid, I can’t touch them.”

Colton nodded in agreement. “Well, sheriff, it looks like you’re going to need a deputy until they leave. I’ll stick around town for a while.”

Daxton nodded, a crease between his eyes. “Much obliged.”

Colton had been the deputy when he first moved to Whiskey River but had given it up when he and Ella married and bought their ranch. But he always stepped in when needed. As far as Dallas was concerned, he should just remain the deputy, but he guessed it afforded him more freedom to step in only when necessary.

“Thanks, Colton. I could use the help. Dallas, I’ll keep an eye on the bank for you until after they leave.” Sheriff Clark slid his weapon back into its holster.

Dallas nodded. “Thanks, sheriff. I’ll increase my security, too.” He looked down at Megan and grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to look into his eyes. “I’m going to assign a guard to you, too. I don’t want you to go anywhere without him until after they leave town. Do you understand?”

Megan took a step back. “I hardly think that will be necessary—”

“Well, don’t stay out here long,” Daxton interrupted. “We don’t need to stir those men up again.” He nodded toward the men sitting in front of the hotel, appearing to have settled in for the long haul.

Dallas nodded. “We’re leaving now.”

Daxton smiled as he tipped his hat toward Megan. “Ma’am.” Then he and Colton headed toward the sheriff’s office next door.

Dallas turned his attention back to Megan when they were gone. “Please, let me do this. I’d feel a lot better, knowing you’re safe.”

It looked as if she was thinking for a moment, then nodded. “If it’ll make ye feel better....”

He let out a deep breath. “It will.” Dallas was going to do everything in his power to protect his wife. In fact, if he lost the bank, it would be nothing compared to losing her. “Why don’t you go inside? I’ll be there in a minute.”

Megan glanced over at Colton, standing just outside the door of the sheriff’s office, waiting. “I’m glad the two of ye came along when ye did.”

“Think nothing of it.” Colton leaned against a post, watching.

“Yes, thank you,” Dallas agreed, sliding his gun back into its holster. “Megan, why did you come here? When I looked out and saw it was you they had, I nearly had a heart attack.”

“I wanted to surprise ye.”

“And surprise me, you did.”

“Well, all’s well that ends well.” Colton smiled, casually watching the men across the street. “But I’m afraid it’s not over yet. I have a feeling that it’s going to get a whole lot worse before it gets better.”

Dallas knew he was right. He just hoped Megan didn’t get hurt in the crossfire.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Dallas

Earlier that morning, Dallas had gone to work at the bank, even though it was Saturday. Charles had tried to get him to take the day off, but Dallas was in a hurry to get back to work. He hadn't been to work in a few days while preparing for the party, and Megan would want to go to church the next day, Sunday.

Although he trusted his staff to run things, he couldn't be away from the bank that long. Dallas needed to check on the safe and the money and go over the ledger to make sure everything was in order. Although he trusted Russell and Alonzo, he just couldn't leave the welfare of the business to chance, especially not after being robbed just a few months before. The last member of the Yates Gang, the man in the black cowboy hat, had gotten away with a bundle and it had cost Dallas dearly. He had no intention of losing any more.

But throughout the day, Dallas found he missed Megan. He missed her smile, her laughter, her humor, her kindness, her strength. Yes, she was beautiful, but what he loved about her the most was her heart. Beauty was only superficial, after all, and would one day fade. No, he'd rather have a woman of substance, a strong woman like Megan. He was glad that she had been his mail-order bride.

That afternoon, the bell on the door rang while he and Charles were going over the ledger and updating his business plan.

"I'm sorry, Mr. King, I know it's Saturday, but I really must speak with you. I've tried over the last few days, but you weren't here."



Dallas looked up and Mr. and Mrs. Tucker stood in the doorway. They were a young couple who had just moved to Whiskey River. “By all means, come in. I’m sorry I missed you before.” Dallas waved them in. “What can I do for you?”

Mr. Tucker held his hat in his hands, fiddling with it nervously as his wife looked on with wide eyes. “Well, we found a spread just outside of town and was wanting to know if your bank could hold the note on it.”

“I’ll go get some coffee and let you discuss business.” Charles headed toward the back, out of earshot.

Dallas motioned toward the seats in front of his desk. “Please, sit down and we’ll talk.”

Suddenly, the sound of horses’ hooves—a lot of them—riding into town resonated outside. Then there was men’s laughter and a commotion close by.

“I can’t afford a big down payment—” Mr. Tucker continued, his young wife nodding in agreement.

“Sir, let me stop you right there.” Dallas rose from his seat. Outside, some men were harassing a lady—Megan. “Sorry, but I’ll be right back. Please, stay inside.”

What was she doing here in town? So many emotions suddenly ran through Dallas’s mind. If something were to happen to her, he didn’t know what he would do. He couldn’t lose her. Not this way. An overwhelming need to protect her filled him as he marched purposefully toward the door.

Dallas laid his hand on the six-gun revolvers strapped to his sides and took off the thumb straps. He didn’t want trouble, but if anyone was messing with a lady in his town, especially Megan, they would have to answer to him. He stepped out and

Charles was right behind him, but stood back to let Dallas take the lead.

Outside, several men were in the street, blocking the way. A horse reared up and the others were prancing, mean and spirited. And in the middle of them... was Megan standing beside Jake.

“So, what is such a delicate flower doing in such a small town?” The leader took off his cowboy hat and held it to his chest. He slid down off his horse and stepped in front of her.

Jake stepped in front of her and pulled her behind him, drawing his gun. “She’s with me, mister. And you’d best be on your way.”

“Leave us alone!” Megan yelled, trying to step out from around Jake. “I’m not that kind of girl!”

A sinister smile curled his lips. “Ah! Boys, we have an Irish lassie here!”

Another man jumped off his horse and stood on the other side of Megan, blocking her way.

“Get away from her!” Dallas commanded, walking purposefully toward them.

Relief appeared in her eyes when she saw him. One man tried to block him, but Dallas punched him, sending him to the ground. Another man pulled a gun, but Charles was faster and pressed his revolver to the man’s head. The man held up his hands and backed away.

Dallas took Megan’s hand and pulled her behind him. Jake and Charles stood at his sides, creating a wall in front of her. “I don’t know who you are, but while you’re in this town, you need to behave yourselves. And the ladies are off-limits.”

The leader held up his hands in surrender. “I meant no harm. We were just having a bit of fun.” He drew his gun and pulled back the hammer, but Dallas was quicker. Everyone had their guns drawn, pointing them at each other with the hammers pulled back, ready.

Daxton stepped out from inside the sheriff’s office with his gun drawn. “Mister, you’d better get back on your horse and go back to where you came from.” The sheriff never wavered.

Colton stepped out from inside the sheriff’s office and leaned casually against a post, watching.

The men were unfazed. “Nah, I don’t think so. We’re just getting started.”

“Go inside... now.” Dallas ordered Megan in a low, urgent voice. Mrs. Carson, the shop owner, pulled her inside the bank. Dallas glanced over and Mr. Carson had his rifle in hand, cocked and ready. Across the street, Harrison Curry stepped out of the restaurant and hotel with his gun drawn.

The newcomers watched Megan go, but thankfully, they didn’t go after her. “Yeah, this town looks like home to me. I think we’ll stay for a while.”

“You have no business here,” Dallas said. “I suggest you leave.”

The leader walked over to him and stopped a few feet away. “Sir, if you kill me, then my brothers will tear up this town.” He shook his head, smiling. “I really don’t think you want to do that.”

“Well, then....” Dallas smiled casually, his eyes never wavering. “You’ll die first. And no matter what happens next isn’t your affair because you’ll be dead.”

A silent hush came over the men, and then they started laughing and slapping each other on the back as if it was the funniest thing they had ever heard.

The click of a gun hammer was heard above everything. “Mister, I suggest you do as the banker says and get out of here,” Sheriff Daxton Clark’s voice bellowed from the wooden walkway. “And take your men with you.”

The leader smiled, looking around. “No, I rather like it here. Don’t you, boys?”

A grumble of agreement came from the men.

The leader nodded. “Oh, yes! I forgot to tell you!” A broad smile spread across his face. “We’re not leaving town until we’ve avenged our brothers. You know. The ones you shot in cold blood.” He looked between the two of them. “Now, which one of you killed them?”

Dallas smirked. They were part of the Yates Gang. “I did, of course,” Dallas smile lit his lips, tilting his head. “That’s what you get when you try to rob my bank.”

“Why, you—”

The sound of spurs jingling and the hard sound of boots against the wooden walkway resounded throughout the town as Colton stepped forward. It was known that he had been a gunslinger before, and he was fast. He was wearing his six shooters, bandana, and his cowboy hat, ready to do business. He stopped beside Daxton and struck a casual pose. “I suggest you do as these gentlemen said and leave.”

“Frank, he’s a sheriff, too!” one of the men told the leader, shifting his weight from side to side.

“No, you idiot! He’s just a deputy.” Frank smirked.

Before they could say anything more, Colton drew both guns and pointed them toward Frank and the man who spoke to him.

“Whoa! Did you see how fast he was?” another man asked, his eyes wide.

“Shut up!” Frank yelled as he held up his hands, glancing over at the sheriff. “We’ll be over at the hotel... if you need us.”

“Just see that you don’t cause any trouble while you’re here,” Sheriff Clark warned. “And that includes harassing innocent ladies. Leave all the ladies in this town alone, you hear?”

“Let’s go!” Frank growled without answering the sheriff and headed across the street to the hotel. Three of the men stood outside, watching, and the others headed inside with the leader.

Dallas’s men sat on the wooden benches in front of the bank, one on each side, watching the men standing outside the hotel.

“Don’t worry, boss. We’ll keep an eye on them,” Jake said.

Anger flooded Dallas’s body as he took Jake in. “Why did you bring her here?”

“I asked him to.” Megan had stepped out of the bank and hurried over to Dallas. “Are you all right?”

Dallas nodded, wrapping his arm around her. He let out a deep breath, relieved that she was safe. He pulled her into his arms protectively, and she laid her head on his chest. “I’m fine. And you?”

Megan let out a deep breath. “I’m fine.” When she pulled back, there were tears in

her eyes. “I was so afraid for you! You could have been killed!”

He rubbed her back as he rested his head against hers. “Shh, darling. I’m fine.”

Megan looked over at Jake. “Thank you.”

Jake nodded as he tipped his hat, and then turned his attention back to the men lingering outside the hotel.

The sheriff clapped his hand on Dallas’s back. “I didn’t know you had it in you! You showed no fear!”

Colton shook Dallas’s hand, one corner of his lips curling into a smile. “The way you faced them down was amazing. I’m impressed.”

“Thanks.” Dallas wrapped his arms protectively around Megan. “Is there any way we can get them to leave, or arrest them?”

The sheriff shook his head. “Unless they kill someone or do something stupid, I can’t touch them.”

Colton nodded in agreement. “Well, sheriff, it looks like you’re going to need a deputy until they leave. I’ll stick around town for a while.”

Daxton nodded, a crease between his eyes. “Much obliged.”

Colton had been the deputy when he first moved to Whiskey River but had given it up when he and Ella married and bought their ranch. But he always stepped in when needed. As far as Dallas was concerned, he should just remain the deputy, but he guessed it afforded him more freedom to step in only when necessary.

“Thanks, Colton. I could use the help. Dallas, I’ll keep an eye on the bank for you until after they leave.” Sheriff Clark slid his weapon back into its holster.

Dallas nodded. “Thanks, sheriff. I’ll increase my security, too.” He looked down at Megan and grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to look into his eyes. “I’m going to assign a guard to you, too. I don’t want you to go anywhere without him until after they leave town. Do you understand?”

Megan took a step back. “I hardly think that will be necessary—”

“Well, don’t stay out here long,” Daxton interrupted. “We don’t need to stir those men up again.” He nodded toward the men sitting in front of the hotel, appearing to have settled in for the long haul.

Dallas nodded. “We’re leaving now.”

Daxton smiled as he tipped his hat toward Megan. “Ma’am.” Then he and Colton headed toward the sheriff’s office next door.

Dallas turned his attention back to Megan when they were gone. “Please, let me do this. I’d feel a lot better, knowing you’re safe.”

It looked as if she was thinking for a moment, then nodded. “If it’ll make ye feel better....”

He let out a deep breath. “It will.” Dallas was going to do everything in his power to protect his wife. In fact, if he lost the bank, it would be nothing compared to losing her. “Why don’t you go inside? I’ll be there in a minute.”

Megan glanced over at Colton, standing just outside the door of the sheriff’s office, waiting. “I’m glad the two of ye came along when ye did.”

“Think nothing of it.” Colton leaned against a post, watching.

“Yes, thank you,” Dallas agreed, sliding his gun back into its holster. “Megan, why did you come here? When I looked out and saw it was you they had, I nearly had a heart attack.”

“I wanted to surprise ye.”

“And surprise me, you did.”

“Well, all’s well that ends well.” Colton smiled, casually watching the men across the street. “But I’m afraid it’s not over yet. I have a feeling that it’s going to get a whole lot worse before it gets better.”

Dallas knew he was right. He just hoped Megan didn’t get hurt in the crossfire.



Megan

Megan headed into the bank to wait for Dallas. When she had seen him face off with the gang, her heart had leapt into her throat. The only thing she could think of was that she couldn't lose him. Not like that.

She was so proud of Dallas for standing his ground against the gang, but scared for his safety, too. After the gang went to the hotel, the only thing she could do was to hold him. She had been so scared that the outlaws would shoot him down, especially after they found out that Dallas had killed their brothers. But, luckily, the sheriff and Colton had arrived just in time.

By the way that Dallas's men and the other men in the town stood up for him, Megan could tell that everyone cared for him, and not just because he was the richest man in town. No, all of them genuinely cared about him. Megan had a feeling that, in this town, having money didn't mean as much to the people as one's integrity.

Outside, Dallas's guards stepped aside, and her heart fluttered when he walked through the door. Even though other people needed his attention, he crossed the room to her in a few short strides and pulled her into his arms. "I'm so glad you're safe." When he pulled back, he pushed away a strand of her hair, gazing into her eyes. "I've been thinking about it and I'm so sorry about how I behaved at the party—"

"Shh," she cooed, gently pressing a finger to his lips. "It's okay."

"I don't know what I'd do if anything happened to you." He let out a deep breath, gazing deeply into her eyes. "Did they hurt you at all?"

Megan shook her head. “No, I’m fine.” She nodded toward Jake. “Before you came out, Jake was looking out for me.”

Dallas nodded as he glanced over at Jake, still standing outside. “I’ll tell you what.” Dallas walked her toward a long wooden bench against the right wall. “Let me take you to dinner. I would take you to the restaurant here in Whiskey River, but with the gang hanging around outside the hotel, I don’t want to put you in harm’s way. So, how about I take you to Laramie?”

Megan’s eyebrows rose. “For dinner?”

Dallas nodded as if traveling all the way to Laramie for dinner was the most normal thing in the world. “Sure. Why not?”

Megan let out a deep breath. “It’s getting a bit late, but I have an idea.” A smile lit her lips. “Let me take care of it.”

He arched an eyebrow, smiling.

“I’ll have everything ready when ye get home.” Megan quickly kissed his cheek, suddenly excited. She rushed toward the door.

“Megan, wait.” Dallas motioned for one of his men to come over. “Milo, would you mind guarding Megan? Stay with her and see to it that she gets home safely.”

The tall, muscular man nodded. “I’ll keep her safe. Don’t worry.”

“Thank you.” Dallas turned back to Megan and held her shoulders. “Please, stay safe. I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you.”

Megan blushed as he tenderly kissed her forehead. “I will. You stay safe, too.”

He nodded and held her hand for as long as possible as she walked away.

Megan rushed out and headed toward the General Store. Milo kept a safe distance as he followed her, continually checking their surroundings until she walked inside.

“Hello, Mrs. King!” a woman greeted her as she walked in, her brown hair pulled tightly into a severe bun, making her pointed nose more prominent. Megan recognized her as the woman who had pulled her into the bank, and she also remembered seeing her at the ball. “My name is Mrs. Carson. My husband and I own this store. And if there’s anything you need—”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, there is,” she replied in a rush. “I’m making a picnic dinner tonight for Mr. King and meself. Can ye help me?”

“Why, of course!” Mrs. Carson chirped. “What would you like to make for him?”

Megan told the woman what she needed, and Mrs. Carson set about helping her gather the items. Megan felt bad for having to charge the items to Dallas’s account, but she felt that since they were married, she had better start getting used to such things.

When she had gathered everything she needed, Mrs. Carson placed the items into bags and then Milo helped her carry them out.

Mrs. Carson stood in the doorway, watching and waving after Megan when she left. “Have fun tonight! And come again!”

Megan gave Mrs. Carson one last wave over her shoulder and then turned to Milo. “Would ye mind taking me home?”

“Not at all, miss.” He lowered the step to the buggy that Jake drove her in and helped

her up. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“Thank you.” Megan nodded her thanks as they placed the bags behind the seat. She was excited to finally be able to do something for Dallas. He was always spending money on her and lavishing her with gifts. She hoped that she could return his kindness and do something for him, no matter how small.

\*\*\*

When they arrived at the ranch, Milo insisted on waiting outside, saying it was a pretty day and he wanted to take in the sunshine. But Megan knew that he wanted to keep an eye out for intruders.

It took a bit of convincing, but Jacques let her use the kitchen, once Megan explained what she wanted to do. After she unpacked the groceries, Megan hurried about the kitchen, and set to work cooking, mixing, and mashing.

Intrigued, Mrs. Daly sat down at the counter to watch. “I would offer ye me help, but it looks as if ye have everything under control.” She watched for a bit, and then asked, “What are ye makin’?”

Megan smiled as she cut the potatoes. “Some traditional Irish fare. Cottage Pie, Irish Soda Bread, and Gur cake for dessert. I hope Dallas likes it.”

Mrs. Daly smiled. “I’m sure he will. And if he doesn’t, then ye and I will eat it. It smells delicious.”

Megan looked up and smiled. “I’ll save ye some.”

Mrs. Daly shook her head. “No, that won’t be necessary. Just promise me that ye’ll share yer recipes with me.”

Megan smiled. “Only if ye’ll share yers with me.”

Mrs. Daly laughed. “Of course. I’d love to.”

From the way Mrs. Daly was watching her, Megan could tell that the woman really enjoyed cooking. They spent the next hour talking about recipes as Megan bustled about the kitchen, preparing the special meal, while Mrs. Daly stayed out of the way.

When everything was baking, Megan started cleaning up the mess.

“I’ll take care of that, madame.” Mrs. Daly shooed her out of the kitchen. “Now, ye go get ready. Ye want to look yer best when yer husband gets here. Ye don’t want to keep Mr. King waitin’.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that—”

“Yes, ye kin.” Mrs. Daly took the dish towel out of her hands. “Now, go get ready and leave the cleanin’ to me.”

Megan pulled her in for a quick hug. “Thank ye, Mrs. Daly. I won’ be forgettin’ this.”

Megan hurried up the stairs as quickly as she could, washed her hands and face, and then changed into a light lavender dress with little blue rosebuds. She pulled her hair up into curls, but didn’t bother with a hat, since she was at home. Then she pinched her cheeks, just enough to give her color.

Satisfied, she hurried down the stairs and assembled everything into a picnic basket that Mrs. Daly had set out for her. She heard voices, and when she looked out, Milo, Dallas, and Charles were talking outside.

When she heard Megan gasp, Mrs. Daly placed a hand on her back and whispered.

“Don’t worry. He just arrived.”

Megan gave her a smile. “I left some in the kitchen fer ye and Mr. Daly.” She pulled the older woman in for a hug. “I hope ye like it.”

Mrs. Daly pulled back. “Ye didn’t have to do that.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “But I’m glad ye did.”

Megan laughed. “Thank you, Mrs. Daly. We won’ be long.”

“Never ye mind that! Ye just have fun.” Mrs. Daly headed into the kitchen.

Dallas looked up and his eyes brightened when Megan walked outside with the picnic basket over her arm. He took her hand and raised it to his lips. “You look gorgeous.”

Megan blushed. “Are you ready?” Then she looked over at Charles and Milo. “I hope ye don’t mind if I steal me husband fer a bit.”

Milo took a step back and Charles smiled. “No, not at all. I may have Jacques make some for me, too. It smells delicious.”

“I made it, but there should be enough in the kitchen for you and for Mr. and Mrs. Daly.” Megan smiled. “I made plenty.”

“I’m glad you did.” Charles smiled as he walked up onto the porch and tipped his hat. “Have fun!” Then he headed into the house.

Dallas smiled as he offered her his arm and nodded toward Milo.

Milo tipped his hat and then headed toward the bunkhouse.

“Will you be okay?” Bill asked, looking down from atop the carriage.

“Yes, we’ll be fine.” Dallas smiled as he gave the horse a gentle pat. “Take the rest of the day off.”

Bill gave him an uneasy smile as he nodded. “Well, if you’re sure....”

“I am.” A smile lit Dallas’s lips. “Don’t worry. We’re staying on the property.”

Bill smiled a bit easier this time and tipped his hat. “Have fun and be careful.” Bill drove the carriage toward the back, leaving the two-seater buggy behind for Dallas and Megan.

“So, where would you like to go?” Dallas asked. “On our property, of course. I don’t want to take you too far.”

“Do you know a place where we can watch the sunset?”

A broad smile spread across his lips. “As a matter of fact, I do. I have just the right place in mind.” He offered her his hand and helped her into the buggy. Then he walked around and slid in beside her.

“So, what brought you to New York?” he asked as he drove.

A faraway look came into her eyes as she watched the sky fill with color. “When Liam and I came to America, we landed in New York, and we stayed there... until I came here.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why was food so scarce in Ireland?” Dallas’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “But we don’t have to talk about it, if you don’t want to.”

“There had been a great famine and food was hard to come by. Many people starved, me parents included.” Megan looked out over the horizon, remembering. “In fact, me brother and I would have starved, too, if we hadn’t moved to America.”

Dallas nodded. “Why? Was there no work in Ireland?”

Megan shook her head. “No, and then we lost all of the potatoes, which was our primary source of food. Now, they ship in food to Ireland, but it’s too expensive to buy.”

Dallas sighed. “It’s hard to believe that people in the world are starving while we live here in abundance.”

Megan nodded in agreement. “But not everyone here in America lives in abundance. Liam and I didn’t, but at least we always had food.” She thought of her life now and how far she had come, even before she had met Dallas King. “Here in America, people work like dogs, but at least there is work to be had and money to be earned, no matter how little.”

Dallas’s head snapped up. “What do you mean?”

Megan let out a deep breath. “In New York, I worked in a factory fer very long hours, and the wages were next to nothin’.”

Dallas lowered his voice. “Is that why you answered my advertisement for a mail-order bride?”

Megan shook her head, giving him a weak smile. “No, I made a promise to me brother... before he died.”

He nodded, as if remembering that she had mentioned it before. “I know you said that



he was defending your honor, but what happened exactly?"

She let out a deep breath. "He was attacked by Italians when he was walking me home from work late one night." She cleared her throat as a wave of emotion came over her. "As he was dying, he made me promise to live a better life, to find someone, get married, and have children." She sighed. "After he died, I knew I had to keep that promise and vowed never to go back to the factory again. That was when I saw yer advertisement in the paper and answered it."

Dallas gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I'm glad you did."

A moment later, they came to a beautiful lake. It was cold out, but they both wore their coats. The sun was setting in the distance over the lake, sending shoots of orange, pink, and yellow across the bright blue sky. It was lovely. Dallas pulled the buggy to a stop under a tree, and then helped her out. The landscape took her breath away. Snow-capped mountains rose in the distance, as the valley below darkened, sending the trees into shadow.

"Oh, Dallas! It's beautiful!"

He smiled as he lifted the picnic basket from the carriage and helped her down. "I'm glad you like it. It's God's country. I thought that one day, our son could build a house here."

"Or our daughter." Megan blushed as she spread a tablecloth on the ground.

Dallas took her hand and helped her to sit down. She started unpacking the basket, laying out napkins that Mrs. Daly had set out for her, as well as the silverware.

"So, what did you make?" he asked, trying to look in the basket, but she shooed him away.

“Have patience.” She set out everything, but it was still covered.

Dallas sat back and smiled. “Everything smells great... whatever it is you made.”

Megan laughed. “I wanted to make ye a few traditional Irish dishes. Cottage pie, Irish soda bread, and Gur cake.”

“It looks delicious,” Dallas remarked as she handed him a plate of food.

She buttered a slice of bread and handed it to him.

“When did you have time to make all of this?” he asked in disbelief.

She shrugged. “It doesn’t take as long as you think.”

He took a bite of the cottage pie and moaned in delight. “This is delicious! Oh, my goodness! If you cook like this for me very much, they’ll have to widen the door to get me in.”

Megan chuckled, pleased with his reaction. “You’d better save room for dessert.”

“Oh, I don’t know. This tastes so good that I may eat the plate, too,” he teased, and then took another bite of the Cottage Pie.

They laughed as they ate and by the time they were finished, Dallas had eaten most of the cottage pie, half of the loaf of bread, and most of the Gur cake—an Irish pastry with a dark brown sweet paste made of raisins and sugar. He moaned in delight as he tasted the flaky pastry. “You could open a bakery! This is delicious.”

She smiled, glad that he liked it. When they were finished and everything was packed away, he slid his arm around her, and they turned their attention to the sunset.

“God’s country,” Megan echoed Dallas’s previous sentiment.

He nodded. “Yes, it is.”

“It feels so open up here. Like we’re close to heaven.”

“You like it?”

“Of all the places I’ve seen on this earth, this is one of the most beautiful.”

He thought for a moment, and then asked, “Is it anything like Ireland?”

“Have you ever been there?”

Dallas shook his head. “No, but I’d love to go sometime. I’ve heard it’s gorgeous. If we go, would you show me around?”

She nodded. “Yes, of course, but I’m not sure if I’d like to go back. After me parents died, it took Liam and I a while before we could leave.” She watched the sunset and then asked, “What was your childhood like?”

Dallas let out a deep breath. “My father drank... a lot... and was abusive. He was a wonderful man when he was sober, but when he was drinking, it was another story. If I did anything wrong, anything at all, I paid the price.”

She nodded, understanding, her heart going out to him. “Is that why you’ve tried so hard to succeed?”

He nodded. “I came from nothing. As I said before, my father was a sharecropper and money was always tight. For Christmas, we were lucky if we got oranges or apples. My father was educated at home by his mother, and he never received a formal

education. He worked hard his whole life, but we never went hungry.” He saw the expression on her face, and then added, “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything—”

“It’s okay. No offense taken.” Megan let out a deep breath. “When we moved to New York, me brother and I had to sell everything we had before we left. Me parents never did that because they were afraid to travel alone with children. In fact, they went without food in order to feed us, and they paid the price. My parents always made sure we didn’t go hungry, either.” Megan thought for a minute. “I’ve always felt guilty about that.”

“Don’t.” Dallas placed his hand on her cheek, forcing her to look at him. “Megan, it wasn’t your fault. Your parents were just trying to take care of you.”

She smiled, leaning into his hand. “Despite your father’s faults, it sounds as if he took care of you, too. That’s why he worked as a sharecropper. It was the only thing he knew.”

Dallas nodded. “I never really thought of it that way.” He released her hand and looked out over the lake at the setting sun, thinking.

“Dallas?”

“Yes?”

Megan sighed. “May I say something without ye getting mad?”

He nodded as one corner of his mouth lifted into a smile. “Yes, of course.”

She curled her hand around his, holding it firmly in her own. “Dallas, ye don’t have to prove anything to anyone. Ye’re successful. Ye don’t need to keep proving it. Ye don’t have to prove anything to anyone but yerself... not even me.”

“What do you mean?”

She bit her lower lip. “It seems to me that, somehow, ye feel ye need to prove yer worth. That yer’re good enough. That yer’re worthy.” He looked away, but she placed a hand on his cheek, forcing him to look at her. “Dallas, ye’re worthy of love.”

A tear rolled down his cheek at her words. “I’ve never told this to anyone.” He bit his lip as he gathered his thoughts. “I guess I never felt like I deserved it.”

“Deserved what? Money? Success?”

He shook his head. “Love. I never felt like I deserved it.” He let out a deep breath. “If my parents actually did love me, then why did my father beat me and why did my mother allow it? It must have been because I’m not perfect. I am... unlovable.”

“Dallas, no one is perfect, and ye don’ have to be.” Megan looked into his eyes. “And of course ye deserve love! Ye’re kind, compassionate, generous.... Ye just have to believe that yer’re worthy and stop keeping people at arm’s length.” He tried to turn away, but she placed her hand on his other cheek, preventing him from looking away. “Ye have lots of people who would like to be yer friend. Ye just have to let them.”

Tears streamed down his face. “But how? How do I do it... open myself up?”

“Just be yerself,” she encouraged, looking into his eyes. “And when people start getting close, don’t push them away... including me.”

“I’ve pushed you away?”

She nodded. “Yes, ye have, and ye probably didn’t even realize it.” Megan thought for a minute and lowered her voice. “And Dallas, ye don’t have to buy people’s love or affection.”

“No one cares about me.” He said it as a fact, not as if he was feeling sorry for himself.

“Yes, they do!” A crease formed between her eyes. “I’ve seen the way the people at the bank look at ye. They would follow ye anywhere. Dallas, they respect ye. And I care about ye, too.”

Every emotion flitted across his face as his eyes met hers. Then his lips descended upon hers, kissing her with a fierceness unlike anything she had felt before. It was a kiss filled with love and pain, as if he had been searching for something and had finally found it. Megan melted into his arms as he pulled her across his lap. Never breaking the kiss, he wrapped her in his arms as passion filled them both. Never before had she felt so loved, so accepted.

When he pulled back, he stroked the hair away from her face. She looked up into his eyes, his face cast in the golden glow of the sunset, adding to his already stunning golden good looks. As she ran her fingers through his light blond hair, she saw a side of him that she sensed he rarely showed anyone. At that moment, she could see a future with him. If she loved him enough, gave her heart to him, maybe it would be enough.

Or would it? If she gave him her heart, what would happen to her if he walked away? If it didn’t work out? She had lost everyone she had ever loved. Could she lose him, too? Could her heart take it?

As they sat on the cliff’s edge and watched the last of the sun’s rays sink behind the mountains, she wondered if love would ever be enough.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Dallas

“Good morning.” Dallas kissed his wife soundly the next morning just as the sun was coming up. “Megan, wake up. Today’s Sunday.”

Dallas hadn’t been to church in a while, but he thought that Megan might like to go. After his talk with her the night before, he knew it was time to become part of the community... and for them to become a family.

“What time is it?” Megan sat straight up in bed, her auburn hair falling loosely over her shoulders.

Dallas smiled as he took her in, pushing her hair back over her shoulder. “It’s early yet, but I thought you may want to go to church today.”

Megan nodded. “Yes, of course.” She started to get out of bed, but he pulled her back.

“Megan, thank you for last night.”

A smile spread across her lips. “What’s a wife for if she can’t listen to her husband every once in a while?”

He smirked. “Every ‘once in a while’?”

“Don’t push it.” She got up out of bed and slid into her robe, took out a dress, and went behind the dressing screen to change.

Dallas got up out of bed and dressed for the day in a light gray suit and white dress shirt. Then he slipped into his boots that shone to perfection. Mrs. Daly always took care of that for him. He never knew when she did it, but they were always ready when he needed them. Or maybe Mr. Daly did it for him at his wife's request. He pushed the thought aside and concentrated on getting ready for church.

"Megan, darling, I'll wait for you downstairs." He took his gray derby hat to match his suit, holding it in his hand as he walked down the stairs. He wouldn't put it on until it was time to go.

"Good morning, Mr. King!" Mrs. Daly was walking through, carrying a stack of linen. "What a fine mornin' it 'tis."

"Yes, it is." He greeted her with a smile, feeling better than he had in a very long time. It was as if a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Go ahead and sit down," Mrs. Daly instructed. "I'll be in with yer breakfast just as soon as I put these away. Jacques already has it prepared for ye and the missus."

Dallas smiled, nodding his thanks. "Thank you, Mrs. Daly."

When he walked into the dining room, Charles was already sitting at the table, eating pancakes. "Good morning, Dallas."

"Morning." Dallas set his hat down on a side table and then sat down across from Charles. "Have you been up long?"

Charles shook his head. "No, but I heard mention of a church service this morning and thought I'd go along, if you don't mind."

Dallas smiled as Mrs. Daly poured him a cup of coffee. "No, not at all." Then he



glanced over at her. "In fact, you and your husband are welcome to come, too."

She smiled appreciatively. "Well, maybe some other day. But thank ye fer the invitation." She walked around the table and refilled Charles's cup, and then set a cup down at Megan's place, knowing she would be down soon. "Ye be careful out there. It was snowin' this morning."

"Really?" Dallas took another sip of his coffee. "I thought it seemed a bit colder this morning."

"I'll have one of the men put another log on the fire." Mrs. Daly walked back toward the kitchen. "I'll be right back with yer breakfast."

Dallas glanced over at Charles. "Will you be here for Thanksgiving?" It was just a week away, after all.

Charles smiled. "Yes, I was planning on it. I don't have to be back in New York until Christmas."

"Great!" A broad grin spread across Dallas's face. "I'll have Jacques fix us a nice Thanksgiving dinner." Dallas took another sip of his coffee. "I wish you could stay for Christmas. But if the weather is like it was last year, you may not have a choice."

Charles laughed. "Between us, I wouldn't mind. But if I can travel, then I must go. Nevertheless, thank you for the invitation."

Just then, Mrs. Daly walked in, carrying two plates. "Where is Mrs. King?" She set the plates down, each filled with pancakes, and then set a platter with more in the center of the table.

Dallas poured syrup over his pancakes. "She'll be down in a few moments."

Just then, she walked into the room and both Dallas and Charles stood, and Dallas held her chair. “So sorry I’m late.” Megan shook out her napkin and slid it across her lap.

“Are you well?” Dallas asked. “You look a bit peaked.”

Megan took a sip of her coffee. “I feel so tired this morning. I’m not sure why.”

“We can stay home, if you like.” Dallas’s eyes were filled with concern as he gently squeezed her hand.

“No, I’m fine.” Megan reached out. “Could ye please pass the syrup?” Dallas handed it to her, and she slathered it over her pancakes. Then she cut the stack of pancakes on her plate, jabbed a few pieces, and shoved it into her mouth. She moaned in delight as she closed her eyes and chewed. Dallas and Charles looked at each other, their eyes wide, and then burst out laughing.

“What?” Megan asked, looking up from her plate.

“Darling, we can stay home today if you don’t feel up to going.”

She shook her head and took another bite. “No, I’m already starting to feel better. I’ll be fine in a minute... after I eat.” She took another huge bite and chewed.

When Dallas and Charles finished, they sat back and enjoyed their coffee, waiting for Megan to finish.

“So, do you have any plans for tomorrow?” Charles leaned back in his chair, holding his coffee.

Dallas glanced over at Megan, who was shoveling forkfuls of pancake into her

mouth, moaning in delight as if it were her last meal. “I think I’m going to have to start feeding her more often.”

Charles coughed to cover a laugh, but Megan ignored them.

“And to answer your question: Yes, I’m going to the bank in the morning. But other than that, I don’t have anything planned.” Dallas took a sip of his coffee. “What do you have in mind?”

“Well, I have some business to take care of in Laramie, so I thought I’d go there tomorrow.” Charles fiddled with his coffee cup, turning it. “I was wondering if you’d like to go.”

Dallas nodded. “Yes, maybe I can come home for lunch, and we can go then. Do you mind if Megan comes, too?” He glanced over at her and smiled. “I think she might like to go. Maybe I can take her out to eat while you take care of your business.”

Charles glanced over at her and smiled. “Yes, of course. It would be a delight to have such a lovely lady accompany us.”

Megan blushed, giving him an appreciative smile, but went back to eating.

Dallas dabbed at his mouth, laid his napkin on his plate, and glanced at his pocket watch. “Well, I think we need to get going if we intend to make it on time.” He glanced over at his wife. “Megan, darling. Are you ready to go?”

She looked up, smiling sheepishly. “Oh! Yes, of course.” She patted daintily at her lips with her napkin, laid it beside her plate, and stood. A slight belch escaped her lips, which she suppressed. “Oops! Pardon me! I’m so sorry! I don’t know what came over me.”

Charles smiled. "You were hungry. It's quite all right."

Dallas held out his arm to her. "Shall we?"

She took his arm, and he led her to the front door.

"I'll wait outside." Charles slipped on his coat and walked out, leaving the door open, obviously giving them a moment alone.

"I'm so sorry." Megan let Dallas help her on with her coat. "I didn't mean for Charles... or you... to hear me do that."

Dallas chuckled. "Charles is like family. It's all right." Then he slipped his arms around her waist and looked into her eyes, concerned that she may be coming down with something. "Are you feeling well, darling?"

"I'm just a little tired... and hungry." Megan laughed. "Yes, and I'm sorry about eating so much, but I just couldn't help myself."

One corner of his lips curled into a smile. "Just make sure you don't get fat."

Megan gave him a light smack on the chest. "Ye will care about me even if I do."

"Yes, of course I will... but just be careful." He loved her figure. Although it sounded unreasonable, even to his own ears, he just wanted her to be careful.

She stared at him for a long moment. "Dallas, if I want to eat the kitchen sink and get very fat, then I will." Megan stormed out the door headed toward the carriage, leaving him behind.

Dallas sighed as he followed her out, closing the door behind him, making a mental

note to have a conversation with her when they were alone. Bill held the carriage door open as he slid in, and he closed it behind him. Megan slid over but looked out the window on the other side of the carriage.

Dallas gently squeezed her hand, and she gave him a weak smile.

He watched the lovely countryside pass, covered in a fresh blanket of snow beneath the evergreens with patches of snow resting upon their branches. Even though it was cold out, the sun shone brightly, reflecting on the snow. It was lovely, reminding Dallas of growing up in Minnesota and sled riding when he was a little boy.

“So, are ye staying through Christmas?” Megan asked Charles, bringing Dallas from his reverie.

He smiled. “No, I have to be in New York for Christmas. But I’d like to stay for Thanksgiving, though.”

Megan gave him a warm smile. “Well, yer welcome to stay as long as ye like.” Then her eyes popped open. “Oh! Maybe we could invite other people, too. Maybe the sheriff?”

Dallas smiled, glad she wanted to be part of the community. “I’m sure that the sheriff would love it. He has two children and no wife, so he probably doesn’t have much time to cook. His daughter, Lillian, is still young yet. But from what I understand, she cooks most of their meals. I’m sure she would like a break. Either that, or we could invite Wyatt Nash and his new wife.”

“Or Colton and Ella and the children,” Megan added. “Since they all know one another.”

Dallas smiled. “I think it may be too many for the dining room.”

“Unless we set up a large table in the living room...” Charles added. “We could all dine together then.”

“I think maybe a more intimate setting in the dining room might be nice.” Dallas added. “After all, it would be twelve people, including the babies. I think we can manage in the dining room. We could set up a side board with the vegetables, turkey, and other items.” Then he glanced over at Megan. “What do you think, darling?”

She gave him a small smile but was obviously starting to get caught up in the planning. “That might be nice. When we get home this afternoon, I’ll have a look and see what we can do.”

“Sounds like a plan!” A broad smile spread across Dallas’s face.

One corner of Charles’s lips curled into a smile. “You know what this means, don’t you?”

“What?” He arched an eyebrow.

Charles leaned forward. “This means that we’ll have to go hunting.”

Dallas burst out laughing. “We could always buy one from the General Store.”

“No! Where’s your spirit of adventure?” Charles asked, clearly excited. “We haven’t gone hunting for a while. It’ll do us some good to get out in the fresh air.”

“In the snow,” Dallas said flatly.

Megan laughed. “Well, I’ll leave it to ye fellas to take care of the turkey. I’ll speak with Jacques about the rest of the meal.” Her head snapped toward Dallas, the earlier incident forgotten. “Should we invite them today? After all, it’ll give them plenty of

time to plan. What do ye think?”

“Well, I don’t know...” Dallas glanced over at Charles and smiled. “What do you think? A Thanksgiving party?”

He shrugged. “Sounds good to me.”

“Now, you boys will have to tell me what to fix because I’ve never had a Thanksgiving meal before, let alone prepared one.” Megan suddenly looked worried.

Dallas gently patted her hand. “Don’t worry. Jacques will take care of everything. You’ll just go over the menu with him, once it’s planned.”

“Well, I want to do something more....” She tapped her finger on her chin, thinking.

“I know! Mrs. Daly and I will take care of the decorations. We’ll press the linens—”

“Okay, okay! I surrender!” Dallas chuckled. “You can have your party.”

“I’ll contribute, too,” Charles interjected, clearly caught up in the excitement.

“No, ye’re our guest,” Megan interrupted. “Ye and Dallas will take care of shootin’ the turkey. Leave the rest of the plannin’ to me.”

One corner of Charles’s lips curled into a devious smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll think of something.”

The three of them laughed as they planned their first Thanksgiving together. Dallas just hoped that everything went well this time. But one thing was sure: He made a mental note to be himself and not to put on airs. After all, he didn’t have to. He just hoped that he and Megan could work everything out in the meantime.

Soon, they arrived at the stone church, set in a fresh blanket of sparkling snow. It was as if God himself had planted a seed and the lovely stone church had sprung up from the earth. The mountains created a lovely backdrop behind it.

Reverend Henley was waiting by the door as they approached, and his eyes widened. After all, it was the first time that Dallas had been to the church for Sunday service. At that moment, Dallas realized how out of touch he had been with the community, although he had fancied himself a part of it all along.

Dallas helped Megan out of the carriage and Charles stepped down from the other side. Dallas tucked Megan's hand in his arm. "Ready?"

"Yes." Then her smile faded. "And I promise not to embarrass ye."

Dallas sighed. "Megan, I didn't mean—"

"It's okay," she cut him off. "Let's just enjoy ourselves today."

He gave her a small smile, gently patting her hand. "Yes, let's."

"Well, well! Mr. King!" Reverend Henley held out his hand. "It's such a pleasure to see you here!"

"The pleasure is ours." Dallas grinned as he shook his hand. "This is Charles and of course, you know my wife, Megan."

"Yes, it's good to see you all again!" Preacher Henley replied, obviously overjoyed that they had come.

"Do you have room for three more?" Dallas asked, smiling.



“Yes, of course!” Preacher Henley stepped back. “There’s always room for more. I’m so glad you came.”

Dallas looked down at Megan and patted her hand. “Well, we hope to be regulars, if that’s okay?”

“Yes, yes, of course!” Preacher Henley was so overjoyed that it was almost embarrassing. Dallas silently kicked himself for not having come sooner. “I’m so glad to hear it! Now, go on in and make yourselves comfortable. The service will start shortly.”

Dallas nodded and led Megan in, followed by Charles. The men took off their hats and laid them on a table by the door alongside the other gentlemen’s hats.

On the way up the aisle, Mia, the preacher’s wife, stood in front of the first pew and waved to them. Colton, Ella, and the children sat in the pew behind them. They turned and smiled.

“Mr. and Mrs. King,” Mia greeted them, “it’s a pleasure to see you here!”

Dallas smiled. “Well, we thought it was about time.” Then he turned to Charles. “Of course, you remember my friend Charles from the party,” He was careful not to mention his last name, wanting Charles to feel completely comfortable.

“Why, yes! Of course!” Mia replied. Then she pointed to the two small children sitting in the front row: A boy and a girl. “These are our children: Shane and Hailey.”

Megan stooped down to greet them. “‘Tis a pleasure to meet you both.”

Shane’s eyes opened wide. “Wow! Where are you from? Are you from the same place as Mrs. Price?” Of course, they were talking about Gabriella Price, the princess

from Monaco that had married Dirk Price.

Megan looked up at him, her eyebrows raised.

“Monaco,” he whispered.

Megan shook her head. “No, I’m originally from Ireland.”

“Ireland!” Shane exclaimed. “What’s it like?”

“Well, ye parents will have to bring ye over to our house some time and I’ll tell ye.”  
Megan was clearly excited at the possibility. It was obvious that she loved children.

Just then, Reverend Henley walked up the aisle, preparing to take his place at the pulpit.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Mrs. King.” Mia hurried to quiet the children. “We can talk more after the service.”

“Yes, of course.” Megan nodded.

Colton and Ella slid over, holding the babies, to make room for Dallas, Megan, and Charles.

Megan leaned in to Dallas and whispered low so no one could hear, “Do ye think we could invite them, too? They seem delightful. We don’t have to make a big fuss—”

Dallas's lips curled into a smile, nodding. Megan wrapped her arm around his and leaned against his shoulder. He patted her hand, and she raised up, turning her attention to the pulpit.

Preacher Henley gave a wonderful sermon and spoke about the Thanksgiving holiday coming up and that it was a time of year to think about everything they had to be thankful for in their lives. After his heartfelt sermon, Gabriella and Gavin Cole, the church organist, launched into “Rock of Ages” and the service was over.

“That was wonderful!” Megan approached Gabriella after the service. “Ye have a lovely voice!”

“Thank you!” Gabriella smiled graciously, gently squeezing her hand. “I’m so glad you came,” she replied in her thick French accent. “I hope you’ll stay. The ladies of the church host an after-service lunch every week and there’s usually dancing and games, too.”

Megan glanced over at Dallas, and he smiled and nodded. Then she turned back to Gabriella. “We’d love to.” Then she turned to Ella and Colton. “Are ye staying, too?”

Colton smirked, proudly adjusting his son in his arms. “If I try to take Ella home right now, I’ll have a fight on my hands.”

“Oh, you....” Ella gave him a playful swat on the arm.

“We’ll see you in a minute.” Colton and Ella carried the children down the aisle.

“Shall we?” Dallas offered her his arm.

Megan took it. “Next week, I’ll bring a covered dish.”

“No need.” Dallas smiled. “I’ll have Jacques make something—”

“No, I mean I’d like to make it.”

Both Dallas and Charles laughed, looking at each other over her head. “Good luck trying to get into Jacques’s kitchen!”

Megan chuckled. “Don’t worry. I have me ways.”

“I’m sure you do.” Dallas loved the feistiness and determination of his new wife. They spent the rest of the afternoon at the church, mingling with the other parishioners. Charles seemed to be enjoying himself, as well. At that moment, Dallas realized that the people of the church treated everyone as equals. It didn’t matter how much money anyone had; a person’s character and fellowship was the most important thing. How people get along with others, how they treated one another was what seemed to matter.

Dallas had a wonderful time talking to the men with Charles and dancing with Megan. When he noticed Megan nodding off while sitting in a chair, he decided it was time to go.

“Charles, I’m going to take Megan home,” Dallas told him after finishing a dance. “But if you’re not ready, I’ll send Bill back for you.”

He shook his head. “No, I’m ready.” He looked over at Megan and his eyebrows pulled together in concern. “Are you well?”

Megan nodded as a yawn escaped her lips, exaggerating the point. “I’m fine. Just tired.” Then she smiled. “But ye can stay here, if ye like. I don’t want to spoil the fun for anyone.”

“No, let’s go. I’ll meet you both outside.” Charles walked over to Preacher Henley and shook his hand.

“Shall we?” Dallas held out his arm. Megan took it and let him help her into her coat.

“Did you have a good time?”

“The best.” Megan smiled up at him. A cold wind blew through his coat as he led her outside. “I’m sorry we had to leave early.”

Dallas smiled, his heart fluttering just looking into her eyes. “Don’t be. I was ready.” Bill saw them leaving, said his goodbyes, and then hurried over to the carriage and opened the door. Dallas put down the step and helped Megan inside. Then he slid in beside her, and Charles was right behind them.

When everyone was seated, Bill closed the door and looked in. “Where to, Mr. King?”

“Home.” Dallas grinned, glancing over at Megan, who was looking out the window. “Did you invite everyone you wanted to for Thanksgiving?”

Megan nodded. “Yes, except for the sheriff.”

Dallas noticed that Sheriff Clark hadn’t attended today, either. He must have his hands full with the gang in town. “I’ll go into town and check on him.”

Megan placed her hand on his arm and shook her head. “No, don’t go into town today. Stay home. I don’t want anything to happen to ye.”

Dallas patted her hand, enjoying that she was looking out for him. “No, someone needs to check on the sheriff. If he’s in town, I don’t want him to be there alone.”

“I’ll go with you,” Charles added, glancing over at Megan. “Don’t worry. I’ll keep him safe.”

She let out a deep breath. “Just be careful... both of you.”

Dallas smiled, grateful that Megan was concerned. “But this time, I want you to stay at home and rest.” He didn’t want a repeat performance of the last time she came to town unexpectedly. When he saw her at the mercy of that madman, Dallas nearly had a heart attack.

Megan giggled. “Don’t worry. I think the only thing I’m going to do is to take a nap. I have no idea why I’m so tired.”

Dallas patted her hand. “You get all the rest you need. I’ll arrange dinner with Jacques.”

“No, I’ll arrange it with him when we get home. It’s the least I can do.” Megan yawned. “I feel bad, not doing much today.”

Dallas patted her hand. “You probably just overdid it yesterday. I want you to let the staff take care of the cleaning from here on out.”

Charles’s head snapped up.

“It was fun, cleaning with Mrs. Daly.” Megan sighed. “It made me feel useful.”

Dallas gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “You should spend your time planning teas and luncheons with the ladies of the town, not working your fingers to the bone.”

Megan laughed. “I hardly call it ‘working yer fingers to the bone.’”

“Well, I think it’s admirable,” Charles interjected, “but Dallas is right. I think you overdid it yesterday. You should rest.”

Dallas glanced over at him and nodded his thanks. He was going to have to teach Megan how to be the lady of the house, to be a woman of substance.

\*\*\*

When Bill pulled the carriage up in front of the house, Dallas walked with Megan up the stairs, and she was asleep before he finished tucking her in. He worried that she might be coming down with something, but pushed the thought aside, vowing to keep a close eye on her. Dallas didn't know what he would do if anything happened to her.

When he came downstairs, he and Charles went into town to check on the sheriff, the bank, and the town, even though it was Sunday. But when they arrived, the town looked quiet. Dallas had a hard time concentrating as thoughts of Megan invaded his mind. And with the outlaws in town, he didn't want to leave the bank unattended for too long, even on Sunday.

Sitting in the bank, the taste of her kiss was still hot on his lips. The more time he spent with Megan, the more he couldn't live without her. Dallas rose from his desk, not wanting to spend too much time away from her. He just hoped she wasn't coming down with something.

"Everything's fine here, so let's go over to the Sheriff's Office," Dallas said to Charles, locking up his desk. "I want to make sure he's okay, since he didn't come to church today."

Charles nodded as he rose from his seat. "Let's go." Charles looked outside, and men were sitting out in front of the hotel and restaurant but were quiet. They were huddled up, obviously having been there for a while in the cold.

Dallas locked up and headed next door and Sheriff Daxton Clark was there. The bell rang when they walked in.

Sheriff Clark's head snapped up. "Dallas."

“What are you doing here today... on a Sunday?” Of course, Dallas knew the answer, but he thought it was a good opener.

The sheriff stood, nodding toward the men sitting outside. “Them. They’re scaring off customers from the restaurant. I have a mind to run ’em off, but they haven’t broken any laws. Not yet, anyway.”

Dallas sighed. “How have they been?”

“Quiet.” Daxton shrugged. “But I have a feeling that as soon as I leave, all hell’s going to break loose.”

Dallas crossed the room to the window, watching the men as he spoke. “Sheriff, you can’t sit up here twenty-four hours a day watching them.”

Daxton let out a deep breath. “Yes, but I can make them think twice before they act.”

“I’m sure you’re doing that.” Charles chuckled. “I’d bet they didn’t expect you to be here today.”

The sheriff smiled. “No, I’m sure they didn’t.” He stood and took a swig of his coffee. Then he walked over to the backdoor and threw out the contents. “Well, I think it’s time to pack it up. If they’re going to do anything, they’ll do it whether I’m here or not.”

“If you like, we can sit up here for a while, sheriff.” Dallas smirked as he looked across the street. The men were still sitting outside, shivering. “Unless they get someone to relieve them, I don’t think they’ll be outside much longer today, anyway. Look.”

He pointed out the window at the men and they were curled in around themselves,



blowing on their hands. Puffs of white snow suddenly blew through the town, and the men pulled the collars of their coats up over their necks.

The sheriff laughed. “Thank goodness for cold weather, right?”

Charles chuckled. “You gotta love it.”

“Well, gentlemen, let’s go home.” The sheriff smiled as he slipped into his coat. “I’m sure the town will be safe for one more night.” He looked through the window at the outlaws. “I just wish I knew what they were waiting for.”

Dallas’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “What do you mean?”

The sheriff let out a deep breath. “Those two men we caught who robbed your bank?”

Dallas nodded.

“They were hung in Laramie last week.”

Dallas’s head snapped up. “When was the trial? Why wasn’t I notified?”

“No need.” The sheriff pulled out his gun and opened the barrel, checked it, and then snapped it closed. “There were plenty of witnesses. It was an open-and-shut case.”

Dallas nodded as Charles’s looked on in concern.

“Just be careful.” Sheriff Clark shoved his gun back into the holster strapped to his leg, nodding toward the men. “They may hold you responsible... since it was your bank they robbed, and you admitted to killing one of their brothers.”

“Thanks, sheriff.” Dallas lowered his voice. “You be careful, too. You don’t want

those men to find out about your children and go after them.”

A crease formed between Daxton’s eyes. “I told the children not to come into town alone until after the gang leaves.” He nodded toward the men sitting across the street. One got up and stretched, said something to the other, and then shoved his hands into his pockets and walked inside. “They don’t know about my children, and I want to keep it that way. Hell! Every decent person in this town is staying away from Whiskey River now, probably for the same reason.”

“Just be careful,” Dallas repeated, sure that if they even went near his children, the sheriff would kill them on the spot. Everyone else in the town would do the same when they got wind of it. “By the way, Megan wanted me to ask you over for Thanksgiving. Would you and the children like to come? Colton and Ella, and Wyatt and Madison are coming, too.”

The sheriff smiled. “Yes, I’d like that. I’m sure Lillian will be happy that she doesn’t have to cook,” he teased. Lillian was his young daughter. Evidently, she had taken over the cooking since their mother left. “What would you like us to bring?”

Dallas shook his head. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

The sheriff chuckled. “Well, I don’t think that’ll be acceptable to my daughter. She wouldn’t want to come empty handed... not since she’s been learning how to cook.”

“Well then, anything she’d like to bring will be wonderful.” Dallas clasped his hand on the sheriff’s shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. Dallas and Charles walked with the sheriff outside. “You want us to ride with you to your place? Make sure you get home okay?”

The sheriff shook his head. “No, I’ll be fine. You two go on home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

As they headed toward the livery stable, Dallas wondered why the men were still in town... and what they were up to. He just hoped that they didn't try to go after Megan.

Megan

Over the next few weeks, Megan found herself getting tired a lot more lately and she had no idea why. Perhaps she was getting a bit too used to the life of leisure, but it was hardly that. She found her days filled with running the house tiresome, especially over the last few weeks preparing for Thanksgiving. Because she never had a Thanksgiving meal before, she entrusted the menu to Jacques, much to his delight. Everything sounded delicious. The only thing she requested was that he serve traditional Thanksgiving fare, and he graciously agreed.

Mrs. Daly and Megan took care of the decorations. Megan kept it low key in comparison to the party that Dallas had thrown. She was worried about having enough room for everyone to sit together at the dining room table, but Mrs. Daly told her that it was a drop-leaf table and assured her that there would be plenty of room. She had Milo and Butch—two of Dallas's men—bring down the two wooden inserts that belonged to the table. Once installed, the table filled the room, stretching from one side to the other, and there was still enough room to serve.

Thanksgiving Day, Megan dressed in a burgundy gown, not too flashy. Although she had loved her dress for the party, she noticed that she had been severely overdressed compared to the other ladies in attendance. This time, she didn't want to make the same mistake. Also, this would be a much more intimate setting and more casual.

Once she was dressed, she descended the stairs and Dallas was waiting at the bottom, wearing his light gray suit with a dark gray vest, setting off his blue eyes. "You look lovely, dear." He took her hand and raised it to his lips, never taking his eyes off hers. "But are you sure you don't want to dress up a bit more?"

Megan shook her head. “No, today is about making friends, not about flaunting wealth.” Megan smiled. “Although money helps, it’s not what ‘tis important today.”

Dallas smiled as he tucked her hand into his arm. “You’re right.”

“Dallas, people will like ye fer who ye are, if ye let them, and not fer what you can do for them or give them.”

Dallas lifted an eyebrow. “Including you?”

A crease formed between her eyes. “What do ye mean? Ye take very good care of me, yer business, the house, and the people who work fer ye.” She slid her arm around his waist. “Ye don’t have to keep showering me with gifts and fine things.”

One corner of his lips lifted into a smile. “But what if I want to?”

She returned the smile. “Well then, that’s different... but in moderation. We need to start saving fer rainy days.”

Megan knew, perhaps more than anyone, the importance of saving money. You never know when you might need it. One catastrophe could send someone on a downward spiral. And if you didn’t have friends when that happened, God help you because no one else would.

Dallas nodded. “Yes, you’re right. Believe it or not, I have some money saved, but I’ll start saving more.”

“Don’t ye be turnin’ into a scrooge, though.” She shrugged. “But a happy medium would be nice.”

“So, are we ready for this?” Charles asked as he walked into the room.

Megan nervously tucked an auburn tendril behind her ear. “Yes, of course. Everything’s set.”

Dallas smiled, taking in his wife. “Yes, Megan thought of everything.”

As if right on cue, there was a knock at the door. Dallas glanced over at Megan, a smile lighting his lips. “Well, I think your guests are starting to arrive.”

Megan laughed. “You mean, our guests.”

“Shall we?” Dallas straightened his vest, and then offered her his arm. She took it and he led her to the front door as Charles followed. When he opened it, Sheriff Clark was standing there with his children.

“This is Lillian and Andrew. She's ten years old, and he's twelve.” Sheriff Clark introduced his children to Megan.

“I made an apple pie.” Lillian held out a covered pie plate.

“My goodness! Thank ye! And I’m sure it’s delicious.” Megan bent down to shake both of their hands. “‘Tis a pleasure to meet ye both.”

Lillian’s eyes widened as she handed Megan the pie. “Where are you from?”

“I’m from a country called Ireland. Do ye know where it ‘tis?”

Lillian nodded. “Mrs. Nash told us about it in school.”

“Really?” Megan’s eyes popped open. “Well, did ye know that Mrs. Nash and her husband are coming today?”

The conversation carried on as Megan led them to the dining room and their father followed. Dallas and Charles stayed at the door to greet their guests.

“This is lovely!” Lillian exclaimed, eyeing the fine porcelain place settings with a little floral pattern setting on the table, covered in a long white tablecloth. Glass candleholders sat in the center, holding long white candles.

“Why, thank ye.” Megan and Lillian talked animatedly as everyone took their seats and got comfortable.

There was some talking at the door and then Colton walked into the dining room, carrying his daughter, followed by Ella, holding their son. “I appreciate you having us over today, Mrs. King.”

“Please, call me Megan. I’m glad ye came today.” Megan nodded toward the chairs. “Make yerself comfortable.”

Ella held out a covered dish. “I hope you don’t mind, but I thought I’d bring some potato salad.”

Megan smiled, taking it from her. “No, not at all! This is wonderful. Potato salad is one of my favorites. Thank you, Ella.” Megan unwrapped it and set it in the center of the table beside Lillian’s pie. “It looks delicious.”

Soon, Madison and Wyatt arrived, followed by Mrs. Jenkins.

“It’s a pleasure to officially meet you!” Mrs. Jenkins chirped happily, giving her a feminine handshake. “I’m sorry I haven’t been over before now.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “I usually help all of the young brides.”

“I’m so glad ye came.” Megan had invited her at the church, along with the others,

knowing that Dallas was quite fond of her. “I’ve only seen ye at church and I was lookin’ forward to getting’ to know ye better.”

“She has helped practically everyone in town.” Dallas interjected and then took her arm to lead her to a chair of honor near him. The older woman had always been like a mother to him. “But today, we want you to relax, Mrs. Jenkins, and just enjoy yourself. We’re so glad you came today. It just wouldn’t be a holiday without you.”

“Why, thank you, Mr. King. That’s very kind.” Mrs. Jenkins smiled, looking up at him fondly.

“Come now. I think we’re all on a first name basis now.” Dallas smiled. “Please, call me Dallas.”

“Only if you call me Abigail,” Mrs. Jenkins added.

“That may be hard for me to do,” he teased. “After all, old habits die hard.”

When everyone was seated, Dallas said a heartfelt blessing over the meal, thanking God for the food, the good company, and for all of them being able to celebrate the holiday together.

Then Megan rose from the table. “Now, if you’ll excuse me.” She headed toward the kitchen. Dallas’s eyes were wide, and Charles smirked, but Megan ignored it. She was going to enjoy herself today. And if there was one thing she enjoyed, it was feeding people.

“What’s the meaning—” Jacques bellowed, but stopped when he saw it was Megan. “Oh. Are you ready, mademoiselle ?”

Megan nodded. “Yes, we are. What would you like me to do?”



Mrs. Daly was already waiting in the kitchen, ready. “Nothing, my dear. Go back in there and entertain your guests and we’ll bring everything out.”

She fidgeted, wringing her hands, not quite sure what was expected of her. “At least let me bring out something.” Her eyes brightened. “The rolls, maybe?”

Mrs. Daly took her hand and patted it. “You, my dear, are the lady of the house.” She bit her lower lip, as if trying to find the right words to explain. “Mrs. King, ye don’t want to embarrass yer husband today, now do ye? The lady of the house’s job is to entertain while the servants bring everything out.” Her lips curled into a smile. “But don’ ye worry. Jacques will help me. After all, he’ll want to take a bow for the turkey.”

“Oh, now....” Jacques looked up from stirring a pan of gravy on the stove.

“Well, if yer sure—”

“I am.” Mrs. Daly pointed her toward the dining room. “Now, go in and entertain yer guests. Enjoy yerself! We’ll be right behind ye.”

Megan nodded and headed back into the dining room. Dallas breathed a sigh of relief when she took her seat without incident. “I just went to check on the food. It’ll be ready momentarily.”

Just then, Mrs. Daly burst through the wooden swinging door, carrying a tray of lemonade. “Here ye go! This is just to get ye started.” Then she lowered her voice conspiratorially. “The rest will be out shortly.”

Then, Mrs. Daly carried out tray after tray, each filled with bowls and platters of food, including candied carrots, mashed potatoes, green beans, stewed tomatoes, dressing, and more. When Jacques carried in the golden-brown turkey on a fine

porcelain platter that matched the dishes, everyone applauded. Throughout the meal, everyone enjoyed themselves, talking animatedly as they ate until they sat back in their chairs, fully sated.

Colton leaned back in his chair and placed his hand on his flat stomach. “Well, that was the best meal I’ve had for a very long time.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Ella teased, slapping him playfully on the arm.

Colton shrugged. “Hey, the truth is the truth,” he teased as everyone laughed.

Megan couldn’t help but steal glimpses at Dallas throughout the meal. For the first time since she had known him, he was laughing and having fun with everyone, not as concerned with his money or wealth. He was just enjoying himself, much to Megan’s amazement. She didn’t want a repeat performance of the party. In fact, no one even brought it up.

“You should have seen him,” Charles teased Dallas. “The flock of turkeys got wind of us and one was running around in circles, not quite knowing what to do. Then one of them got the bright idea to fly away and the rest followed, but Dallas got the one running around just before it flew away. Clean shot, right through the head.”

Everyone laughed.

“I wish I could have been there,” the sheriff added.

“We should all go hunting some time,” Dallas replied. “There’s plenty of game around here.” He glanced over at Megan and smiled. “In fact, I haven’t had any venison in a while.”

Colton took a sip of his lemonade. “So, Charles, will you be here through

Christmas?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m expected back home for the holidays. But I’ll come back as soon as I can.”

“Please,” Dallas interjected, “see that you do. It’s always a pleasure having you here.”

“When are you leaving?” Wyatt cut into a slice of Lillian’s apple pie and took a bite, moaning with delight. “Lillian, you really need to give Madison your recipe. This is delicious!”

Lillian smiled, blushing with pride.

“I’m leaving the day after tomorrow.” Then Charles chuckled under his breath. “If I try to get on the train tomorrow, I won’t fit in the door!” Everyone laughed. “This meal was delicious.” He held up his glass of lemonade to Megan. “My compliments to the hostess!”

“Here, here!” Everyone held up their glasses and toasted her together.

“Thank ye fer being here with us today. It means a lot to us both.” Megan looked around the room, feeling kind of foolish for taking the credit for a meal she didn’t actually prepare. “Although this was my first Thanksgiving, all of ye being here has made it the best.” She held her glass up. “To everyone! May we all share similar holidays to come!”

Everyone raised their glasses in agreement and took a sip.

Much too soon, the evening came to an end and Megan was feeling the effects of the day.

“Well, I don’t recall a better holiday,” Sheriff Clark told Megan as they were leaving. “Thank you so much for having us. Everything was delicious.”

“Maybe you can come to our house one day, too,” Lillian added.

“Well, I’m not sure—” Daxton started to make an excuse for them, but Megan stopped him.

“We’d be glad to....” Then she looked up at Dallas. “Wouldn’t we, dear?”

Dallas smiled. “Yes, of course.... especially if you promise to make some more of that delicious apple pie.”

Lillian smiled proudly, nodding. “I’d be glad to.”

“But ye really need to give me yer recipe, though,” Megan added. “I believe that was the best apple pie I ever had.”

“I will.” Lillian offered her hand to Megan. “Thank you so much for having us today. I really had fun.”

“Oh, I’m sorry you had to sit around and listen to us old folks talk. It was just too cold to play games outside.” Also, Megan found that she was just too tired, but she didn’t say so. “Next time.”

Lillian shook her head, smiling. “No, Andrew and I had a really good time.”

“I’m glad.” Megan gave her a feminine hug. “You all really must come back soon.”

After they left, Megan headed toward the dining room, when Dallas stopped her.

“Megan, go on upstairs and rest. You look tired.” Dallas wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her to his chest. “You did a wonderful job today. I’ll have Mrs. Daly and Jacques clean everything up.”

Megan shook her head. “No, tell them to leave it until tomorrow and I’ll help them. I don’t want to leave it all for them to clean up.”

Dallas smiled as he kissed the top of her head. “Megan, they’re employees,” he whispered, “it’s their job.” Then he laughed. “I almost had a heart attack when you went into the kitchen. I thought you were going to serve everything yourself.”

Megan shrugged. “I was until Mrs. Daly explained to me that it would embarrass ye and that a lady of the house didn’t do such things.”

“Remind me to thank her later.” Then he scooped her up into his arms and started carrying her up the stairs. “Now, let me get you into bed. You need to rest.”

Megan laughed as she wrapped her arms around his neck. She looked into his eyes and her heart pounded, despite how tired she felt. “Ye, my dear, are spoiling me. I can walk, ye know.”

“Ahh! Yes, but I enjoy this so much more.” As Dallas carried her up the stairs, she wondered how long him carrying her to bed every night would last, but she planned to enjoy it while it lasted. As she looked into his eyes, she felt her heart swell. Was this what love was? Could she be falling in love with him? She quickly pushed the thought aside, knowing that she couldn’t bear it if he lost interest in her. No, it was good to love your children or your family, but to give your love to a man—even your husband—was foolish. The heart is too easily broken and too hard to mend. She knew first hand.

Dallas

Dallas went to work early the next day to open the bank with the intention of leaving with Charles for Laramie for the rest of the day. Throughout the morning, the outlaws were still loitering in front of the hotel and restaurant despite the cold, scaring off customers. It had stopped snowing, but winter had definitely set in. Dallas just hoped they wouldn't get a blizzard the way they did the year before. Dallas suspected that since they had arrived, the establishment hadn't had a lot of business. Harrison Curry, the owner, told them as much, ordering the men to go to their rooms and to stop scaring off all the decent townsfolk. But the men just laughed, not moving from their perch.

When Harrison complained in front of the bank, Sheriff Clark told him that he couldn't arrest them unless they broke the law. Harrison told him that harassing his clientele should be enough. But the sheriff said that, technically, they weren't causing any trouble. Just leering at the women and tipping their hats wasn't considered a crime... unless they took it further. Also, none of them could be identified as having participated in the bank robbery.

Since their arrival, tensions had been flying high in the town. When Dallas spoke to the sheriff, he had told Dallas that he was thinking of hiring another deputy. After all, Colton had his responsibilities at his ranch, and it wasn't fair to him to have to spend so much time in town. But Dallas had offered him as many of his men as he needed, telling Sheriff Clark that he could even deputize them, if needed. The sheriff had thanked him, but in the end, he declined his offer.

Dallas looked around the room and his eyes met Charles. "Ready?"

Charles nodded, rising from his seat.

Dallas called Milo and Butch over. “Mr. Whitfield and I are going to Laramie. Would you accompany us?” He made sure the money was in the safe with a combination lock. It was the latest and most secure model.

Milo stood and adjusted his vest. “Yes, of course.”

“Let’s go ahead and lock it up for today,” Dallas announced to everyone. “Charles and I have to go to Laramie, and I don’t want to leave you here alone. Not with those yahoos across the way.”

Russell and Alonzo looked at each other, breathing a sigh of relief.

“It’s the day after Thanksgiving and it’s dead today. So, go home and be with your family... with pay.” He nodded toward Jake. “Why don’t you come with us, too? Just in case.”

A crease formed between his eyes. “Are you sure? What if the gang attacks the ranch while you’re in Laramie?”

Dallas shook his head. “They’ve been pretty quiet this morning. But I’m going to take Mrs. King with us, too.” Dallas didn’t want to take any chances, not where Megan was concerned. Also, he thought that he could take her out to eat while Charles was attending to his business.

Dallas looked out and Bill Myrick had pulled up outside of the bank with the carriage. After the money and the drawers were secure and everyone was out, Dallas locked up. “Bill.” Milo climbed on top of the carriage beside him, and Jake and Butch followed them on their horses.

Bill lifted his chin toward the men sitting in front of the restaurant and hotel. “They haven’t left yet?”

Dallas sighed. “No, not yet, but I wish they would.” Their presence was causing too much tension in the town. The good citizens of Whiskey River were staying at home, coming to town just to get provisions from the store when they needed them, and then went straight back home. Dallas knew it was all because of them.

“You think they’ll make their move soon?” Bill asked.

“I hope not, but we need to be prepared, just in case. Bill, let’s go home for Mrs. King. I want to get to Laramie and back before dark.” Dallas slid into the carriage along with Charles, ending all conversation.

“Yes, sir,” Bill replied, guiding the carriage toward home. The men sitting in front of the hotel smiled, tipping their hats at them when they passed. Dallas was sure they were taunting him. They were up to something. He just wished he knew what it was.

Soon Bill pulled the carriage down the long driveway of his ranch. Dallas jumped out as soon as it pulled to a stop. “I’ll be right back.”

Charles nodded. “Yes, of course.”

Dallas looked over at Milo, sitting on the carriage, waiting. “Milo, why don’t you stay close to home tonight.”

His eyebrows pulled together in concern. “Are you sure you won’t need me to go with you?”

Dallas shook his head. “No, just do me a favor and take care of business if there’s any trouble here at the ranch.”



Milo smirked. “Gladly.” Then he climbed down from the top of the carriage and took a seat on the front porch. Dallas knew he would stand guard until they returned. He didn’t want anything to happen to Mr. and Mrs. Daly, Jacques, or the few ranch hands that were staying behind.

When Dallas walked in, Mrs. Daly was walking by carrying fresh linens, headed toward the dining room.

“Good afternoon, Mr. King,” Mrs. Daly greeted him as she stepped aside.

“Is Mrs. King upstairs?” he asked, taking off his hat.

She nodded. “She’s taking a nap. She went up there not long ago.”

Dallas smiled his thanks as he headed toward the stairs. Although he hated to wake her, he really wanted to take Megan to Laramie, knowing she would enjoy getting out of the house. Also, he would feel a lot better if she were with him. If he went to Laramie and left her behind, he would worry the whole time he was gone.

A moment later, Dallas walked into the bedroom and Megan was sleeping so peacefully that he hated to wake her. He sat down on the edge of the bed. “Megan, honey. Would you like to go to Laramie with Charles and me?”

She woke with a start, sitting straight up in bed. “What time is it?”

Dallas smiled, brushing back a lock of her auburn hair. “It’s not even noon yet.”

Megan nodded, obviously orienting herself.

“Would you like to go to Laramie for dinner?” he repeated, his voice low.

“For dinner?”

“Well, Charles has to go there for business. He asked if we’d like to go along, and I agreed. I thought that maybe you’d like the opportunity to get out of town for a bit.” His heart fluttered as he watched her, so gorgeous and vulnerable, not quite awake.

“Let me freshen up a bit and I’ll be right down.”

“I’ll wait downstairs.” Dallas smiled, bending down to kiss her forehead. Then he headed down the stairs to wait for her. Any other time, he would have left her home in the safety of the ranch, but he wasn’t going to trust her safety to the fate of those madmen in town. If they figured out where he lived and that she was alone... he didn’t even want to think about it.

A moment later, Megan descended the stairs, wearing a deep blue dress and matching hat.

Dallas’s heart fluttered as he reached for her hand and kissed it, never taking his eyes from hers. “Each time I see you, you become more gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” A mischievous smile lit her lips. “Oh, I bet ye say that to all the ladies.”

“No, I don’t. Only to the most beautiful,” Dallas teased, running his fingers absentmindedly along the brim of his hat. “Let’s go. If we get to Laramie early enough, you and I can go shopping or have dinner while Charles takes care of his business.”

A smile lit her lips. “It sounds wonderful.”

When they left the house, Dallas closed the door behind them and offered her his arm. “I want you to have fun today. I plan on showing you the town.”

Megan held his arm tightly. “As long as we’re together, I’ll be happy.”

He patted her hand, feeling much better now that she was with him. Dallas had a feeling that she would be happy no matter where they went. She was just that kind of a person.

A moment later, Dallas lowered the step and helped her into the carriage.

Charles took her other hand to help her in. “Hello, Megan. You look lovely today.”

“Thank you.” She slid onto the seat across from him, and Dallas slid in beside her. “So, are you gentlemen planning on staying in Laramie long?”

Charles shook his head. “No, just for the day.”

Dallas laced his fingers with hers and gently squeezed her hand. “Sorry for the short notice, but I’m glad you could come.”

A light shade of pink touched her cheeks. “I’m glad ye came home early.”

“So, tell me,” Charles began. “Where in Ireland are you from?”

The conversation turned light as they headed toward Laramie. Dallas found that he really enjoyed himself, relaxing a bit. Since he’d met Megan, it seemed that he was finally learning how to make friends. Perhaps he had more friends in town than he had originally thought.

\*\*\*

When they pulled into Laramie a few hours later, Megan smiled at the hustle and bustle in the town.

Dallas enjoyed her reaction to the town. “Laramie isn’t as big as New York, of course, but it’s an up-and-coming town, just like Whiskey River but much bigger.”

“New York was always too busy for me. Too many people.” She gazed out the window, her eyes wide. “No, this is perfect.”

“Bill, stop in front of the bank, please,” Dallas instructed his driver, and they came to a stop. “Charles, we’ll be back for you later.”

A broad smile spread across his lips. “Take your time and enjoy yourself with this lovely lady. I’ll catch up with you when I finish.”

Charles tipped his hat to Megan, exited the carriage, and then headed into the bank.

Dallas stepped out of the carriage, lowered the step for Megan, and then helped her out. “Bill, we’ll be back later.”

“I’ll be here, boss.” Bill tipped his hat to Megan, and then leaned back on the seat, propping his feet on the front footboard.

Excitement filled the air as he led his wife through the streets of Laramie. “So, shopping first or dinner?”

Megan giggled. “Dinner. You’ve already spent too much money on me.”

“Nonsense!” He smiled as he tucked her hand into his arm. “I’m a bit hungry, too. What would you like to eat? The Cavalryman Steakhouse has great steaks, or we can go to the restaurant, if you like.”

Her eyes brightened. “I’ve never been to a steakhouse before, but we can go to the other restaurant. What would you like?”

“Let’s go to the steakhouse.” Dallas smiled. “I’d like to show it to you and the steaks are wonderful.”

Megan smiled. “Sounds good.”

He patted her hand as he led her down a street, then turned a corner and crossed another street to the other side. Dallas was quite familiar with Laramie, having come to town on business often. A few paces later, they were standing before the steakhouse with huge plate-glass windows stretched across the front.

“ Good afternoon .” A gentleman with a well-kept, big mustache greeted them at the door, menus in hand. “A table for two?”

“Yes, please,” Dallas replied, taking off his hat.

The man gave them a slight bow. “Right this way.”

Dallas and Megan followed him to a secluded table at the back of the restaurant and laid two menus on the table. Dallas held her chair. After she was seated, he took the seat across from her.

“Your waiter will be right with you. Enjoy!” The man headed back to the front to greet another couple.

Megan looked around the room, taking in the ambiance. “This is lovely.”

Dallas gently squeezed her hand. “I’m glad you like it. Is it anything like the restaurants you went to in New York?”

She shook her head. “No, Liam and I cooked at home.” A faraway look came into her eyes. “Liam would go out at night to fight sometimes. He was a boxer.”

Dallas's eyebrows rose nearly into his hairline. "A boxer? Did he fight for purses?"

She nodded, smiling proudly. "Yes, of course. He worked on the bridge during the day, but he boxed at night when there was a fight offering a large purse."

Dallas nodded, realizing what a privileged life he had led of late. "Which bridge?"

Megan sighed. "Have ye heard of the new Brooklyn Bridge they're building?"

"Yes, it's supposed to be a monument of engineering accomplishment when it's completed."

She smiled, her eyes filled with emotion. "Me brother was helping to build it before he died."

Dallas held her hand, his heart going out to her as guilt filled his chest. Megan had come from nothing just as he had, but she never complained. She had accepted her past and loved her family, knowing that they had done the best they could with what they had.

"Good afternoon! May I start you off with some red wine this evening?" A waiter, wearing a white, high-collared dress shirt and black trousers, showed them both a bottle of wine.

Dallas glanced over at Megan, and she nodded. "Yes. Two glasses, please."

The waiter poured the wine in elegant glasses that were already setting on the table. "Are you ready to order?"

Dallas looked at Megan again and she nodded as a smile appeared on her lips. "Two T-bone steaks, please. I told my wife how wonderful your steaks are, so we had to

come.”

“Wonderful! I promise you won't be disappointed!” The waiter happily clasped his hands. “I shall have that out momentarily.” He headed toward the kitchen.

“I hope you don't mind me ordering for you, but the T-bones here are wonderful.”

Megan shook her head, patting his hand. “No, that's fine. Ye've been here before and know what's good.”

Dallas smiled, but his smile quickly faded when he glanced toward the front door. For standing in the foyer was Frank, one of the gang members from Whiskey River. His men had hollered it enough that he knew the names of some of the men.

Dallas didn't dare tell Megan, not wanting to upset her. They couldn't leave without drawing attention to themselves, so Dallas rationalized that the best thing to do was to stay there and to try to enjoy their afternoon. He just hoped that Frank hadn't followed them to Laramie.

“Good afternoon, sir. Would you like to be seated?” the ma?tre d' asked Frank.

“No. I'm just looking for someone. I'll be out of here in a minute. That's all it'll take.” He laughed at his own joke, holding his hands out to his sides over his guns, attracting the attention of all the respectable patrons.

The ma?tre d' gulped. “Sir, we don't want any trouble. Please leave.”

“Why, I've never been treated so badly!” he yelled, indignant as he looked around the room, drawing everyone's attention. Dallas was surprised that Frank just didn't go to the Bucket of Blood Saloon instead. But it was obvious that Frank was looking for him.

“Megan, go to the back of the restaurant, in the kitchen if you have to, and don’t come out until I come and get you,” Dallas said, his voice low.

“Be careful.” Megan gave his hand a gentle squeeze, and then casually did as he had instructed.

Once Megan was safe, Dallas rose from his seat, straightened his vest, and walked to the front until he was standing in front of Frank. “I suggest you leave as the gentleman said.”

“Well, well!” Frank bellowed, staggering a bit. “Look who we have here! If it isn’t the man who killed my brother!”

All eyes in the restaurant were on them. “You mean, the man who robbed my bank.” Dallas took a step closer. “Your brothers were hung for what they did. And if you don’t watch it, you might join them.”

“Why, you—” he challenged, quickly drawing his gun and pointing it at Dallas.

Without thinking, Dallas grabbed Frank’s hand and banged it on the counter. Frank screamed in pain as he let go of the gun. Then he reared back his fist and swung, but Dallas ducked, moving out of the way. Then Dallas grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back. “Take his gun,” Dallas instructed the ma?tre d’, holding Frank still as the women in the restaurant gasped. A few of the other men seated stood, obviously ready to offer their assistance.

The ma?tre d’ did as he instructed, and then a few other male customers walked to the front, and one of the men helped Dallas hold Frank.

“I’ll get the sheriff!” another man yelled as he hurried from the restaurant and ran down the street.



Frank struggled against their grasp. “This man killed my brothers!”

“Well, if they hadn’t robbed his bank, I’m sure he wouldn’t have killed them,” one of the men replied.

“Be careful.” Dallas held Frank firmly, speaking to the other man helping him. “He has a lot of men traveling with him.” In fact, Dallas was surprised that he had come into the restaurant without his entourage.

They waited a few minutes, while Dallas and the other man held him.

“Let me go!” Frank yelled, struggling against their grasp. “Or my boys will make you pay!”

“Yeah, that’s what your brothers said.”

“Why you sneaky, low down—”

“Quiet you!” Dallas shook him. “There are ladies present.”

A few minutes later, the sheriff burst through the door. “Okay, that’s enough. You caused enough trouble for one day. Let’s go.”

“You can’t do this to me!” Frank yelled as they dragged him out the door. “Mark my words, banker! This isn’t over!”

Dallas stood back and watched as they took him away. “Oh, it’s over, all right,” he replied, hoping he was right.

When Dallas headed toward the back of the restaurant, Megan was standing against the wall across from their table, holding a steak knife that had been lying on the table.

Several of the workers from the back were standing there, too. A big man wearing a white apron held a butcher knife, ready.

A crease formed between Dallas's eyes as he slowly approached her. "It's okay, Megan. I'm okay."

"If he would have hurt ye—"

"I'm fine." Dallas cut her off, gently taking the knife from her. "Megan, it's okay." He pulled her to his chest and laid the knife on the counter. When he looked over at the table, their steaks were at their place settings. "Hey." He pulled back to look into her eyes. "Let's eat, and then we'll see if Charles is ready to go."

Megan shook her head. "I don't think I can eat. Not now."

Dallas smiled, gently placing his hand on her cheek. "I refuse to let a thug like that ruin our evening together. Come on." He led her to their table and held her chair as she sat. "Please. Let's try to enjoy the rest of the afternoon."

She nodded as she took her seat. "I guess t'would be a shame to let such a fine meal go to waste."

"That's my girl," Dallas cooed, smiling proudly. He cut his steak, took a bite, chewed, and swallowed, enjoying the burst of flavor. "Tell me one thing, Megan."

She stopped eating to look up at him. "Anything."

A devilish smile lit his lips. "Would you really have used that knife?"

Megan's eyes turned serious as the smile left her face. "What do ye think?"

Dallas smirked as he sat back, taking her in. “I think you would have, if you had to.”

She let out a deep breath. “I was waiting, watching. If he had hurt ye in any way, I wouldn’t have hesitated.”

Dallas chuckled. “Yes, I believe you would have.” A shiver ran through him at the thought. Dallas didn’t know what he would have done if she had come after Frank with a knife, even a steak knife. A part of him would have felt sorry for Frank.

“What?” she asked, seeing his amusement.

Dallas chuckled. “Oh, no!”

“Come on. What is it?”

Ignoring her question, Dallas took another bite of his steak, letting the rich flavor and juices fill his mouth. Luckily, Megan turned her attention back to her meal. Or so he thought.

“I won’t forget.” She took a bite of her steak, moaning with pleasure.

Dallas swallowed. “I just can’t believe how brave you are. I don’t think I’d want to tangle with you.” He thought for a moment and then whispered, “Well, on second thought.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Ye’re incorrigible.”

“I try.” Dallas didn’t tell her that she would never know how unbelievable he could be. He was too much of a gentleman for that.

He tried to keep the conversation light during dinner. When they had finished and the

bill was paid, he guided her toward the bank, placing his hand protectively on the small of her back as he looked over his shoulder. "I hope you don't mind, but I really want to get you back home."

She smacked him lightly on his stomach. "Dallas!"

"No... I meant... where it's safe." He raised an eyebrow, a devilish smile lighting his lips. "What did you think I was talking about?"

"Never mind." Megan blushed, lifting her chin.

Dallas chuckled as his eyes darted around, making sure that none of Frank's men were lurking around to finish the job that he had started. Luckily, they arrived at the bank a few moments later.

Charles came out just as they walked up. He was smiling, but then his smile swiftly faded when he saw the look on Dallas's face. "There you are! Are you ready to go or would you like to stay a bit longer?"

"No, we're ready." Dallas put down the step and helped Megan into the carriage. "Wait here. I'll only be a moment."

Her smile faded, but she nodded.

Dallas walked away from the carriage and Charles followed, out of earshot. "Frank, one of the outlaws in Whiskey River, followed us and created a scene in the restaurant. He was wearing his guns in full view, but I was able to disarm him."

A crease formed between Charles's eyes as he listened.

"Do you have your gun?" Dallas asked in a low voice, trying to look casual.

“Yes, of course. Under my suit coat. I always carry it when I come to visit. You?”

“Always.”

Dallas would never go anywhere without it. Not with men like Frank and his gang lurking about.

“There could be more men.”

“Yes.”

Dallas glanced over his shoulder and motioned at Jake, Milo, and Butch, standing near the bank. They looked at each other and then walked over.

“What’s wrong?” Jake asked. The others looked about.

“There’s been some trouble,” Dallas replied. “We need to head back to Whiskey River... now.”

Butch nodded. “Let’s go.” He glanced over at Milo and nodded toward the carriage and then turned back to Charles. Jake and Butch walked over to the hitching post where their horses were tied, and quickly mounted.

Dallas clasped his hand on his shoulder. “Thanks, Milo. I really appreciate this.”

“Don’t worry.” Milo looked over at Megan in the carriage. “We won’t let anything happen to her.”

“Thank you,” Charles added.

Dallas nodded. “Let’s go. I want to get home before sundown.”

Charles followed Dallas to the carriage and slid in next to Megan. She immediately slid her hand into his and gave it a reassuring squeeze. He looked into her eyes, knowing just how brave she really was.

No one said anything on the way back to Whiskey River. The journey started off slow, and Butch and Jake hung back, away from the carriage, just in case there was trouble. Dallas felt anxious, in a hurry to get Megan to safety.

Butch suddenly rode up beside them and yelled into the window. “Get out of here! Riders are coming up fast behind us! We’ll hold them off for as long as we can! Go!”

Dallas nodded once. “Bill, get us out of here!” he yelled to the driver, and then turned to Megan. “Lie down on the floor and don’t get up until I tell you!”

After she was safely on the floor, Dallas pulled out his gun and leaned out the window, while Charles did the same on the other side.

Behind Butch and Jake, several riders were coming up fast.

“Give me a gun!” Megan shouted over the sound of the pounding horses’ hooves.

“No! Stay down!” Dallas commanded, and then turned his attention out the window. He waited until the riders were closer, and then he and Charles started firing. They took down two, but the other riders were getting closer. Dallas leaned farther out the window and shot again, taking down another.

One of the riders shot and Jake slumped over onto his horse, nearly falling off, but he held on.

“Dallas, give me a gun!” Megan yelled, and then started patting down his suit.

“Do you know how to use one?” Dallas countered, and then leaned out and shot another rider.

“Now’s a good time as any to learn!” she shouted over the rumble of the carriage and horses’ hooves pounding into the snow.

“Megan, no! Reload for us! Do it like this.” Dallas popped open the chamber of the revolver, shoved in the bullets, and snapped it closed. Then, he gave her the bullets.

Megan stayed down low in the seat and reloaded the revolvers for both Dallas and Charles when they emptied, never faltering.

Butch turned around and shot another. “Hold on, Jake! Don’t you dare let go!”

Dallas shot and took down another, and so did Charles. When there were just two outlaws left, they pulled off and turned around.

Butch grabbed the reins of Jake’s horse while still going full speed.

“Bill, pull the carriage over!” Dallas shouted up to the driver when he was sure the riders were gone.

“Whoa!” Bill shouted, and the carriage started to slow.

As soon as it came to a stop, Dallas and Charles jumped out, and Milo jumped down from the top.

“Take him inside the carriage. I’ll ride out here,” Dallas instructed when Charles and Butch pulled Jake off the horse.

Charles shook his head. “No, I’ll ride Jake's horse. You ride in there with Megan and

Jake.”

Dallas nodded once, knowing there was no time to argue. The men might come back at any moment.

When they carried Jake to the carriage, Megan was sitting as far over on one of the benches as she could. “Here! Lay him here.” She motioned for them to lay him on the seat beside her, and then laid his head on her lap. She immediately checked his shirt. He was shot on his side.

“We’ll take care of him,” Dallas promised Charles and Butch. Then he climbed into the carriage and sat on the seat across from her. Milo quickly climbed back on top of the carriage.

Megan swiftly slipped off her scarf, wadded it up, and then pressed it to Jake's side. “He needs a doctor.”

Dallas nodded. “Bill, take us to Doc Morgan’s!”

“Will do!” Bill shouted down, and soon they were off again.

“We have to keep pressure on the wound or he’ll bleed to death.” Megan looked up at Dallas with pleading eyes.

Dallas nodded. He knelt down on the carriage floor beside Jake and applied pressure to his side. Jake was so out of it that he wasn’t aware.

Dallas looked up at his wife. “Megan, I’m so proud of you. You really helped us out.”

She looked up at him and nodded, concern filling her eyes as she turned back to Jake.



Dallas just hoped they got him to Doc Morgan's makeshift hospital in time.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:49 am*

Megan

Megan held Jake's head in her lap, trying to make him as comfortable as possible while Dallas applied pressure on his wound. "Hold on, Jake. We're almost there," she cooed, stroking the hair away from his face. Although he was still unconscious, she felt that he could still hear her.

Soon, they arrived at the doorstep of Doc Morgan's office and Charles jumped down and rushed in, while Milo opened the carriage door. "We're here, Jake. Hold on."

Luckily, Doc Morgan was in and climbed into the carriage and gave Jake a quick assessment. "Bring him in and I'll take care of him."

"Will he live?" Butch asked as he and Dallas pulled Jake from the carriage.

Doc Morgan nodded. "It's a clean wound, but he's lost a lot of blood. He just needs plenty of rest and he'll be fine."

Megan leaned back against the seat, relief spreading over her.

Dallas glanced over in her direction. "I'll be right back."

She nodded, wiping the blood off the seat with her shawl the best she could.

"Take care of her," Dallas ordered.

"Yes, boss," Bill replied, and then Dallas, Butch, and Charles carried Jake inside.

A wave of fatigue washed over Megan as she waited. "I'll just close my eyes for a second," she mumbled to herself. The next thing she knew, Dallas was shaking her awake.

"Megan?" Dallas cooed, climbing into the carriage. Charles slid onto the seat across from them.

She snapped awake. "Sorry. I must have dozed off. How is he?" She looked around, trying to orient herself.

Dallas smiled as he pulled her to his side. But she sat up and looked out the window. Streaks of orange, red, and pink raced across the sky, chasing the blue away, reflecting off the white snow.

"Madame, you were really brave today," Charles mused, a smile curled his lips.

Dallas chuckled under his breath. "Did you see the way she reloaded for us? When she started patting me down for a gun, I almost had a heart attack."

"Yes... well... I couldn't just stand there and watch, now could I?"

"I figured that if I didn't give you a job to do, you might have taken the gun I was using!" Dallas laughed at the memory.

Megan smiled, feeling a bit groggy. "At that point, I figured ye could use all the help ye could get. But knowing my shooting skills, I was probably more help reloading fer ye both."

Dallas and Charles laughed.

"Dallas, you have yourself a brave one there. I'll give you that!" Charles laughed.

“Man! I was about to give her a gun myself!”

A moment later, they pulled in front of the sheriff’s office and Dallas gave her hand a squeeze. “I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll stay with her,” Charles interjected.

Dallas nodded once, and then disappeared into the sheriff’s office. He was in there for a few minutes, and then came out with the sheriff and Colton.

“Don’t worry. I’m headed over there right now to question them.” Sheriff Clark nodded toward the hotel. “We’ll take care of it. They’ll be lucky if I don’t arrest them all.”

Butch slid off his horse and tied it to the carriage. “I’ll go with you.” Bloodstains still covered his shirt.

“Now, we can’t go over there hotheaded,” Sheriff Clark warned. “We’re going over there to question and to warn them.”

“I’ll go with you, too,” Charles replied as he stepped out of the carriage and turned to Dallas. “You go ahead and take Megan home.”

Dallas nodded. “Are you sure you won’t need me?”

Charles shook his head. “The four of us can handle it. I’ll see you back at the ranch.”

Reluctantly, Dallas climbed into the carriage and sat beside Megan. “Bill, to the ranch.”

“Yes, sir,” Bill replied, and a second later the carriage was moving again.

Dallas didn't say much for a bit. They both watched the sunset, content with each other's company.

"Megan." Dallas stroked a strand of hair away from her face. "I don't know what I would have done if something would have happened to you today."

Megan sighed. "Dallas, I don't know what I would have done if I had lost ye, too." She sighed, absentmindedly shaking her head. "No, I couldn't have lost ye that way."

He placed a hand on her cheek, forcing her to look at him. "Megan, I'm in love with you."

Megan shook her head. "Dallas, I—"

Dallas gently pressed a finger to her lips. "I know you married me out of necessity, and you don't have to say anything in return. I just wanted you to know." He turned sideways so he could take her hand into his. "I love you, darling."

She nodded. "Dallas, please understand. I've lost everyone I've ever loved. If I lost ye, too, I don't know if I could take it." Her eyes filled with tears, unable to say more.

Dallas pulled her to his chest and stroked her hair, but didn't say another word.

Megan turned her gaze toward the darkening sky, fearing that he was angry with her, and she wanted to make it right. "Dallas, I—"

"Shh...." He gently brushed the hair away from her face. "You don't have to say anything."

When they arrived at the ranch, Dallas opened the door and climbed out, lowered the step, and held Megan's hand as she stepped down. "Let's go inside. You need to eat

something. I don't want you to go into shock."

Megan smiled, and looked down at her dress, but only a few spots of blood were evident. "I'll hurry upstairs and change. I don't want to give Mrs. Daly a heart attack when she sees me. But I ate so much earlier, I don't think I'll be able to eat much now."

Dallas pulled her to a stop when they reached the door and placed his hand on her cheek. "Megan, I don't want you to have to live in fear. It's my job to protect you. I want you to stay close to the ranch. Please, don't venture off—"

"I'll be fine." Megan reached up and kissed his cheek. "Ye do protect me, but I can protect meself, too."

Dallas pulled her into his arms and his lips descended upon hers as she ran her fingers through his blond hair. This kiss was filled not only with passion, but with desperation and pain. He pulled back, leaving her breathless. "Megan, promise me you'll stay safe. Those men in town are dangerous."

She nodded as a smile lit her lips. "I promise. Now, let's go inside and get something to eat. We can discuss this later."

Dallas gazed into her eyes for a long while and then gave her one last sweet kiss. "One more thing: Be sure not to hurt Mrs. Daly or one of my men, thinking they're an intruder," Dallas teased, remembering her with the knife at the restaurant as he walked with her up the front steps to the porch.

Megan burst out laughing. "Don't worry. If I attack anyone, it'll be in self-defense or... because I meant to."

Dallas laughed. "I don't doubt that!" He opened the door for her, and she rushed

upstairs to change her clothes before anyone saw her.

\*\*\*

The next day was Saturday. Megan cleaned up and changed into a lavender dress and combed her hair into place. She laced up her black shoes, and then headed down the stairs.

“Good morning, missus!” Mrs. Daly greeted her when she walked down the stairs. “My, my! Don’t ye look nice today!”

“Thank ye,” Megan replied, smoothing a hand over her dress. “Where’s Mr. King?”

She let out a deep breath. “He went to the bank. He said he wouldn’t be long.”

Megan smiled. “Mrs. Daly, do ye have a minute?”

“Yes, of course.” A crease formed between her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Megan shook her head. “Nothing at all. It’s just that Christmas is coming soon. Why don’t we have some tea and make plans?”

A broad smile spread across Mrs. Daly’s face. “Yes, of course. I’ll be right back with the tea.”

She started to walk away, but Megan stopped her. “Mrs. Daly, I’m not keeping ye from anything, am I?”

The older woman shook her head. “No, not at all. I was just finishing up me chores.”

“Well, if there’s ever anything I kin do—”

“Nonsense!” Mrs. Daly cut her off. “You’re the lady of the house. I’ll be right back.”

Megan sat at the dining room table and waited. Megan still felt a bit strange having people wait on her. She didn’t want to become complacent and take it for granted, either. As she waited, she thought about what Dallas had said... that he loved her. She was very fond of him, but could she allow herself to love him? No, after what she had been through, it was better to marry for stability and she had that with Dallas. But if she gave him her heart and something happened to him, she feared it would crush her.

“Here we go!” Mrs. Daly burst into the room carrying a tray with a pretty teapot and matching cups, along with a plate of sandwiches. She placed it on the table and began setting everything out. “Since ye haven’t eaten anything yet today, I thought ye might be a wee bit hungry.”

Megan smiled. “Yes, thank ye. But please join me. I hate to dine alone.”

“I hope ye don’t mind....” Mrs. Daly lowered her voice conspiratorially, “but I was planning on it.”

“Good!” Megan laughed, glad she had the company of Mrs. Daly. Although they didn’t talk about anything personal, it was good to have the camaraderie of another woman. “Now, about Christmas....” Megan leaned forward at the edge of the table as Mrs. Daly poured the tea.

Together, they ate sandwiches with bacon that was probably left over from breakfast and freshly baked bread. The scent was heavenly. By the time they finished their lunch, the Christmas plans were arranged. Megan didn’t know if Dallas wanted to have other people over or not, so they made two plans: One, for a quiet Christmas with just the two of them, and another plan that included guests.



After their meal, Megan stood and pushed in her chair. “I think I’ll go Christmas shopping in town. Would you like me to help you with these?” She gestured toward the dishes.

“No, of course not.” A crease formed between Mrs. Daly’s eyes. “But with those brutes in town, I really don’t think ye should go. In fact, I haven’t been to town since they arrived. If I need anything, Mr. Daly goes for me.”

Mr. Daly spent his time caring for the horses or in their little cottage behind the bunkhouse, staying to himself. In fact, Megan only met him once or twice.

“I’ll be fine. Besides, Mr. King is in town. I’d like to surprise him.” She hurried to the stairs, but Mrs. Daly stopped her.

“Do ye think that’s wise? I really think ye should reconsider.”

Megan sighed. “One of Dallas’s men will escort me, so I should be safe.”

Mrs. Daly nodded. “Just be careful. From what I’ve heard, those men in town are dangerous.”

“Do you know why they’re here?” Megan couldn’t wait until the men left. Then, maybe everything could go back to normal... whatever normal was. She hadn’t lived in Whiskey River long enough to see what “normal” was before they arrived.

Mrs. Daly shook her head. “No, but I’m sure they’re up to no good.”

Megan went upstairs and slipped on a hat and grabbed her coat, suddenly excited to see Dallas.

When she walked outside, Milo came around the corner of the house and tipped his

hat when she stepped out onto the porch. “Good morning, ma’am.”

She smiled. “Yes, it is. Would you mind taking me into town this morning?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I don’t think that’s wise.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be careful. I’d just like to go to the General Store to go Christmas shopping.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather wait for Mr. King?”

Megan smiled. “I wouldn’t be able to buy him a present when he’s with me, now could I?”

“I guess not.” Milo thought for a moment and then replied, “But stay with me, ma’am, and I’ll keep you safe.”

Megan smiled appreciatively. She wasn’t used to such attention and having to have a guard all the time. She hoped that things would be different once the gang was out of town. As she stepped into the buggy, she wondered if Dallas would have armed guards with her constantly. She hoped not, but she figured it was just until the men in town left. Megan wasn’t one to live her life in fear.

As they were riding along, she thought of what Dallas had said the night before, that he loved her. But could she give him her love in return? No, it was better to marry for security, not for love. Then again, Dallas was generous and caring, but he was domineering at times, too. But no one was perfect... and neither was she.

\*\*\*

They rode into town a short time later. Milo pulled the buggy down to the corner,

careful not to stop in front of the hotel and restaurant. When they passed by, she noticed that not as many men were perched out front, only one this time. Maybe they got the hint and left town, but she knew that was too much to hope for.

“You can go ahead,” Megan instructed Milo when he helped her out of the buggy. “I’ll be fine.”

Milo frowned as he turned his hat in his hand. “Actually, Mr. King said I was to stay with you today and not let you out of my sight.”

She sighed. “Very well, then. I’ll be in the General Store, and then I’m going to The Ladies’ Dress Emporium to visit Miss Baker.”

Milo nodded. “I’ll wait outside for you, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” Megan headed into the General Store, excited to buy Dallas a gift.

“Why, Mrs. King! ‘Tis a great pleasure to have your unexpected company today!” Mrs. Carson slid a bolt of fabric away and then pulled out another. “Could I interest you in some of our finest fabric today?”

Off to the side, Mr. Carson scoffed as he slid a can onto a shelf.

“No, not today. Christmas is coming, so I thought I’d just browse and perhaps get a Christmas gift for Mr. King.” Meagan walked around the store, enjoying the freedom of being out alone for a change. She stopped to admire the Christmas ornaments and decorations on a table sitting front and center of the store. She walked over and there were also ribbons and plain wooden and glass ornaments.

“Oh, Mrs. King!” Mrs. Carson interrupted. “A fine woman such as yourself shouldn’t think of buying those.” She scoffed, turning up her nose at the table containing the

items to make your own ornaments. “What you want is over here.” Mrs. Carson crossed the room to a table containing expensive glass ornaments.

Megan shook her head. “No, I’d really prefer to make them myself.” She gathered some ribbon and some wooden ornaments, along with small containers of paint. She had never painted before, but it looked like fun. Then she picked up a roll of wide red ribbon that she planned to use to decorate the house.

Then, she browsed the store, trying to think of something she could get Dallas for Christmas. It was difficult to think about a gift for a man who had everything. Since she couldn’t think of anything right off the bat, she decided to think about it and come back later. She felt bad for buying Dallas’s gift with his money. But since they were married, she guessed it was hers, too.

“Mrs. King, a woman such as yourself—”

“Mrs. Carson,” Megan addressed her in a kind but firm way. “I may be Mr. King’s wife, and he may be one of the richest men in town, but I would appreciate it if you would treat me like any normal person.”

Mr. Carson coughed to cover a laugh. “I think I’ll go to the back for more supplies.” He quickly disappeared into the back room.

Mrs. Carson’s mouth was still open, but she quickly recovered herself. “Well! I never!” She walked off, and then bit out over her shoulder, “If you need any help, Mrs. King, just let me know.” Then she went on with her work.

Megan ended up buying some potatoes, carrots, some cranberries, and some other vegetables. She also bought some beef to make stew, and then more flour, just in case, not sure what they had at home.

When she was about to leave, Mr. Carson rang up her purchases. “It was a pleasure to see you today, indeed. Please, come back again soon.” He gave her a warm smile. Megan thought that he had enjoyed her telling off his wife a bit too much.

When she walked out, Milo was waiting. “Here, Mrs. King. Let me get those for you,” he offered, taking her bags from her. “I’ll put them in the buggy.”

“Thank you, Milo,” she replied, and then added, “I’m going over to see Miss Baker at the dress shop for a while.”

“I’ll be here.” Milo pulled the buggy in front of the dress shop and stood guard.

“Milo, this really isn’t necessary. I can go to the bank once I finish.”

He shrugged. “No, orders are orders.”

Megan sighed, knowing she wasn’t going to win that battle, so she headed into the dress shop.

“Well, hello!” Kenzie Baker smiled, looking up from helping another customer. “I’ll be right with you.”

“Take yer time,” Megan replied, smiling as she browsed through the shop. “I just stepped in to say hello.”

Kenzie nodded, and then turned back to her customer.

Megan was glad to see that Kenzie treated her like any other person and didn’t fall at her feet because she was married to Dallas King. As Megan looked around the shop, she thought about Dallas. She wondered if he would expect her to act a certain way, as a lady of leisure, at all times. But that just wasn’t her. Megan had always had an

independent spirit.

She just wanted to live a normal life with a husband who would provide for her and their children. She would never consider letting a nanny raise their children, and if that was what Dallas had in mind, then he would have a fight on his hands. As she walked around the shop thinking about Dallas, it appeared that they still had a lot to discuss.

Dallas

“Well, it’s Saturday. Let’s go home, Mr. Whitfield,” Dallas announced, closing the ledger lying on the table. He had only wanted to come in and check on everything, not to stay the whole day. But he didn’t want to leave the bank unattended for two days, not with the outlaws still in town.

“Why aren’t you calling me Charles?” He tilted his head, giving him an odd look.

Dallas smiled. “At home, it’s Charles. But here at work, I find it hard to call you by your first name.”

Charles smiled, amused. “Okay, Mr. King.”

Dallas laughed. “Call me Dallas.”

“See?” Charles smirked.

“You have a point.” Dallas sighed, leaning back in his chair. “So, when are you planning to leave for New York?” He would have liked to take him to dinner at the hotel restaurant, but he didn’t trust the gang to behave themselves.

“Why? Are you ready to get rid of me already?” A mischievous grin spread across his lips.

Dallas laughed. “Heavens, no! Stay forever if you like.” He shrugged. “I was just wondering. Actually, I would love it if you could stay at least until after Christmas or

New Year's Eve."

"I wish I could." Charles's expression suddenly turned serious. "After we spoke to the men at the hotel last night, Sheriff Clark told them that he wanted them out of town before sun-up, but I noticed they're still here."

Dallas shook his head. "I just wish I knew what they were waiting for."

Charles let out a deep breath. "I hate to say it, Dallas, but I think they're biding their time to find a way to get even with you for killing their brothers."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Dallas agreed. "I just hope Megan doesn't get hurt in the process."

"Where is she now?"

"At the ranch. I told her not to leave." Dallas had a feeling that if they saw her, the gang would kill her on the spot just to get back at him.

Charles leaned back in his chair. "But to answer your question, I'm not going anywhere until those men are gone."

"I'll be okay—"

"Dallas, you're like a brother to me." One corner of his lips curled into a smile. "And I'm not leaving town until I know you and Megan are safe."

A crease formed between Dallas's eyes. "Charles, you don't have to do that. I can handle it with my men. If you have business to attend to in New York—"

"Nothing is more important to me than your welfare." Charles rose to his feet. "I'm



staying. That is, unless you're getting tired of having me as a houseguest."

Dallas laughed. "Never."

Charles smiled graciously. "Come on, then. Let's get out of here."

Dallas and Charles locked the money away in the safe and put everything else away, too. Dallas also assigned two armed guards to watch the bank. He didn't think the outlaws would be so stupid as to try to rob it again, but he wasn't taking any chances.

After they were safely out, Dallas locked the door. "So, how's Jake?"

Charles sighed. "When I went to see him, Doc Morgan said he had lost a lot of blood, but he'll recover."

Dallas nodded. "Do you think that he's up for a bit of company?"

Charles shook his head. "No, Doc Morgan said he needed to rest."

"I'll go by and visit him after church tomorrow then." Dallas's men were like his family and Jake had been with him for a long time. He was going to ask Doc Morgan when he would be ready to take home. Dallas planned to keep him in the main house and care for him until he was fully recovered.

Suddenly, Dallas's heart stopped, for walking toward him on the wooden walkway was Megan. Rage instantly filled his chest. "What are you doing here?"

Her smile faded. "Mrs. Daly and I made plans for Christmas, and I thought I'd go to the store and pick up a few things. I didn't think—"

"Yes, that's right! You didn't think!" Dallas's voice bellowed, his heart pounding. He

had no idea what he'd do if something ever happened to her. "Coming into town like this was really stupid, Megan! Do you know that those men over there are looking for a way to get back at me? And seeing you here is giving them plenty of ideas, I'm sure!"

"So, now I'm stupid?"

Dallas gritted his teeth, ignoring her question. "Did you come alone?"

Megan inclined her head toward the buggy. "No, Milo's with me." She sighed. "He insisted on bringing me."

Dallas nodded. "Good."

She huffed. "Dallas, ye can't yell at me like this or order me around!"

"I'm only trying to protect you, Megan! Can't you see that?" He grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to look into his eyes. Fear of losing her took over and he couldn't stop himself. "And as long as you're my wife, you will do as I say!"

Charles cleared his throat. "Dallas, we're attracting attention. Let's take this elsewhere."

Dallas glanced over and they had caught the attention of the outlaws. A few stood, stepping closer, watching, sinister sneers spreading across their faces. "After those men came after us yesterday, I'm not taking any chances with you." He needed to get Megan out of there... now. "Let's go home."

She looked at him and Charles. "Fine! But I'm cooking dinner."

"No, you will not." Dallas's lips formed a straight line. "You will behave as a lady."

“Behave as a lady?” she repeated, her voice raising several octaves as she folded her arms across her chest. “Dallas, I’m not a doll ye can dress up and bring out to show off in front of yer friends and not expect me to do anything!”

Dallas looked apologetically at Charles.

“I’ll wait in the carriage,” Charles replied and then slid into the carriage to give them some semblance of privacy.

Dallas nodded, fuming. Then he turned to Megan with gritted teeth and squeezed her arm. “How dare you talk to me that way in front of my friend?”

Charles shot him a warning glance out the carriage window. The men across the street were standing, watching.

Dallas pulled Megan toward the carriage, knowing he needed to get her out of there immediately. “We will continue this conversation at home.”

“Dallas, let go of me!” She pulled away, and he let go of her arm. “Let’s get one thing straight. I will not be ordered. Ye can ask, but never order me.” Megan stared at him, her eyes never wavering.

Dallas let out a deep breath, rage filling his chest. “We’re leaving... now.”

Megan stared at him for a long moment. “Fine!” Then she climbed into the carriage across from Charles and looked out the window.

Dallas glared at her through the window, clenching his teeth, but she didn’t look up at him. “I’ll be right back,” Dallas spat out, and then headed toward Milo, waiting by the buggy. Without saying a word, Dallas caught his attention and inclined his head in the direction of the ranch, indicating for him to follow them. Milo nodded once and

then climbed into the buggy.

Dallas walked around to the other side of the carriage, obstructing the men's view of Megan. "Home, Bill."

Megan slid away from him and looked out the window on her side of the carriage.

Dallas looked out the window on his side, trying to calm down, wondering how in the world they could ever find a compromise to make their marriage work. She was just too headstrong... and it was liable to get her killed.

Megan

Megan was fuming as she looked out the carriage window on the way home. Whether Dallas realized it or not, she was his equal and she expected to be treated as such. Looking back, she probably shouldn't have come into town, but he didn't need to yell at her the way he did. Megan had never taken orders from a man before and she wasn't going to start now.

Any other time, she would have enjoyed the landscape, the sun sparkling upon the snow with the evergreen trees sprouting up from it, as if they had been set there purposefully. But she was too upset. And the more she thought about it, the angrier she got. She was not going to be treated like a porcelain doll. And if she wanted to cook dinner, then by golly she would. Dallas was just going to have to get used to it.

Dallas sat next to her and never made a move to reach for her hand like he usually did. Charles didn't say anything, either.

Megan would have asked him when he planned to leave for New York, just to start a conversation, but now wasn't the time.

As they rode along, Megan thought of her situation. Even if she persuaded Charles to take her back to New York when he left, there was nothing waiting there for her. She was completely at Dallas's mercy, entirely dependent upon him, and she didn't like it. She thought that maybe she could ask Harrison Curry for a job waitressing, if she ever left Dallas. But could she stand to see him with another woman? Perhaps she could go to Laramie, but she would need money in order to do that.

Her heart sank at the thought of leaving Dallas. Somehow, she couldn't imagine her life without him. Despite his faults, he was the best thing that had ever happened to her. But they were going to have to reach some kind of compromise if they were ever going to make it work between them.

A few minutes later, the carriage pulled down the long drive of Dallas's ranch. She cringed internally. Would she ever come to think of it as her ranch, too? She wondered if she ever could. As soon as the carriage came to a stop, Megan opened the door and slid out, not waiting for Dallas. Then, she walked over to the buggy and grabbed the bags. She hated having charged everything to Dallas's account... another reminder of her dependence upon him. But she had no other choice.

Sometimes she wished that having money wasn't so important. But if they had had money for food, then her parents wouldn't have died. And if she and Liam had had money, then she wouldn't have had to work so late at the factory, and he would still be alive. Somehow, she knew she was going to have to get used to being dependent upon Dallas. After all, she was his wife. But her independent nature was just too strong to accept it. To Megan, losing her independence was losing a part of herself, which she could never allow.

Dallas grabbed the rest of the bags and followed behind her. Then he set the bags down on the kitchen table and walked out, ignoring Jacques's dirty looks.

"What's the meaning of this?" Jacques's voice bellowed in his French accent, waving around the butcher knife he was holding. "You are soiling my kitchen!"

Megan smirked as she began unpacking the groceries. "I hardly call it 'soiling.' I'm cooking dinner tonight." Then she added for his benefit, "If ye don't mind."

"You what ?" he screeched, his voice raising several octaves.

Mrs. Daly ran into the kitchen and looked back and forth between them, her eyes wide.

Megan smiled sweetly. "Please?"

Jacques stared at her for a long moment, and then laid down the butcher knife. "May I assist you?" he asked sarcastically, folding his hands in front of him, raising his eyebrows.

Megan smiled. "No, thank you. I'll be fine." Then an idea struck her. "Jacques, why don't you take the night off?"

Jacques's eyes opened wide. "The night off?"

Mrs. Daly bit her lower lip to keep from laughing.

"Yes." Megan smiled sweetly. She needed tonight to feel some semblance of control, if nothing else. She hadn't cooked since leaving New York and she missed it.

"Very well, then." Jacques lifted his chin. "I know when I am not needed. Bonne nuit."  
"

"Jacques, it's only for tonight...." Megan yelled after him, watching him go.

Mrs. Daly patted her arm. "Don't worry. He'll be fine. He just got his nose cut out of joint a bit, is all."

Megan nodded as she started unpacking the groceries, slamming things a bit harder than she had intended.

The older woman walked over to her slowly, her eyes filled with concern. "Are ye all

right?”

She stopped what she was doing and looked into her eyes. “Yes, I’m fine.” She resumed putting away the groceries, but Mrs. Daly stopped her.

“Dinner can wait.” She took her hand and led her to the table. “Sit down and let’s talk.”

Megan did as she asked, letting her hands fall limply to her sides as tears filled her eyes, threatening to spill over.

Mrs. Daly took one of her hands and gave it a gentle pat. “Now, now. It can’t be all that bad.”

Megan pulled her hand away. “Oh, yes it can.”

“Talk to me.” She gave her a sorrowful look. “What happened?”

Megan shook her head. “It’s Dallas.” Anger flooded back to her at the mere mention of his name. But she knew she couldn’t talk to Mrs. Daly about him, since she was his employee.

Mrs. Daly sighed as she gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Being married is hard at first. Why, I remember when Mr. Daly and I first married.” She chuckled. “It was quite an adjustment.”

Megan nodded as tears came to her eyes. She couldn’t speak or she would start crying.

Mrs. Daly calmly took her hand. “Mr. King’s a good man.” She thought for a moment and frowned. “Megan, I have something to tell ye.”



Curious, she looked up and waited.

She let out a deep breath, holding her hand. “Since ye arrived, I’ve seen a big change in him. Oh, he was always a gentleman, but the way he looks at ye... I know he cares for ye very much.” A thoughtful smile lit her lips. “Mrs. King, a man can change for the better. Remember that.” Mrs. Daly released her hand as she smirked. “And nothing changes a man like a good woman.”

Megan nodded, feeling a bit better. “Thank you, Mrs. Daly.”

“Think nothing of it, madame.”

“Please.” Megan smiled. “Call me Megan when we’re alone.”

Mrs. Daly chuckled. “I’ll try, ma’am... I mean... Megan.”

As she started fixing dinner with Mrs. Daly, she felt much better. Having the camaraderie of another woman in the kitchen was just what she needed. They spent the next hour laughing and talking as they prepared the meal together... and Megan hadn’t felt happier. She just wished that she and Dallas could reach a compromise, too. Then everything would be perfect.

Dallas

Dallas waited in the parlor with Charles, smoking a cigar and enjoying a brandy, thinking of Megan. How dare she defy him... and in front of his friend? She was his wife, wasn't she? That meant that she had to do as he asked. And cook dinner? He scoffed. The lady of the house didn't cook. It wasn't as if he couldn't afford a chef. But now, his wife felt the need to give the chef the night off to cook dinner herself. He took a sip of his brandy, wondering if he would ever survive his wife.

"What's on your mind?" Charles asked, sitting in an armchair by the fire across from him.

Dallas shook his head, swirling the caramel-colored liquid in his glass.

"So, she wants to cook dinner one night?" Charles shrugged. "I'd let her. Hell, if I had a wife, I'd be delighted if she wanted to cook occasionally."

Dallas glanced over at him. "How so?"

Charles looked into the fire. "It would tell me that she was the kind of woman who didn't mind getting her hands dirty. That she was down to earth." He scoffed. "Most of the women I know wouldn't dream of it."

"See what I mean?" Dallas stood and walked over to the fire, leaning onto the mantel above the fireplace.

Charles's eyebrows pulled together in concern. "I'm not following."

Dallas sighed. “Women of substance have cooks or chefs, they do as their husbands say, and they don’t clean the house after a party.”

Charles chuckled. “Well, I’d be thankful that she isn’t afraid to push up her sleeves and pitch in. Besides, what harm would it do?” He raised and lowered his shoulders. “Let her...” Then he lowered his voice conspiratorially. “But don’t let her know that you’re letting her.”

“Why should I let her?” Dallas took the last swig of his drink and set the glass down on the mantel.

Charles rose from his seat and stood in front of the fire, holding his glass. “She’s a woman who is not used to just attending parties and seeing to the staff. She probably just wants to feel useful. Making dinner and cleaning is familiar to her. Maybe make a compromise with her. Let her cook when you two are here alone, but for parties or when you have company, then have the chef cook. You can talk to her and see what she thinks. If she agrees to it, it’ll save a lot of arguments.” Charles chuckled. “Besides, it’ll give Jacques the night off occasionally, too.”

Dallas smiled. “Jacques doesn’t like ‘days off.’”

Charles shrugged. “He’ll get used to it.”

“Charles, I’m sorry she behaved this way while you were here.” Dallas couldn’t believe she had embarrassed him like this.

Charles laughed. “Don’t be! I’m like family, remember? As far as I’m concerned, she can cook dinner and clean the house all she wants while I’m here. It wouldn’t bother me a bit or make me think any less of her or you. Personally, I think it’d be good to have a wife who isn’t afraid of a little hard work. That’s the kind of woman I want someday.”

Dallas let out a deep breath. “Thanks, Charles. I appreciate that.”

“Well, something smells wonderful.” Charles smiled, playfully nudging his shoulder with his. “I wonder if dinner’s getting close.”

“I’ll go check.” Dallas was about to walk into the kitchen when Mrs. Daly appeared in the parlor doorway, smiling broadly.

“Dinner is served,” Mrs. Daly announced and then disappeared around the corner, piquing Dallas’s interest.

“I wonder what that was all about?” Dallas had a feeling that she and his defiant wife were up to something. What? He had no idea.

Charles laughed. “Well, I think we’d better go find out.”

“Yes, I think we should.” Dallas chuckled as they headed toward the dining room.

When they walked in, the candles on the table and along the buffet against the wall were lit, sending sparkles throughout the room, creating a romantic atmosphere. Megan had also lit the oil lamp that was on the far wall and had turned it down low, creating enough light to eat by. The room was nothing short of magical.

Megan stood in front of the door leading to the kitchen. She wore a clean, blue dress and her hair was combed into place, brought up off her shoulders into loose curls, taking Dallas’s breath away.

“Everything looks great... and you look lovely.” Dallas took her hands in his. “Could you ever forgive me?”

Megan nodded. “Yes, but let’s talk about it later. Right now, let’s just enjoy our meal

together.”

“Everything looks wonderful,” Charles replied, a smile lighting his lips.

“Thank ye, but I didn’t do it alone. Mrs. Daly helped,” she beamed, her eyes sparkling in the firelight.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” Dallas asked, her excitement catchy.

She rocked up on her toes, clearly excited. “Yes, as a matter of fact I did.” She was about to go into the kitchen, but Mrs. Daly was on the other side of the door, smiling.

“No, madame,” she said, her eyes kind. “You did more than enough. Jacques has agreed to help me serve tonight.”

Megan laughed, her eyes wide. “Ye jest!”

“No, ma’am.” Mrs. Daly beamed. “He was more than glad to help.”

“Thank ye,” Megan beamed and then walked back to the dining room. “It’s on the way.”

“Well, then, shall we?” Dallas held Megan’s chair for her, finding himself caught up in her excitement and the romanticism. He pushed her chair in as she sat.

Dallas took his seat at the head of the table, and Charles sat at his right, across from Megan. “Well, Charles suggested that maybe you could give Jacques a night off occasionally so you can cook. Would that be okay with you?”

“Oh, that would be lovely!” Megan beamed, clasping her hands. “Mrs. Daly and I had so much fun chatting and talking while we were cooking. It’s been a while since—”

“We can talk about it later,” Dallas replied. But the way her voice trailed off, Dallas knew that she was about to say that it had been a while since she had made dinner in the kitchen with another woman, probably her mother. “So, what did you ladies plan for dinner?”

“Wait just a moment and ye’ll find out.” Megan smiled.

Right on cue, Mrs. Daly walked into the room, carrying a bowl with a ladle in it. “Here you go!”

It smelled so delicious that Dallas’s stomach rumbled, not realizing he was hungry until that moment. Jacques followed behind Mrs. Daly, carrying a wooden cutting board with a loaf of round bread.

“Irish Stew and Irish Soda Bread,” Megan announced, her eyes sparkling.

“Well, it smells delicious,” Charles replied. “It’s been a while since I’ve had authentic Irish Stew.”

Mrs. Daly began ladling out the stew, pouring a hefty scoop into each bowl. “Well, you’d better eat up. Mrs. King made plenty.” Mrs. Daly finished and walked discreetly back into the kitchen.

Dallas’s heart filled with pride. “Let’s say the blessing, shall we?” Everyone bowed their heads, and he said a blessing over the meal, thanking God for the good food, the good company, and all the gifts He had given them. And for the first time in a very long time, he could see all of the blessings in his life... and everything he had to be thankful for. Before that moment, Dallas hadn’t realized just how much of an impact his father had had on him and his life. In a way, Dallas was who he was because of him. He realized how much he had been carrying around with him. It was time he forgave his father and let the past go.

“Are you okay?” Megan asked, laying her spoon down beside the bowl, her eyebrows pulling together in concern. “You don’t like it?”

Dallas smiled as he shook his head. “No, just the opposite. I was just thinking of how lucky I am, how much I have to be thankful for.”

“We all do,” Megan agreed, giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

And Dallas knew it was true. It was high time he stopped blaming his father for his own shortcomings and go on with his life the best way he could. But sometimes, it was easier said than done.

Megan

The next morning, Megan woke before sunrise. Moonlight streamed in through the window and a bluish cast filled the room. She glanced over and Dallas was still sleeping. For once, she had woken before him. Megan walked over to the window and moonlight was shining over the snow, sparkling silver and blue. It really was so beautiful that she had an overwhelming urge to go for a walk. Plus, she needed time to think. Since it was early yet, she had some time before she had to get ready for church. Also, the gang was staying in town, so it should be safe to go alone, as long as she stayed on their property.

As she dressed for the day, she wondered what would happen if she really did give Dallas her heart. Megan let out a deep breath. Could she stand it if he left her, or if he died and left her alone again? She had already lost so many people that she loved. Could she stand to lose him, too?

As she laced up her shoes and combed her hair into place, she wondered what Liam would have said about Dallas. She chuckled. Liam had always been so protective of her, despite her insistence that she could take care of herself.

But Liam would have also told her not to be afraid to love again. Megan knew she couldn't go through the rest of her life protecting her heart from being broken again. Love was a chance you took. You might get your heart broken, but then again, you might not. Love was a gamble and, win or lose, usually you were better for it. Even though she had lost everyone she loved, no one could take away the memories or the love she had for them. Knowing them, and her love for them all, had made her the woman she had become.



Megan slipped on her coat and headed down the stairs. She was almost to the door when she heard a voice behind her.

“Good morning, Mrs. King... er... Megan,” Mrs. Daly greeted her happily, obviously remembering that Megan had asked her to call her Megan when they were alone. “Did ye sleep well?”

A smile spread across her face, feeling more content than she had in a very long time. “Yes. And ye?”

Mrs. Daly shrugged. “Tolerably.” She took in Megan’s appearance and then asked, “Where are ye goin’?”

“Fer a walk.” Megan buttoned up her coat. “I won’ be long.”

Mrs. Daly’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “Do ye think it wise to leave the house alone before daylight? Ye should take one of the men with ye... or Mr. King—”

“No, don’t wake him,” Megan stopped her. “I’ll be fine. I just want to take in the air and enjoy the sunrise. I’ll stay on our property and will only be a few minutes. We’re going to church today and I’ll be in soon enough to get ready.” Then she thought of something. “Would ye and Mr. Daly care to join us for church today?”

Mrs. Daly smiled, clearly touched, but shook her head. “No, not today. But maybe next week... if it’s okay with ye.”

A broad smile spread across Megan’s lips. “Yes, that would be grand. Ye’re welcome anytime.”

When Megan headed out the door, a rush of cool air hit her, but she pulled her coat

around her tightly and walked toward the back fields, wondering if she had enough time to find the lake that Dallas had taken her to. The sun was just beginning to rise in the distance, sending shoots of pink and orange through the dark blue sky. Even though it was cool out, it wasn't cold once she got used to it.

As she strolled through the freshly fallen snow, she thought of Dallas. She hadn't been comfortable in the life he wanted her to lead, but he had made a compromise. If he didn't mind her doing what she wanted to within reason, then she could act as he wanted her to when they had company. If he could compromise, then so could she.

At that moment, she realized that she loved him... let the chips fall where they may. Even though he could be controlling and demanding, he could also be loving, caring, generous, and compassionate. No one was perfect. He wasn't, but neither was she.

But if she gave him her whole heart, could he give her his in return? He had said that he loved her, but he continued to doubt her. But could he give her his whole heart if she loved him entirely? Now that they could find compromise, she knew they could have a wonderful life together.

Then she thought of Liam and her parents. If they had known Dallas, they would have loved him, too. She now knew that she couldn't go through life afraid to love for fear of losing them. How could she ever have a good life if she was afraid to love? Afraid to give her whole heart? At that moment, she realized that she loved Dallas nearly more than she had loved anyone else in her life.

Megan glanced up and she was at the lake, a big, barren oak tree growing beside it. But instead of looking dead, it looked alive as the sun rose behind it, sending shoots of orange and bright yellow across the sky, taking her breath away. She had walked farther than she had realized while she was thinking.

As Megan watched the sunrise, casting light upon the earth and in her soul, she

realized that her heart had awoken, along with the sunrise. She had to tell Dallas. As quickly as she could, she turned and started running toward the house. She had to see Dallas right away; she had to tell him that she loved him. It was unladylike, but she lifted her skirts away from her ankles and ran as fast as she could toward the house, not wanting to waste another moment, not wanting to live another moment without telling Dallas how she felt.

All of a sudden, three men rode toward her, coming up fast, and she froze. “Who are ye?” Megan looked toward the house, but the house wasn’t in sight... and neither was the barn, the bunkhouse, or Mr. and Mrs. Daly’s little cabin. Without realizing it, she had gone too far.

One of the men sneered. “I think you know.”

Megan looked up and got a good look at the men... and recognized them. Under the dirt and grime, they were the men who had been standing in front of the hotel in town nearly every day. They were part of the Yates Gang.

She screwed up her courage and narrowed her eyes, determined not to show fear to these outlaws. “Let me pass.”

A sinister smile spread across one of the men’s faces as he slowly climbed down off his horse, not taking his eyes from hers, watching her every move. “I don’t think so, sugar.”

A shiver ran down her spine, but she donned her best Poker face. “Git out of me way!”

“Oooo, a feisty one!” the other man leered, climbing down off his horse, too. “Just how I like ’em.” He lunged toward her, but she ducked away and tried to run. But the other man caught her, wrapping his arms around her so tightly she couldn’t move her

arms.

“Help! Someone help!” Megan yelled at the top of her lungs, kicking and screaming, hoping beyond all hope that someone would hear.

“Get a bandana, Joe!” The man holding her yelled, shoving his filthy hand over her mouth to muffle her screams. “We don’t need anyone hearing her.”

Megan bit his hand, drawing blood and he screamed in pain as he let her go and she was running again. But they quickly caught up with her.

Joe shoved a dirty bandana from around his neck into her mouth, smelling of sweat and body odor, and tasting of dirt as she thrashed her head about. “Hold her head, Hal! We gotta get out of here before someone hears her!”

Hal grasped her forehead and pulled it back hard against his chest, nearly breaking her neck, holding her head still. Joe tied the bandana into place behind her head, muffling her screams.

Megan thrashed so hard that she got away from Henry again. This time, she turned and punched him in the mouth as hard as she could, drawing blood, and ran.

But Fred was quicker. The pounding of his boots running behind her came up fast... too fast. Within seconds, strong arms grabbed her waist, and they both tumbled into the cold snow. Fred straddled her, holding her down, pinning her hands back over her head. Then he looked down at her and sneered. “If my orders weren’t to bring you into town, I’d be tempted to have a bit of fun with you first.”

“Get off her,” Henry ordered. “We have to take her back to Frank.” Joe got off her and pulled her to a sitting position on the cold snow. “Hold her hands.”

Joe held her hands together as Henry quickly bound them. Then he pushed her onto the front of his horse and slid up into the saddle behind her, pinning her in front of him. “Let’s go!”

Megan struggled, but to no avail. “Hold still!” Henry yelled in her ear, jerking her head back. They ran at full speed, going another way, not passing the main house.

Obviously, they had been waiting to catch her alone without her guards. Megan guessed that they were going to kill her since Dallas had killed their brothers. An eye for an eye.

The horses’ hooves kicked up snow as they sped away. But all Megan could think of was Dallas, wishing she could see him one more time... wishing she had one more chance to tell him that she loved him.

Dallas

Dallas woke with a start, sitting straight up in bed. He had tossed and turned all night as thoughts of Megan filled his mind. He glanced over to her side of the bed, but she was gone. Perhaps she went downstairs to have breakfast and then get ready for church. He chuckled to himself as he sat up on the side of the bed.

Knowing her, she probably beat Jacques to the kitchen and fixed breakfast. He was going to have to speak with Jacques about his wife's forays into the kitchen... and perhaps give him a raise to make it worth his while.

Dallas rose from the bed and crossed the room to the window, enjoying the sunrise, as orange and pink streaks spread across the sky. It had been a while since he had actually taken the time to enjoy the sunrise. But since Megan had come into his life, he was beginning to appreciate the little things in life. Since they had met, it was as if Megan had awakened a side of him that he hadn't known existed. He now saw beauty in everyday life, where he didn't before. His life seemed richer now, with Megan at his side. Not wanting to waste another minute to see her, he dressed quickly for church and headed down the stairs.

"Mr. King! I'm so glad ye're awake!" Mrs. Daly wrung her hands as she paced.

Dallas's heart dropped as he ran down the staircase. "What is it? Where's Megan?"

Mrs. Daly shook her head as tears came to her eyes, scaring Dallas. The elder woman was as tough as they come and if she was this upset, it was for a good reason. "Mrs. King went for a walk this morn' and hasn't returned."

Dallas's heart sank. "When? How long ago?"

Mrs. Daly bit her lower lip, and then answered, "About an hour ago."

"Which way did she go?"

"I... I don't know...." Mrs. Daly grabbed the edge of her apron and dabbed at her eyes. "If anything were to happen to her...."

Dallas sprinted out the door and looked both ways. There were tracks in the snow that led to the left. He followed them for a bit, and then he realized where she had gone... to the lake. He sprinted over the field and into the barn, causing Bill to jump.

"Oh! I'm sorry, sir! You scared me." Bill brought a hand to his chest.

Dallas paid no attention as he grabbed a lead strap, his heart pounding. There was no time to waste. He just hoped that Megan was at the lake and on her way back. He just prayed that Frank and his men didn't find her first. But surely, they wouldn't be brazen enough to come onto his property, but he wouldn't put it past them. Dallas grabbed the bridle from the nail next to Blaze's stall and flung open the door.

The horse reared up a bit. "Easy, boy." Dallas held out his arms. Once Blaze calmed, he hooked the lead strap to his halter, led him into the hallway, and tied him off at a post.

"Bill, could you get me Blaze's saddle?" Dallas grabbed the saddle blanket and threw it over Blaze's back. Blaze was his fastest horse and his best bet to get to Megan in time. Dallas just hoped that he was letting his imagination run away with him and that she was safe. When he turned around, Bill was there, holding the saddle.

"What's wrong?" Bill asked, concerned.

“I’m not sure.” Then an idea hit him. “Did Megan come by the stables this morning?”

Bill shook his head. “Not that I know of. Why?”

Dallas threw the saddle upon the back of the horse and swiftly tightened the cinch. “She went for a walk an hour ago and she hasn’t returned.”

“I’ll tell the men.” Bill ran out the door toward the bunkhouse before Dallas could say more.

But Dallas was grateful. Until he saw that Megan was safe, he needed all the help he could get to find her. He would rather look like a lunatic running around looking for her rather than take a chance that one of the Yates boys had grabbed her.

Within minutes, the horse was saddled. Dallas quickly led Blaze from the stall and then mounted him as the horse's eyes flared.

“Easy, boy,” Dallas coaxed as he ran his hand along the stallion’s neck. The horse glared at him and laid back his ears. “Don’t even think about it.” After Dallas mounted, Blaze started to prance. “Ready to run?” Dallas patted the side of his neck. “Let’s go, boy!” He leaned forward in the saddle and yelled, “Yah!”

Immediately, Blaze reared up and lunged forward into a dead run with his ears perked and his tail extended, kicking up the snow as he elongated his strides and pressed on.

It had been a while since Dallas had run him like this, but this wasn’t for pleasure. Dallas couldn’t wait another minute as he pressed Blaze onward toward the lake. Within minutes, he neared the lake and saw a lot of footprints in the snow. He dismounted to look at the tracks, holding onto Blaze’s reins. He was barely winded and ready to run again. From what Dallas could tell from the tracks, there had definitely been a struggle. Then the human footprints abruptly stopped.



They had taken her.

He mounted Blaze and headed back toward the house at full speed, Blaze kicking up snow behind them. Within minutes, he pulled Blaze to a stop in front of the house. Then Dallas jumped off and tied him off at a nearby hitching post.

Milo saw him and yelled, “Hey, boss! What’s wrong?”

“The Yates Gang took Megan!” Without saying another word, he skipped up the stairs to the front porch, taking two at a time. He flung the door open so hard that it hit the wall, scaring Mrs. Daly. But Dallas didn’t stop. He ran up the stairs and into their bedroom. He hadn’t planned on wearing his guns today, especially since it was a Sunday, but he had no choice. He strapped his gun belt around his waist and then tied off the little straps of leather at the bottom of the holsters around his legs to hold them in place. Usually, he didn’t bother with that if he was just going to the bank. But now, against the Yates Gang, he knew he would need it. If he had to take them all on single handedly, then so be it. And if that happened, Dallas knew he’d need every advantage he could get.

When he was ready, he ran down the stairs and out the door. Mrs. Daly followed him out and stood on the porch, but didn’t say a word.

Outside, Milo, Butch, Bill, and Mr. Daly rode up on their horses, heavily armed.

“We’re going with you,” Milo announced, sliding his rifle in its holster strapped to his saddle.

Dallas’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t.” Milo smirked, his hand resting on his rifle. “But we’re going.”

“Let’s go.” Dallas raised his chin toward Milo and the boys, and then quickly mounted Blaze. Then he pointed him toward town.

Blaze ripped down the snow-covered road through the trees headed toward town, his hooves digging in, kicking up snow and dirt as he pressed onward. He hated pressing Blaze so hard in the cold, but the horse seemed to be enjoying himself. His tail was extended as he stretched his neck forward to gain more speed. Dallas held him back a bit so as not to let him slip and break a leg. But after a bit, he gave up and leaned forward, urging him on. He’d never forgive himself if anything happened to Megan.

He still couldn’t believe that they had the gall to come to his ranch and take her. Dallas’s blood boiled when he thought that they had bided their time, waiting for the chance to get back at him. When the outlaws saw Megan in town the day before, Dallas was sure it gave them plenty of ideas.

When they rode into town, Dallas pulled back hard on the reins, bringing Blaze to a stop in front of the livery stable and jumped off. Milo and the other men did the same, quickly jumping down off their horses.

Dirk came out of the livery stable. “Dallas? What’s wrong?”

“Can you keep our horses for us?” Dallas nodded toward the hotel. “They got Megan.”

“Yes, of course.” Dirk raised his chin toward the other men, his eyebrows pulling together in concern. “Tie them off at the hitching post over there and I’ll take care of them.”

Milo, Bill, and the other men did as Dirk instructed.

Dirk took Blaze’s reins and led him into a stall. “I’ll be down in a minute.” Then, he

ran out and quickly untied another horse.

“Dirk, I can’t ask you to do that. You have a baby on the way—”

“Nonsense! I’m sure you would do the same for me if it were Gabby.”

Dallas nodded, knowing he would. “Thanks, Dirk.”

He nodded toward the hotel. “You go do what you have to, and I’ll be right behind you as soon as I take care of the horses.”

“Thanks, Dirk. I appreciate that.” Dallas ran into town and flung open the door to the sheriff’s office, knowing someone was there... even though it was Sunday.

Colton jumped up and drew his gun quicker than Dallas would have thought possible and pointed it at him but held it up when he saw who it was, his long hair falling over his shoulder. “That’s a good way to get yourself shot.”

Sheriff Clark was on his feet behind his desk. “What happened?”

“Megan is missing.”

“Hey, banker! I saw you go in there!” Frank yelled from outside in the snow-covered street. “I have your woman and I’m coming for you next!”

Dallas crossed the room in two strides and threw open the door with Daxton and Colton hot on his heels. “If anything happens to her, I’ll hunt you down.” Dallas gritted his teeth, moving his coat to the side, revealing his six-gun revolvers strapped to his sides. “There will be nowhere you can hide because I’ll hunt you down...” Dallas stepped forward and stopped at the edge of the wooden walkway. “... and I’ll kill you.” Dallas planted his feet firmly on the porch. “Let her go and we can settle

this like men.”

Then a man wearing a black cowboy hat walked out of the hotel, the same one who had robbed the bank and got away. One corner of his lips curled into a menacing smile as he strode over to Frank, who was holding Megan, pushing his gun to her head. Three other men that Dallas recognized from outside the hotel flanked them.

“Dallas, I’m so sorry!” Megan yelled in her thick Irish brogue. “Don’t get hurt because of me!”

“Ever since our last meeting....” The man wearing the black cowboy hat laughed at his own joke. Dallas knew that their last meeting was when he had robbed his bank. “I’ve been looking for a way to get even with you. Fancy my surprise when my brothers saw her yesterday... your wife.” He smelled her hair, taunting Dallas, never taking his eyes from him.

Megan struggled in his grasp. “Let me go, or I’ll kill ye myself!”

He laughed. “Now, that I would like to see.”

“Let her go!” Sheriff Clark yelled from behind them. “You’re under arrest for the robbery of the Whiskey River Bank, for the murder of Virgil Williams, and now for kidnapping! Let her go! You don’t want to add anything more to the charges!”

“Oh, but I do... and I will.” Frank walked up beside the man wearing the black cowboy hat. “Give me the man who killed my brothers, and we’ll let her go.”

Dallas heard Colton’s spurs ring out behind him and stepped up beside him. “I killed one of them while we were chasing them down after robbing his bank.”

“Well, then I’ll get you, too.”

Colton straightened, perfectly calm. "I'm right here."

Sheriff Clark walked up on the other side of Dallas. "As sheriff of this town, I'm telling you to let her go! This is the last time I'll say it."

"They killed my brothers!" Frank yelled, pointing to Dallas. "Are you going to let them get away with that?"

"Your 'brothers' robbed his bank, and they were armed. They killed one of the bank guards, too." Sheriff Clark stepped forward. "Sorry to say this, but your brothers got what they deserved. Let her go and I won't kill you. Again, drop your weapons! You're all under arrest!"

Frank shook his head. "Not until I kill the men who killed my brothers."

"Then let me save you gents a lot of trouble," the man in the black cowboy hat interrupted. "Why don't we settle this like men, like the banker said? Let this gentleman here...." He nodded toward Dallas. "...face off with me in a true western gunfight. If he wins...." He shrugged. "Then my family here will leave peacefully."

"Morgan, I've got this," Frank yelled.

Morgan rolled his eyes.

"Whatever you want. Just let her go!" Dallas started to step down off the wooden porch, but the sheriff put his hand out, stopping him.

"Morgan Yates," Sheriff Clark shouted, taking a step forward. "You're under arrest for robbery and for the murder of Virgil Williams, the bank guard you killed, and for kidnapping. In fact, you're all under arrest! Drop your weapons now and let her go! This is your last chance to surrender!"

Frank cocked his gun, pressed to Megan's head. "Hold it right there, mister, or she's dead."

"Stop!" Dallas yelled, stepping between them. "Let her go and I'll fight you. Just you and me, Morgan. Or I can fight you, Frank. Whom I kill makes no difference to me." He took a step forward. "One man can die just like another."

Morgan pushed Megan to the ground. "Why, you—" She rose to her feet and started toward him with her fists doubled but, to Dallas's relief, Mr. Carson pulled her back, holding a finger to his lips.

Morgan laughed. "You have yourself a real hellcat there, mister." He looked in Megan's direction and licked his lips. "I was really looking forward to having fun with her until you showed up." He shrugged. "But I'll have my way with her later... after I kill you."

"I'll face off with you!" Dallas yelled. "Just leave her out of this!" There was no way that he was going to leave Megan to the fate of these men. He vowed to do anything to save her... including giving his own life. His life meant nothing without her.

Sheriff Clark looked over at Dallas. "Is this what you want?"

Dallas nodded once. "Protect her if anything happens to me."

Sheriff Clark nodded and yelled, "No one interferes... unless you want to die!"

Frank glanced over at Morgan for his approval. Morgan nodded, and then they all stepped back, out of the way.

A sinister laugh exploded from Morgan as he backed down the street, putting some distance between them. "I've always wanted to have a good ol' western gunfight!

Legalized murder, right?"

"Not quite, but I'll take my chances," Dallas replied as he stepped back, unsnapping the leather straps across his guns, preparing to fight.

"Dallas, don't do it!" Megan yelled as Mr. Carson held her back.

Rage filled Dallas as he looked down the street toward Morgan.

"Everyone, clear the street, and you men stay out of it!" Sheriff Clark pointed to the rest of the Yates Gang. "There's no reason for all of you to have to die."

Many onlookers ran inside, taking cover.

Dallas stood with his hands over his guns, ready.

"Draw!" Morgan yelled, his hand twitching over the guns strapped to his sides.

Excitement and rage filled Dallas as he pulled his guns and fired, unloading several bullets into Morgan. Morgan pulled his weapon and fired, too, but wasn't quick enough. Blood poured from his chest and the gun dropped from his hand as his lifeless body fell onto the street.

"You just killed my cousin!" Frank yelled, and opened fire, along with the rest of the Yates Gang.

Then, everything happened at once. Dallas jumped behind the watering trough and opened fire, taking down Frank. Quicker than Dallas would have thought possible, Sheriff Clark and Colton opened fire, taking down more. Dirk ran up and killed two as he dove behind a wooden barrel. Then Charles rode up, jumped from his horse, and fired, standing in full view. Milo, Bill, and Butch shot down more.

Then Harrison came out of the hotel with a rifle and shot down another. “And that’s for scaring my customers away!”

One of the Yates men fired at Mr. Carson and shot him in the leg. His wife helped him out of the street and into the General Store, along with Megan. Colton dove for the ground, firing repeatedly, and took down several more.

To Dallas’s horror, Megan came out of the General Store with a rifle, shooting wildly, but managed to take down two men. Where she got the rifle from, Dallas had no idea. “How dare ye kidnap me! Ye leave me husband alone!”

Knowing he had to end this quickly, Dallas came out from behind the watering trough and took down the rest, with the help of the sheriff, Colton, Charles, Harrison, Milo, Butch, Bill... and Megan.

When the smoke cleared, the Yates Gang was lying dead in the street.

The sheriff turned to a young man standing nearby. “Kyle, ride to Laramie and tell the U.S. Marshall what happened.”

“Here,” Charles said, handing him the reins of the horse he rode in on. “Take this one. It’s fast.”

“Yes, sir!” Kyle quickly swung up into the saddle and headed out of town at full speed.

Dallas searched the smoke, and his breath caught... when his gaze fell on Megan.



Megan

Megan looked through the gun smoke and found Dallas. And she was never so happy to see someone in her life.

She and Dallas ran through the gathering crowd and into each other's arms. Then his lips crushed down onto hers as he placed his hand on the back of her head. She wrapped her arms around him, engulfed in the safety of his arms.

"I'm so sorry," he breathed, kissing her face over and over again, virtually anywhere his lips could reach.

"I'm sorry, too," she replied, feeling him all around her.

"I thought I'd lost you." He kissed down her neck.

"Never." She pressed against him, surrendering her heart to him.

Finally, he pulled back and gave her one last sweet kiss. "I love you, Megan, and I always will."

"I love ye, too, Dallas. Forever."

Then he swept her off her feet and twirled her around, hugging her tightly.

When he set her down, a pained look filled his eyes. "Take care of yourself, and I'll come for you when I get out."

Megan's heart sank. "What are ye talking about? Those men kidnapped me... they came after ye—"

"Shh." He stroked her hair away from her face as he pulled her against his chest. "Don't worry. I'll be out soon."

"No," Megan sobbed against his chest. "If they take ye, then they'll have to take me, too."

"No. They came after me and I took care of it. You're not to blame for this." He held her for what seemed like an eternity, and then pulled back and gently kissed her lips. "Knowing that I have your love and that you'll be waiting for me is enough."

She nodded, forcing a smile. "Ye'll always have it."

Then he turned around and held his arms out to the sheriff, holding his wrists together.

"What?" Sheriff Clark asked, feigning confusion.

Colton bit his upper lip to keep from smiling.

"You're going to arrest me, aren't you?" Dallas asked, confused.

Sheriff Clark shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about. If I arrested you, I'd have to arrest Dirk, Harrison, and Charles, too. As far as I could tell, it was self-defense." Then he turned to Charles. "Don't you think so?"

One corner of Charles's lips curled into a smile. "Looked like self-defense to me."

Dirk shrugged. "To me, too."

Harrison held up his hands, smirking. “Hey, I was just defending my property.”

They all looked over at Colton, who held up his hands. “Don’t look at me! Those men attacked first! In my book, we had every right to defend ourselves.”

They all laughed.

Sheriff Clark shrugged again. “That will be our testimony when the U.S. Marshal gets here.”

Dallas shook his hand, a smile lighting his lips. “Thanks, sheriff. I’ll never forget this.”

The sheriff clasped his shoulder. “Think nothing of it. I’m just sorry it came down to this.” Dallas started to turn away, but the sheriff stopped him. “I got a wire earlier that the Yates Gang had a pretty hefty price over their heads, dead or alive. I was going to arrest them and then this happened.” A crease formed between his eyes. “It’s yours.”

Dallas looked over at Megan, and she nodded. Then he turned back to the sheriff. “Donate it to the school and the church. Maybe buy some new books for the children. Giving the students a good education is important.” Then, Dallas thought of something else. “And buy food for anyone in the town who needs it. No one should go hungry... ever.”

“I will.” The sheriff shook his hand. “You’re a good man, Dallas.”

He nodded. “Thank you, but I intend to be better.”

Sheriff Clark grinned. “Well, I’m going to check on Mr. Carson to make sure he’s all right.”

“I’ll send for Doc Morgan.” Dallas glanced over at Butch, and he nodded, then headed toward the doctor’s office. Dallas looked down at Megan and smiled, still speaking to the sheriff. “I’ll go check on him later. Please thank him for me.”

The sheriff nodded and then walked away.

Megan looked up at Dallas and a thought occurred to her. “There’s just one more thing: I want to be treated as an equal.”

Dallas chuckled, nodding his head. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“And another thing....”

Dallas waited, one corner of his lips curling into a smile.

“I’m sorry I went out this morning, unattended.”

Dallas’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “They didn’t hurt you, did they?”

She shook her head. “No, they didn’t.” She didn’t tell him that she’d probably have bruises all over her body from the struggle, though. But a thrill ran through her body when she touched her lips to his, for she knew that their life together had truly just begun.

Megan

Later that day, Kyle came back with the U.S. Marshall. When he saw the carnage and heard the stories of what had happened, he ruled that the gang was responsible for wreaking havoc on the town. Then he went back to Laramie without incident, taking the bodies with him.

Mr. Carson was going to be all right. He would be off his feet for a while and needed to rest but was no worse for wear. Dallas sent Milo and Butch over to the General Store to help out until Mr. Carson was on his feet, and Mrs. Carson enjoyed ordering them around a bit too much. Milo and Butch couldn't wait until Mr. Carson came back to work.

Jake was back at the ranch and no worse for wear. True to his word, Dallas had brought him into the main house so Jake could be better cared for. But soon, Jake had enough of the special attention and wanted to go back to the bunkhouse. Megan suspected that he was ready for his life to get back to normal, too.

True to his word, Dallas donated the reward money to the school. New books and slates were purchased, along with a new blackboard, and there was even enough money to purchase a curtain to cover it when church services were held.

Dallas also bought food for those who needed it and he and Megan enjoyed delivering it discreetly. They also vowed to start a food pantry for anyone who needed it. Megan was glad that no one else in Whiskey River would go hungry again... not if they could help it.

Over the next two weeks, Dallas had treated Megan as an equal, turning them into the best weeks of her life. She and Dallas spent every waking moment together. He was courteous and slow to anger, as if something inside of him had changed.

And Megan knew that she had changed, too. After she had surrendered her heart to Dallas, it was as if a weight had been lifted from her. She was no longer afraid of losing those she loved... and she was no longer afraid to love.

In celebration, Dallas and Megan decided to have a Christmas party on Christmas Eve. He had stepped back and let Megan plan the party just as she wanted it. Dallas had insisted on her buying another dress, but she wouldn't hear of it. She had plenty. This time, Dallas didn't argue with her. She wore a burgundy dress with black shoes, perfect for the holidays. Then she swept the sides of her wavy auburn hair up away from her face, letting the back fall into loose waves. Dallas had dressed in his best black suit, combed his hair into place, and was as dashing as ever.

After the incident with the Yates Gang was over and things settled down, Charles had decided to stay through Christmas, much to Dallas's and Megan's delight. His father wasn't happy about it, having sent a wire, but Charles was his own man and had decided that it was time he took control of his own life.

Everyone in the town had been invited to the party, and they all came. Charles, Dirk, and Gabriella, Wyatt and Madison, Colton and Ella... and even Mrs. Jenkins had come. Gabriella and Dirk came by in their sleigh, dressed as Mr. and Mrs. Claus for the children. Gabriella looked cute with her full, round belly ready to deliver at any time.

"It looks like your party is a success," Dallas approved as he whirled Megan around the dance floor, more relaxed than she had ever seen him.

Megan smiled. "Ye mean our party."

Dallas bowed when the song came to an end. Megan was ready for another dance, but Dallas led her from the dance floor to a secluded alcove, away from the crowd.

Megan's eyebrows pulled together in concern. "Is something wrong?"

He nodded, his face suddenly serious. "Yes, there is."

Megan's heart sank. "What is it?"

Dallas pulled a small box from inside his suit coat.

"Oh, Dallas!" Megan's breath caught, lifting her hand to her chest.

He held up his hand. "It's not what you think. I mean, it's not new." Dallas opened the box, and inside was a lovely silver heart, strung on a wide blue ribbon. "This belonged to my mother."

Tears came to her eyes as she looked down at the necklace. It was unadorned but was the best gift he could have ever given her.

The smile on Dallas's face faded as he took in her expression. "Okay. I understand. You don't have to take it—"

"No, it's beautiful... it's the best gift I've ever received in my life." Megan gazed into his eyes, smiling through her tears. She took the necklace carefully out of the box and held it up to him. "Will you help me put it on?"

Dallas smiled and nodded. "Yes, of course." He carefully took the necklace and tied it off at the back of her neck.

"Dallas...." A crease formed between Megan's eyes. "Promise me you won't be mad, but I have something to tell you."

“What’s that?” Dallas’s eyebrows rose almost into his hairline. “Are you okay?” She had gone to see Doc Morgan earlier in the week because of her fatigue and nausea had started, too.

Megan nodded. “Yes, of course.” She bit her lower lip, summoning her courage. “It’s just that I’m going to have a baby.”

Every emotion suddenly flitted across his face. Then, he picked her up, swung her around once, and set her on her feet, but still held her hands. “I’m going to be a father?” She nodded and he turned to everyone in the room. “Everyone! I’m going to be a father!”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. “Thank you, Dallas.”

Dallas wrapped his arms around her, but leaned back, his eyes wide. “For what?”

Megan smiled, not a bit ashamed of her tears. “For everything. You’ve given me more than I could ever hope for.”

A crease formed between his eyes. “Do you need anything else? I can—”

Megan placed her finger to his lips. “I have everything I want”—she patted his chest—“right here.” And Megan knew it was true. “The only thing I want is you.”

As she stood in Dallas’s arms, she knew her life had come full circle. She had finally found love and was no longer afraid to love. And she knew in her heart that her brother, her parents, and everyone she had ever loved, along with Dallas, would remain with her in her heart... forever.