







# The Preacher's Bride

## (Whiskey River Brides #4)

**Author:** *Theresa Oliver*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** She's afraid to give her heart. He's locked his heart away. In a marriage of convenience, will two hearts let go and let love in?

After Mia Flynn's roommate, Ella, moves to Whiskey River, Wyoming, she is left high and dry. In financial trouble and alone, Mia remembers that Ella had been a mail-order bride when she moved away. Knowing she has connections, Mia writes to her, asking her to find her a suitable husband.

Haunted by the ghosts of his past, Caleb Henley is also in trouble. As the preacher of Whiskey River, he finds himself with two small children alone, caring for his farm, and attending to the needs of his congregation a near impossibility. With no other options in sight, he decides to take a wife.

Mia soon discovers that what Caleb really wants is a housekeeper and a babysitter for his children, but not a wife.

Caleb is determined not to let his new wife into his heart. Or can he?

Mia and Caleb discover that there are many types of love, but will they find it in each other or lose it forever? Join Mia, Caleb, and all your favorite citizens of Whiskey River as love takes the reins in *The Preacher's Bride*!

Each book in the Whiskey River Brides Series is a stand-alone and features a different couple: a dancehall girl and a gunslinger, a sheriff and an outlaw, a dress designer and a lawyer, and more. All books are Sweet Historical Western Romance.

**\*Note:** This is the second publication of this book. It was previously published as *The Preachers Bride* (Whiskey River Brides, #4) by Theresa Oliver with another publisher.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Mia

February 1871

New York, New York

“Hey, Mia!” Trent Jericho yelled as he walked into the Breckenridge Saloon in New York, New York. “Wanna dance?”

He took off his hat as he approached, his presence filling the sparkly filled room. Trent had been a regular for a while and was harmless. He was a local lawyer, dressed in a business suit, but he always wore a cowboy hat... no matter how out of fashion it was in New York. Trent was a misplaced cowboy, Mia reasoned.

“Trent...” Mia Flynn placed her hands on her hips. “You really should get a wife, you know. With as much money as you spend in here—”

“Why? You offering?” he cut her off, arching an eyebrow.

Mia couldn’t help but laugh. “Yeah, like I’d marry the likes of you.”

Trent scoffed, making a big show of placing his hat over his heart. “Miss Flynn, you have mortally wounded me.” When she laughed, he added, “Would you do me the honor of a dance?”

Mia laughed, shaking her head. She could never stay mad at Trent, even if she was only pretending. “That’s what I thought. One of these days, a woman’s going to catch

your eye—”

“And I’ll run like hell.” Trent took a step closer. “Just one dance? Please?”

She pretended to deliberate as the feather in her blonde, wavy hair bobbed. She had been a dancehall girl since she moved here three years before, after her parents died of influenza in Connecticut. She let out a deep breath. “Sure.”

Mia was getting tired of making a living with men paying her to dance. One day, she wanted to have a family of her own and children, but that wasn’t going to happen here.

Trent crossed the saloon. “Thanks, Mia. I’ve had a hard day at the courthouse and a dance will cheer me up.”

Mia looked at him sharply. “A big trial, huh?”

Trent nodded. “Yeah, but I can’t talk about it. While the trial’s on, I’m sworn to secrecy.” He towered over her as he twirled her expertly around the dance floor. “Say, have you heard from Wyatt Nash lately?”

Mia scoffed. “Now, why would I ever hear from him? After the last mess he made in here, he can just stay where he is.”

A man had called him a cheat and drew a knife. One thing led to another, and they tore up the bar. They paid for the damages, but Mia and the other girls were left to clean up the mess.

“Hey, that wasn’t Wyatt’s fault.” Trent arched an eyebrow, thinking. “Didn’t he move to Wyoming like Ella?”

She nodded. “Yes. A little town called Whiskey River.” A twinge of guilt tugged at her. In the last letter she had received, Ella was pregnant and would have the baby soon. She and Ella had been roommates. They had been close—like sisters. Mia sighed, wishing she could be there for her friend in her time of need now.

“What’s wrong?” Trent asked, truly concerned. Over the past few years, he’d been nice enough. Always a gentleman. In fact, he’d been somewhat of a big brother figure to her since she’d known him.

“I just wish I could be there with Ella.” Mia looked up into his eyes. “She’s going to have a baby soon and, from what I gather, the pregnancy’s been rough.”

Trent shook his head. “That’s too bad. I always liked Ella. Well, I’m sure everything will work out all right.” The dance came to an end. “Dance another?”

Mia scoffed. “You haven’t paid me for the first one yet.”

Trent laughed as he pulled out two dollars and handed them to her. “Here’s for this one and the next one, too.”

She took the money and slipped it into the front of her dress. There had to be a better way to make a living. Being a dancehall girl was good money, but just not enough. Since Ella left, she had to shoulder all the financial responsibilities herself. While they were roommates, they rented a two-bedroom tenement and split all the bills. Now, there just never seemed to be enough to cover everything.

“What’s wrong?” Trent asked, breaking her reverie. Out of all the men who frequented the saloon, he was the best dancer. Despite their bantering, Mia never minded dancing with him.

She shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

Trent raised an eyebrow. “Come on. It’s not ‘nothing’. Talk to me.”

Mia let out a deep breath and gave him a small smile. “It’s nothing I can’t handle. Times are just a little tough, is all.”

A crease formed between his eyes. “Need some money?”

Trent had always been very direct. That was one of the things she liked about him.

“No, I’ll be fine,” she said, looking around the nearly empty saloon. It was dead tonight. “I’ve been taking in some sewing lately for extra money.”

Trent stopped dancing immediately and took out his wallet. “How much do you need?”

“Put that away in here.” Mia gently pushed his hand down, looking around the room. Luckily, no one was watching. “I appreciate the gesture, but I’ll be all right.” She shrugged. “I just need some time to figure things out.” The only problem was that she had taken in all the sewing she could handle, working into the wee hours of the morning... and it still wasn’t enough.

“Here. Take it.” Trent opened his wallet and shoved a twenty-dollar bill into her hand.

Her eyes flew open wide as she looked at the money, and then up to his eyes. “Trent, this is too much! I can’t take this!”

Trent closed his hand around hers, the money crumpling. “You can and you will.” He shrugged. “Not to brag, but I make good money and I don’t have a family, so what else am I going to spend it on? I already have more than I know what to do with in the bank.” His shoulders lifted. “Besides, it’s only money.”

“Trent, I don’t know what to say....” Tears sprang to her eyes. Twenty dollars would be enough to not only pay the rent, but to buy groceries, too. “I’ll pay you back.”

“Oh, no you won’t!” He looked around and then lowered his voice. “Mia, this is for you. Don’t give the house a cut of it.”

She nodded, a small smile lighting her lips. “Thank you,” she said, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Hey... let’s have none of that.” Trent wiped a tear away from under her eye with the pad of his thumb.

“Thank you.” Mia looked up at him with doe eyes. “Want another dance?”

Trent chuckled. “Well, since I just lost that one, sure. But I’m going home after that.” Trent thought for a moment, and then added, “Mia, what I gave you... it’s not for dances. It’s for you.”

She nodded, smiling. “I know.”

Then a broad smile spread across his face. “Now, how about that dance?”

Mia laughed as she held her arms out to him willingly. Even though she knew she wasn’t obligated, she gave him another dance on the house, grateful for his help. With that kind of money, she would have plenty left over for a while until she could decide what she wanted to do.

As Mia walked up the stairs to her tenement later that night, Mrs. O’Riley came out of her apartment from across the hall, scowling as she placed her hands on her hips. The woman’s red hair was a testament to her Irish temper. “And when do ye plan on paying the rent, my dear? I have bills to pay, too, ye know.”

A broad smile spread across Mia's face. "As a matter of fact, I have the money right here." She took a step closer but didn't dare take out the money. Knowing Mrs. O'Riley, she would take the whole twenty for rent, but Mia had other plans for it.

Mrs. O'Riley's eyebrows raised nearly into her hairline.

"Do you have change for a twenty?" Mia asked nonchalantly.

The middle-aged woman gasped. "And where did ye git that kind of money, lass?"

"Never you mind that," Mia replied, her hands on her hips. "Do you have change?"

Mrs. O'Riley just shook her head. "No, but I can apply it to your next month's rent."

Mia shook her head as she pushed past her. "That's what I thought. I'm going out to get some things, and I'll be over later with the rent."

Mrs. O'Riley narrowed her eyes, and then gave her one swift nod. "By the way, somethin' came for ye today."

Mia's eyes brightened. "What is it?"

The Irish woman shrugged. "A letter from Ella." She pulled out a crisp white envelope from a pocket in the side of her skirt and handed it to her, changing her attitude. "So, how is she?"

Mia shrugged as she ran her fingers over the beautiful scroll that was distinctly Ella's. "I don't know. I haven't read it yet."

"Hmph!" Mrs. O'Riley huffed as she marched back into her apartment. "And don't ye forget to come by later with the rent!" She slammed the door shut, punctuating her

words.

Mia hurried inside and quickly locked the door behind her. A woman living alone in New York City wasn't ideal, but it was the best she could do at the moment. She slung her reticule haphazardly onto a nearby table and then looked down at the letter in her hands.

January in New York was cold. There was no other way to say it. Mia wanted nothing more than to curl up in her rocking chair, tear open the envelope, and devour every word from her friend. But she would probably freeze to death before she could finish the letter. So, she hurried to build a fire in the fireplace with what was left of the twigs in the wood box. She made a mental note to have some wood delivered.

Soon, the small fire lapped eagerly at the twigs, burning a bright red, orange, and yellow as warmth filled the tenement. Then she settled herself in for a nice read. She picked up the envelope and looked at the return address one more time, savoring the moment.

"Whiskey River," Mia mumbled, running her fingers over the paper. What an odd name for a town, but from what Ella had told her of the friendly people there, it seemed to suit the town well.

Unable to wait any longer, she daintily tore open one end of the envelope, revealing the contents inside.

My Dearest Mia:

It seems as if it's been longer than it has since I've seen your lovely, smiling face. This pregnancy is making me nostalgic, perhaps. Lately, I've been reminiscing about the tenement we shared, which seems like a lifetime ago. But I have no regrets.

Colton is the light of my life. I have so many blessings in my life, so much to be thankful for. A loving husband to care for me and a new little one on the way. What more could I ask of life? I feel lucky for all that the Good Lord has chosen to bestow upon me.

Now, for the town. Wyatt and Madison have settled in nicely. Of course, you know that she's the new school teacher and Wyatt now owns the saloon. Madison wasn't too keen on the idea at first, but they have since settled in and are happy in their new life together. Wyatt cleaned up the Whiskey River Saloon since the likes of Pete McGregor. Truth be told, it's probably the cleanest saloon in the county now.

It's strange that no one has heard from Pete McGregor since his departure. If not anything else, I hope he learned something from the experience.

We also have a real, honest-to-goodness princess living in Whiskey River! Dirk Price married a princess right after Christmas. I'm not sure how they met or the particulars, but they seem to be very happy together. She left her title behind and has settled into Whiskey River as Mrs. Gabriella Price. It has a ring to it. Don't you think? Anyway, I wish them all the happiness in the world.

Preacher Caleb Henley is struggling. The townsfolk are worried about him and try to help him out as much as they can, but he's just not the same since he lost his wife. He hasn't smiled much lately. Not that I have seen, anyway. I suppose that between caring for his two small children, the congregation, and the farm, it has taken a toll on him. Colton and I continue to keep him in our prayers. I ask that you do the same. I just wish there were something more that I could do. But I feel comfort in the fact that dear Mrs. Jenkins and the other ladies of the church congregation have been trying to help out with the children. But it's of little consequence to lift his spirits. The loss of his adoring wife, Jessica, has been a loss for us all indeed.

I don't want you to worry, but Doc Morgan has me on complete bedrest now. Colton

tells me that it's not only for my good, but for the good of the baby. Although he says nothing about it, I know he worries. I try not to complain, so as not to give him fuel for his worry.

But you, my dear friend, I can confide in. Lately, I've been feeling helpless. Colton waits on me hand and foot, and never complains. Although he has never given me cause to feel this way, I feel guilty for Colton having to shoulder the burden of the ranch and the house alone. He hired a few ranch hands, and they have been working out, which is a comfort. I just hope they continue to be of service to Colton and lessen his burden.

So, how are you, dear friend? I miss you so, and wish you would consider moving to Whiskey River. The town is much, much smaller than you're used to in comparison to New York, but the picturesque landscape of the rolling mountains and the friendly, communal nature of the people make it home.

If you do decide to move here, I would expect you to stay with us, of course, until after the baby is born, or for as long as you like. But if the cries of the baby in the middle of the night become too much for you, Mrs. Jenkins always has room at the boardinghouse.

Alas, I know this is but a dream.

Take care, my friend. I hope this letter finds you well, and I count the days until I can see you again.

Your Loving Friend Forever,

Ella

Mia clutched the letter to her chest as she rocked back and forth, watching the glow

of the fire, the only light in the room. Although it hadn't been that long since she had seen her best friend, it seemed like it had been a lifetime.

Could she ever think of moving to Whiskey River? After all, there was nothing left for her here. Ella would let her live with them for as long as she wanted, but she didn't want to intrude upon their hospitality indefinitely.

Mia let out a deep breath. Even if she wanted to, she didn't have the money for train fare, and purchasing a horse and a rig would be even more expensive. Also, the journey would take weeks in what was sure to be snow. No, that would be out of the question.

She couldn't go, but she couldn't stay, either. The money that Trent gave her would soon deplete, leaving her with nothing. She could continue to take in more sewing and work at the saloon, but what kind of life would that be? Eventually, she wanted to have a family of her own. Something she hadn't had in a very long time.

Mia rocked back and forth into the wee hours of the night, considering her options, which were slim at best, when it finally hit her. Ella had been a mail-order bride. And although she didn't end up marrying the man that she had intended to, everything had worked out. Perhaps God did have a plan for Ella that was bigger than she herself could see.

What if she became a mail-order bride, too? After all, Ella would pick out a suitable man for her. Also, Ella had connections with a matchmaker, who had the resources to set everything up.

Mia jumped from the rocking chair and dashed over to her desk, picked up a quill, and began penning a letter, asking Ella if she could pick out a suitable husband for her.

Mia just hoped she was making the right decision.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Caleb

Whiskey River, Wyoming

“Would you like me to come over tomorrow, too?” Mrs. Jenkins asked when Caleb Henley walked into his house. He hung his cowboy hat on a peg by the door but left on his heavy coat.

“If you don’t mind,” Caleb replied, his mind a million miles away.

Since he had lost his Jessica, nothing seemed real anymore. Nothing seemed quite right. No matter how much he tried, something was missing from his life. And he knew what it was... her. It had only been a few months since she had passed away from influenza, leaving him alone with two small children—Hailey, age two; and Shane, age four.

Most days, Caleb tried to suppress his anger, and guilt. Why hadn’t he taken better care of his wife? He had left her to care for the children and the house, knowing she was ill, while he tended to the congregation and their farm. And she was also the town schoolteacher. But she had insisted that she was fine. Why hadn’t he taken better care of her? Why hadn’t she taken better care of herself? Then, he felt guilty again for being angry with her.

As the town preacher, he was supposed to be strong for his congregation, to comfort them in their time of need, assure them that God was with them. But where was God now? Why had he taken his Jessica away from him so prematurely?

In his heart, he knew that God wasn't the one who took her away. Things happen. He knew that God never turned away from his people, but why had he allowed that to happen to his Jessica?

He had been going on for months like this, but it was time to take matters in his own hands. If something didn't change soon, he stood to lose more than his congregation. Although he truly appreciated the help, he felt like he was losing his family with so many people coming and going in his house. Caleb was used to him and Jessica raising their family themselves, not having so many differing opinions. As they say, too many hands in the pot spoils the brew.

But on the other hand, he didn't know where he would be now if it weren't for the help of the community.

A crease formed between Caleb's eyes. "Are you in a hurry to go home?"

Mrs. Jenkins cocked her head to the side, her curly, silver hair causing her to look like a kind grandmother, rather than the widow that she was. "No, what do you need, Caleb?"

He let out a deep breath, guilt stabbing his chest. "I hate to ask. You've already done so much, but could you watch the children for me for about forty-five more minutes, or so? I have some business to take care of, and I won't be long."

Her eyebrows rose, a smile lighting her lips. "Oh! I wouldn't mind it at all! Go do what you have to do. I'll stay here with the children." She nodded to them playing quietly on the big oval rug in the center of the living room in front of the fireplace. "Take your time." She gave his arm a motherly pat.

She reminded him so much of his mother that it was uncanny. Actually, his mother was even kinder than Mrs. Jenkins, if that was even possible. But God had taken her

when he was little, leaving him alone with his father, who was a preacher, too.

It seemed that history had repeated itself.

“Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins.”

Caleb ran his fingers through his dark brown hair, slid on this cowboy hat, and walked out the door. A cold wind rushed through him, causing him to shiver. He pulled his collar up on his coat, deflecting the cold. Snow adorned the ground, creating a thick, sparkling blanket across the land that reached all the way to the base of the mountains.

At least the blizzard had stopped. It had snowed nearly nonstop the whole month of December. He had been afraid that he would have to cancel the annual Christmas Eve Candlelight Service, but the Good Lord had seen fit to give them a reprieve.

Earlier, Caleb had left his buckboard out front with the team still attached, knowing the errand he wanted to run. He didn't have much time, so he jumped in and grabbed the reins. “Yah!” he yelled, urging the horses into a gallop.

There was only one person on the planet who could help him.

Guilt filled his chest from even contemplating the idea. But he had been thinking about it and it seemed the most logical solution. It was either this or lose control of everything, including his family, which was something he would never allow.

He let out a deep breath, and it turned to steam immediately in the cold Wyoming winter air. Guilt filled his chest again. Wasn't he supposed to put God first before everything, including his family? And the people in his congregation and in Whiskey River had been so kind to him. But he had to do something.

He was tired. Caleb often found himself running ragged just to try and keep up. It would be more than enough for any man to handle. If something didn't give, he was thinking of stepping down from being the preacher here in Whiskey River.

It seemed that he felt guilty over everything lately. Guilt and anger was his prominent emotions.

Within minutes, he pulled down the long driveway leading to Colton and Ella Hill's ranch.

Colton headed toward the house from the barn but stopped short when he saw Caleb pull up in the driveway.

Just seeing Colton's warm smile made Caleb feel better. He just hoped that he was making the right decision for his family... for his children.

"Evening, Preacher." Colton smiled as he extended his hand when Caleb wrapped the reins around the front bar of his buckboard and stepped down. "What brings you out here tonight?"

It was twilight and the sun was just beginning to set, signaling the end of another day. Another day without his Jessica.

"You got a minute to talk?" Caleb asked, shaking his hand.

Colton took off his hat and ran his hand through his long brown hair, pulled it back, and then let it fall down his back. "Sure. Come on in." Colton started walking toward the house, but Caleb stopped him.

"Actually, I'd rather talk out here privately, if you don't mind." Caleb's heart pounded at the thought of what he was about to do, but he had to do something, for

better or for worse.

Colton nodded, his eyebrows pulling together in concern. “Sure. What’s wrong? Something happen with one of the kids?”

Caleb shook his head. “No, nothing like that. The kids are fine.”

Colton waited patiently.

The preacher let out a deep breath. “I don’t know how to begin.”

Colton gave him a knowing smile. “Want to sit on the porch?”

Caleb shook his head.

Colton waited, obviously giving him time. One corner of his lips curled into a mischievous smile as he gave him a manly slap on the back. “Oh, come on, Preacher! It can’t be that bad. Just spit it out.”

Caleb nodded. “Right now, I’m not here as a preacher, but as a man. I need to talk to you about something, but it needs to stay between us for now.”

Colton nodded thoughtfully. “Of course.”

Caleb placed his hands on his hips. letting out a deep breath. “Your wife, Ella, was a mail-order bride, right?”

Colton’s smile faded as he nodded. “Yes, you know she was. But Dallas King was an ass, and she fell in love with me—”

“No, you misunderstood.” Caleb bit his lower lip, summoning his courage. He almost

dropped the whole thing and walked away, but he was desperate. “I need a wife. Someone to care for the kids and the house. Someone I can trust while I’m away. Someone who will become a part of my family and help me hold it together. I can’t keep depending on the ladies of the church anymore.” He let out a deep breath. It felt good to get it off his chest, if nothing else. “I was wondering if Ella might know of... a woman... that I can marry. I know it sounds crazy, but it will be purely platonic. We will have to be married for her to live in the house with me and the kids, though. But I have a spare room and she can have it all to herself.” Caleb walked away to collect his thoughts, and then turned back around. “I just need some help holding my family together. I’ll pay for everything. She can just stay at home with the kids and take care of the house. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Colton nodded as he wiped his hands on a towel, lost in thought. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

Caleb nodded as a lump of guilt formed in his throat.

“Are you ready for this?”

“I have to be.” He held out his arms, letting out a deep breath. “Colton, I know it doesn’t sound rational, but I feel like I’m losing my family, and I can’t do it anymore. Between trying to care for the congregation, my family, and the farm... something’s got to give. I hate to say this, but I have to start putting the needs of my family first.”

Colton nodded thoughtfully. “What do you need me to do?”

Caleb sighed in relief. “You don’t think this is crazy?”

Colton laughed. “Oh, it’s crazy, all right. But no crazier than anything anyone else in this town has done.” Colton placed his hand on Caleb’s shoulder and squeezed. “Caleb, you have to do what you have to do. I don’t see how you’ve done it so far. I

couldn't imagine...."

Colton's voice trailed off, not finishing the sentence. But Caleb knew full well what he was about to say. He couldn't imagine ever losing his wife like that.

Caleb nodded in understanding and smiled. "It's all thanks to the parishioners and the people of Whiskey River. I wouldn't have survived it if it weren't for them. I appreciate everything that everyone has done, but now I have to do what is best for my family."

"Yes, you do." Colton sighed. "If I were in your shoes, I'd do the same thing. For the sake of the children, if not anything else. It's going to be hard for you, though. But if you're sure, we can go in and talk to Ella right now."

"Are you sure it's not an imposition?" Caleb arched an eyebrow.

Colton smiled. "Never. Preacher, you're welcome here anytime."

"Please, call me Caleb." He shoved his hands into his pockets. Caleb had been out making his weekly rounds, seeing to his congregation, even though the barn and the house needed tending to, and he didn't have time to clean up before coming over. There just never seemed to be enough time for anything lately. But he pushed the thought quickly aside.

Colton smiled as he headed up the stairs and held open the door for Caleb. "Ella, honey! We have company!"

"Oh, yes?" Ella's voice rang out throughout the house, coming from the living room. "Who is it?"

Immediately, Caleb's preacher instincts kicked in when he saw Ella lying on the

couch, pale as a sheet as she attempted to sit up. “Please, don’t get up on my account.” A crease formed between Caleb’s eyes as he sat on a chair across from her. “How are you feeling?”

Ella gave him a small smile. “I’m okay, but I feel like an invalid. Doc Morgan wants me to lay down until the baby comes.” With much effort, she sat up and instinctively rubbed her stomach.

“Well, just stay there,” Caleb said, concerned. She had always been so active in the community; it was hard seeing her like this. For a moment, he wondered if something was wrong with her or the baby, but he pushed the thought aside. “I won’t stay long.”

Ella leaned back on the couch. Colton lifted her feet, sat down beside her, and placed them on his lap, the adoration he had for his wife prominent in his eyes. He smoothed the skirt of her dress down and rubbed her leg out of habit.

A crease formed between Ella’s eyes. “What’s wrong, Reverend Henley?”

“Caleb, please,” he corrected, a small smile lighting his lips.

Ella’s eyes flew open as she looked at Colton and then back. “Are you okay?”

Caleb nodded. Here, she was very sick herself, but she was more concerned about his well-being than her own. “Mrs. Hill, I hate to trouble you with this now, but I was wanting to know if I could talk to you about something.”

“Yes, of course,” Ella replied, concern filling her eyes as she listened attentively.

Caleb proceeded to tell her of his plan to send for a mail-order bride to help out around the house and care for his children. “My question to you is this: can you tell me who to contact, or would you help me to set it up?”

Ella laughed, her eyes wide. “You have got to be kidding me!”

Caleb’s mouth flew open in shock as his face fell. Of all the things he had expected her to say, this wasn’t it. “I... I... I’m so sorry I bothered you with this. It was a stupid idea.” He rose to his feet and headed toward the door, his bulging muscles tense under his jacket.

“No! You misunderstood!” Ella said, stopping him. “Please, come back over and sit down. That’s not what I meant.” A broad smile spread across her face. “You talk about the Good Lord working in strange ways!”

Caleb narrowed his eyes, confused. “I’m... not following you,” he said as he sat back down.

Ella’s face beamed brightly, bursting with excitement as she turned to her husband. “Colton, would you be so kind as to bring me the oil painting of Mia?”

Colton suppressed a smile, nodding as he headed into the bedroom.

Caleb wondered what was going on, but Colton was back before he could ask. He handed Ella a small picture frame, and she laid it face down on her lap as she turned back to Caleb. “You aren’t going to believe what I’m about to tell you, Caleb.” She held up a letter. “I just got this letter from my best friend in New York, Mia Flynn. In the letter, she asked me if I could find her a husband. She wants to be a mail-order bride.”

Caleb’s eyes flew open wide, unable to believe what he was hearing. “What? Why?”

Ella shrugged. “You can read the letter yourself, if you like. Essentially, she’s in financial trouble.” She let out a deep breath. “You see, we shared a tenement before I left, and we used to split the rent. It was okay for two people who were both working.

But I'm ashamed to say that I left her high and dry when I came here."

Caleb's heart pounded hard against his ribcage, unable to believe what he was hearing. "Why doesn't she just get another roommate?"

She shrugged, smiling. "No one was me, I guess. You see, we've been best friends for a long time. And if the shoe was on the other foot, I know I couldn't replace her, either."

Caleb nodded in understanding.

"Caleb, before you say anything, there's something you should know first."

He waited, listening intently.

Ella let out a deep breath. "Mia and I worked together. She's a dancehall girl and a seamstress."

Caleb nodded as Ella waited for it to sink in.

"Caleb," she said, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Gentlemen came in and paid to dance with us. Nothing more. It's good money, but she's getting tired of that life, just like I did." Ella bit her lower lip. "My question to you is: will it make a difference? Could you still care for her, knowing that?"

"Of course I could." He shrugged. "We all come from somewhere. Right?" One corner of his lips curled up into a smile. "You said that she sews?"

Ella laughed. "Oh, yes! In fact, she's been sewing for ladies in New York, and she sews all her own clothes. It's just not enough to make ends meet. She said that she would rather be a seamstress for a dress shop... or make clothes for her own family."

Caleb's eyebrows shot up. "She said that?"

Ella giggled. "Yes, she did." She ran her hand over the back of the picture frame. "Would you like to see a picture of her? The oil painting really doesn't do her justice, though."

Caleb's heart pounded as he nodded. Here, he had just made the decision, and now everything was happening so fast.

Ella's lips curled into a mischievous grin as she handed him the picture frame face down.

When he turned it over, he looked into the most beautiful green eyes he had ever seen. She had blonde, wavy hair and a sweet smile. "She's beautiful," he said as a twinge of guilt pulled at his heart. Not long ago, he had thought that Jessica would always be the most beautiful woman in the world to him.

Ella giggled, pleased with his reaction. "She's like my baby sister."

"What's she like?" he asked, unable to take his eyes from the young woman in the painting.

"Well, she's just as nice and kind as she is beautiful." Ella smiled proudly.

"But she can be feisty, too." Colton laughed. "She won't take any guff from anyone. At the saloon—"

"She's one of the kindest people I know," Ella cut him off. Caleb assumed that she must not have been wanting to push the fact that she was a dancehall girl. Ella looked into Caleb's eyes. "Caleb, she's a decent person and has good morals. She only danced with men because it paid well. As you know, there are very few options for

single women to make a living these days.”

“I understand,” he said, looking at the painting.

“Does it bother you?”

He shook his head as a smile lit his lips. “Hey, if she can help me with the children and the house, then she’ll be golden to me.”

Ella laughed. “Well, she’s already golden to me.”

“Just don’t make her mad.” Colton chuckled, shaking his head. “Once, a man gave her a hard time and she stomped on his foot, pushed him away, and marched off the dancefloor. I couldn’t have been more proud.”

“That’s right.” Caleb nodded in realization. “You all knew each other in New York. Didn’t you?”

Ella smiled, absentmindedly rubbing her stomach. “Yes, we did.”

Caleb’s heart twinged. He knew that move well, remembering when Jessica used to rub her stomach while she was pregnant. “I should go and let you rest.”

Ella shook her head. “No, I have a plan.”

“Already?” Colton chuckled as Ella nodded. “Leave it to my wife not to waste time.”

Caleb laughed. “So, what’s the plan?”

“Well....” Ella leaned forward, clearly excited. “Madame Samantha Chase is the matchmaker I went through, and she can set everything up.” She let out a deep breath.

“You’ll have to pay for everything, though—all of her expenses, and Madame Chase’s fee, as well. Mia doesn’t have much money.”

“That’s not a problem at all. Just let me know how much it is and I’ll give it to you.” Caleb thought for a moment, and then asked, “Is she good with kids?”

Ella smiled. “She loves children.”

Caleb nodded. “How soon can she get here?”

A broad grin spread across her lips. “I’m sure she can leave right away.”

Caleb rose to his feet. “Well, I really must go. Mrs. Jenkins has been with the kids all day. But something told me to come over and talk to you both tonight.” He chuckled. “Now I know why.”

Ella caught his hand, stopping him. “Caleb, are you sure this is what you want?”

He thought for a moment, and then nodded. “I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.”

“Okay, then. I’ll get in touch with Madame Chase and Mia right away.” She laughed. “With as many men needing wives here in Whiskey River, I think I might go into business with Madame Chase!”

Caleb and Colton laughed.

Caleb gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Thank you, Ella. And if you need anything, just let me know. I’m here if you need me.”

She smiled, nodding. “I appreciate that, but you just gave me the best gift of all ...

my best friend. If we act quickly, this means that Mia will be here in time for the baby.”

“I hope so.” Caleb smiled, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “Thank you, Ella, for everything.”

“I’ll walk you out.” Colton rose from the couch, carefully lifting Ella’s feet and laying them gently back down again.

When they walked outside, night had fallen, casting a blue hue over the pristine snow when Caleb turned to Colton. “Is she okay?”

Colton’s smile faded as he shook his head. “I just hope that Doc Morgan is right and that it’s just the pregnancy. I hope it’s nothing more.”

Caleb gave Colton’s shoulder a manly squeeze. “I’m sure she’ll be fine. If you need anything, just let me know.”

Colton laughed. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I think you have your hands full already.”

Caleb smiled as he stepped up onto his buckboard. “Thanks, Colton. And be sure to thank Ella for me, too.”

Colton laughed. “No, I should thank you. You just made her night. Mia and Ella have been as thick as thieves for years.” A mischievous gleam appeared in his eyes. “Which means, you and I are both going to be in big trouble.”

“Actually, that sounds pretty good.” Caleb laughed, and for the first time in a long time, it was genuine.

He gave Colton one last wave as he headed home, feeling better than he had in a very long time. He just hoped that he was making the right decision.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Mia

Mia took the worn letter out of her pocket to read it one last time before the train stopped in Laramie, Wyoming. She had taken it from her pocket, unfolded it, and reread it so many times over the past few days that creases had been etched permanently into the folds of the letter. It appeared to be years older than it was. Everything had happened so fast over the last few days it was hard to believe that it was real.

My Dearest Mia:

I have the most wonderful news! The preacher here in Whiskey River approached me, stating that he'd like a mail order bride... on the same day I received your letter! The Good Lord truly does work in mysterious ways!

He is a good man with two small children. Shane, age four; and Hailey, age two. They are wonderful, well-behaved children who need a mother to love and care for them.

Between us, Reverend Caleb Henley has his hands full. Between dealing with the loss of his wife, raising his two small children alone, and dealing with his congregation and the farm, it's taken its toll on him. Although maybe a bit more serious now, Caleb is still the wonderful, God-fearing, good man that he's always been. With time and your patience, I'm sure he will soon be back to his old self soon. Mia, he's still healing, so be patient with him.

The reason he wants a wife is for the children and insists that your relationship be

purely platonic until the day comes when and if you may choose differently. He assured me that you would be perfectly safe with him.

He has a spare room that will be yours. He and the children will share the master bedroom for a while until you get to know each other.

I also spoke with Madame Samantha Chase, Matchmaker, and she will make the arrangements for your travel. Caleb, Colton, and I will meet you in Laramie when you arrive. You will need to leave as soon as possible, though. I hope it won't be an inconvenience for you.

Let me know if this is agreeable to you.

Also, I don't know how else to say this, but Caleb knows that you were a dancehall girl. He understands. Even though he is a preacher, he is not judgmental.

He was pleased to hear what a wonderful person you are and that you love children. He's looking forward to your meeting.

I cannot wait to see you and will count the days until your arrival. Have safe travels, my friend, and I'll see you soon!

I am Sincerely Yours,

Ella

Mia folded the note one more time and slipped it back into her reticule as she looked out the window of her private car. She let out a deep breath, exhausted from the three-day trip from New York. She mainly kept to herself in her private room, sewing, and only came out for meals. It wasn't that she was trying to be unsociable. She just wanted time to think and to get some last-minute sewing in before she arrived.

On the trip, she had made a new dress, beige with tiny rosebuds, to match a light beige hat she already had. She wanted to look nice when she arrived but didn't have much time to assemble a new wardrobe prior to the trip. After she received Ella's letter, Madame Chase contacted her with the arrangements, and three days later, she was on the train.

Now, as the train prepared for its arrival in Laramie, Mia realized that it hadn't quite been a week since she had received the news that she was going to be a mail-order bride. It seemed that after she had made the decision, everything had fallen into place very quickly.

In her cabin, she slipped into the new dress she had just finished and looked in the mirror. It fit her perfectly with a fitted bodice, low neckline, and a full skirt. She took out a beige modesty scarf that matched her dress, slipped it around her neck, and tucked it in place. She wanted to look good, yet proper when she met her soon-to-be husband and his children.

Children.

Mia was going from being single and lonely to having a ready-made family, all in the course of a week. It would have been overwhelming if she allowed herself to think about it.

Suddenly, there was a loud knocking on the door down the hallway, bringing her from her reverie. "Gather your things!" the steward announced as he knocked on another door. "We'll arrive soon!" He said the same lines over and over again down the hallway, making the same announcement along the way.

"Well, this is it!" Mia checked herself in the mirror one last time. Her green eyes were bright, and she pinched her cheeks, then dabbed a slight bit of rouge onto her lips, giving her a little color. "There." She slipped the rouge back into her reticule.

Satisfied, she glanced around the cabin once more to see if she had missed anything. Then she slipped her reticule over her wrist and headed toward the exit, knowing the steward would get her bag.

The conductor offered her his hand. She took it and stepped gracefully down out of the train.

“There she is!” Ella yelled from the other side of the platform.

Mia’s heart leaped when she saw her friend.

Ella’s stomach was protruding, but in her face, she didn’t look pregnant at all. Mia was surprised at how pale she looked. Obviously, the pregnancy had taken a toll on her.

Colton stood beside his wife, beaming with pride, and on her other side stood a tall, handsome, muscular man with dark brown hair and blue eyes, holding a small, whimpering little girl, while trying to wrangle a fidgeting little boy. They all appeared to be dressed in their Sunday best.

Caleb took her in, and their eyes met and held, and something passed between them that she couldn’t quite put into words.

Ella pulled her in for a hug. “You look wonderful!” she gushed. “I just love your dress! Did you make it?”

Mia nodded, but before she could say anything more, Colton pulled her in for one of his famous bear hugs. “It’s great to see you again, Mia. How was your trip?”

“Good. Ella, thank you so much for arranging everything.” Mia glanced nervously over at Caleb, who took her in with his bright blue eyes, the most beautiful eyes she

had ever seen.

“Mia, this is Reverend Caleb Henley,” she said, and then turned to Caleb. “Caleb, may I present to you... Miss Mia Flynn.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Mia smiled, extending her hand.

“It’s nice to meet you, too.” He touched her hand and electricity shot through her, but Caleb quickly pulled away. “Here.” He shoved the little girl into her arms, who was now crying openly, and then picked up the boy. “We have to meet the preacher here in Laramie in a few minutes.”

Mia’s eyes opened wide. “Preacher?”

Caleb nodded. “He’s going to marry us.”

“Now?”

Caleb let out an exasperated breath. “Yes. You can’t live under my roof unless we’re married. Since I’m the town preacher... and with the children... it just wouldn’t be proper otherwise.”

Mia nodded, thankful that she had chosen to wear the dress she had made, which would become her wedding dress within a matter of minutes. She was about to protest, but then again, that was what she had come there for, wasn’t it? She just hoped that she was making the right decision.

Ella pulled her in for another hug and whispered, “He really is a good man, Mia. I promise.”

Mia nodded. “It’s just that I thought we’d have time to get to know each other first.”

“Time is a luxury I don’t have at present,” Caleb said curtly as he picked up the squirming boy. “Are you ready?”

Mia nodded. “I guess I have to be.”

Caleb froze, staring into her eyes. “Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

It was the oddest marriage proposal she had ever heard, but Mia guessed that it was the only one she was going to get. After all, they had arranged everything ahead of time. In her mind, she had hoped for a little romance, but she guessed that it was all a fantasy. She just hoped that romance would come later... maybe... someday.

“Yes, of course!” Mia turned her attention to the crying little girl in her arms. “And you must be Hailey.”

“Pa!” She reached for her father as huge crocodile tears rolled down her cheeks.

“It’s okay, baby,” he gently cooed. “This is Mia. She’s coming to join our family.”

“I don’t want a new ma!” Shane wailed, stamping his foot.

Caleb scooped him up into his arms. “Now, that’s enough of that.”

“I’m not trying to replace your mother, baby,” Mia reassured.

“Don’t talk about my ma!” the boy yelled. “You didn’t know her!”

Caleb looked at her apologetically. “I’m sorry, but he’s never acted this way before.” Then, he turned to the boy. “Now, I want you to be respectful of Mia. You apologize to her right now.”

“No!” he yelled.

“Do you want a spanking?”

“All right,” Mia intervened, not wanting the boy to get spanked on her account when they first met. “Didn’t you say that the preacher was waiting?”

Caleb let out a deep breath. “Yes. My buckboard is right over here.”

Mia nodded, and then turned to Ella one last time.

“We’ll meet you at the church,” Ella reassured her, and then wrapped her arm around Colton, who looked at his wife with adoring eyes.

Mia just hoped that Caleb would look at her like that one day. But she guessed that he was just as overwhelmed as she was at the moment.

But Mia had made this decision, and she was going to make the best of it. Caleb walked away, traipsing through the snow, expecting her to follow. Soon, they came to a flat, uncovered buckboard with blankets in the back and on the front seat. Mia was glad that she had worn her heavy coat over her dress. She glanced over at the children, and they were wearing heavy coats, as well. Caleb swung the boy up in one arm and extended his other hand to Mia to help her into the front.

“Shh,” Mia cooed softly into Hailey’s dark blonde hair, hugging her to her chest. “It’s okay, baby girl.”

Hailey snuggled against her chest and soon quieted down.

Caleb slid the bright blond boy up into the seat between them.

“Hmph!” he huffed, scrunching up his nose as he folded his arms deliberately across his chest. He snuck a peek at Mia out of the corner of his eye, and then looked straight ahead.

“Straighten up,” Caleb said to him curtly. Then, he looked over at Mia. “I’m so sorry about this. He normally doesn’t act this way.”

Mia gave him a small smile. “I’m sure we’ll be friends in no time.”

“Nope,” Shane said under his breath.

Mia was surprised at how smart he was. Although he was only four years old, he seemed to understand what was happening, and his vocabulary was extraordinary. Mia knew it was probably a credit to his mother, who had obviously educated him at home. Her heart went out to him. Not only had he lost his mother not long ago, now he was going to be forced to accept another woman in her place. At that moment, Mia vowed to try to make it as comfortable for the children as possible.

Hailey wasn’t asleep by the time they reached the church, but she had quieted down and was content in Mia’s arms, laying her head down on her shoulder.

Soon, Caleb pulled the buckboard to a stop in front of the church in Laramie and wrapped the reins around the front bar. “Here we are!” he announced happily, obviously trying to make the best of the situation.

Mia knew that it was probably just as hard on him as it was on her. After all, he had just lost his wife a few months before and was now forced to take another wife. She couldn’t imagine what he must be going through.

She just hoped that they were doing the right thing.

Mia waited in the buckboard as Caleb walked around and took Hailey out of her arms and helped her down. Then, he shoved the little girl back into her arms as Shane hopped down on his own. But Caleb quickly took him by the hand.

Mia's heart fluttered as he wrapped his free arm gently around her waist to guide her into the church. Ella and Colton were already waiting for them in the front of the church when they arrived. Ella nodded at her encouragingly as she and Colton followed them in.

A preacher was waiting with Bible in hand just inside the doors. "Welcome!" the preacher chirped as he shook Caleb's hand. "So, you're getting married today?"

Caleb nodded.

"Yes, please," Mia said aloud, her voice cracking as Hailey took in her surroundings.

The church was big and beautiful, with stained glass windows spaced strategically around.

"Well, then! You've come to the right place," the preacher announced. "Right this way."

They all walked down the aisle together until they came to a stop at the altar.

"Here," Colton said as he reached for Hailey. "I'll take her."

Mia gave him an appreciative smile as she handed her to him. Then, he took Shane by the hand and approached Ella and Colton.

"Would you mind watching the children for a few minutes?" Caleb asked, sounding frazzled.

“Yes, of course,” Colton replied, patting Hailey’s back.

She whimpered a bit but soon settled into his arms.

Mia hurriedly took off her coat and laid it in a nearby pew.

“Don’t worry,” Ella whispered, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “You’re doing the right thing.”

Although she didn’t say it aloud, Mia hoped so. She nodded as she smoothed her hands over her dress, and then took her place by Caleb’s side at the altar. He stood with his hands folded in front of him, not even giving her a sideways glance.

“Today, we are gathered before God to witness the joining of Caleb Henley and....” The preacher leaned in, his eyebrows raised. “What is your name again?”

She sighed. “Mia Flynn.”

“And Mia Flynn,” he continued, “in Holy Matrimony.”

As she listened to his words, she glanced over at Caleb, but he kept his eyes only on the preacher.

“Do you, Reverend Caleb Henley, take Mia Flynn as your lawfully wedded wife? To love, honor, and cherish her, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?”

Caleb nodded, emotionless. “I do.”

Then the preacher turned to Mia. “Do you, Mia Flynn, take Reverend Caleb Henley as your lawfully wedded husband? To love, honor, and cherish him, for richer or for

poorer, in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do," Mia replied, giving Caleb's arm a gentle squeeze. But he did nothing.

A broad smile spread across the preacher's face. "Then, by the power vested in me by God and the state of Wyoming, I now pronounce you husband and wife." Then he turned to Caleb and smiled. "You may now kiss the bride."

For the first time since they entered the church, he looked into her eyes. When he placed his hands on her shoulders, an electrical current ran through her body, and then his lips descended upon hers in a chaste kiss.

The preacher looked around as if it was the happiest day in the world and the most spectacular event he had ever witnessed. "May I present to you for the first time as husband and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Caleb Henley!"

Both Ella and Colton started clapping.

Colton approached, smiling as he shook Caleb's hand. "Congratulations, Caleb!"

Caleb mumbled something back to him, but Mia didn't hear it all.

Ella came up behind her and placed her hand on her back, claiming her attention. Mia almost cried when Ella pulled her in for a hug. "Don't worry," she whispered. "I know you're overwhelmed, and it seems rushed, but trust me. Everything will work out. I know it will."

"I hope so." Mia nodded as she bit her lower lip, fighting back tears. "Thank you."

Ella smiled encouragingly, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

“Well! What do you say we all go to the restaurant to celebrate?” Colton asked, smiling, obviously trying to lighten the mood.

“We would,” Caleb said as he took Hailey from his arms, “but I want to get the children home in case it starts snowing again. After the blizzard a few months ago, I don’t want to take the chance of getting caught out in the weather.”

Colton nodded, and then shook his hand, his expression suddenly serious. “You take care of my girl now.” Colton smiled at her encouragingly as he handed Hailey to her.

Mia was touched that Colton thought enough of her to tell him that. Back in New York, Colton had always been friendly and laid back when he came into the Breckenridge Saloon. Although he rarely ever asked for a dance, he had always treated her and the other ladies with respect.

Caleb gave him a small smile. “I will.” He took Shane by the hand and shook Ella’s hand. “Thanks for everything, Ella. We couldn’t have done this without your help.”

Ella smiled, but it didn’t touch her eyes. Obviously, she wasn’t happy with the way he had treated her, either. “It was my pleasure, but make sure you take care of my best friend. She’s like a sister to me.”

Caleb nodded, understanding. “I will. Will you two be all right driving home?”

“We’ll be fine,” Colton replied as he handed Hailey to Caleb.

“Would you like us to follow you?” Caleb rubbed his daughter’s back as she settled her head on his shoulder.

“Yes, if you don’t mind.” Colton took a step closer, lowering his voice. “I don’t want us to be caught alone on the road if Ella goes into labor.”

“Yes, of course. It’s the least we could do,” Caleb said as he held Shane’s hand.

Colton nodded. “Well, then let’s go home.”

“Thank you both for doing this.” Caleb shook his hand, and then turned to Mia. “Ready?”

Mia nodded. Ella pulled her in for another hug and whispered in her ear. “Don’t worry. We’ll see you soon. Mia, I know you’re overwhelmed right now, but everything will work out fine. Just give it time. And if you need me, just let me know.” Ella suddenly bent over and held her stomach as her face scrunched up in pain.

“Ella, what’s wrong?” Mia asked, her eyebrows pulling together in concern.

Ella closed her eyes tightly and Mia’s heart sank.

“Ella?” Colton placed his hand on his wife’s back, suddenly panicked. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

She shook her head and forced a smile, straightening up. “I’m fine... really.”

“Ella, you shouldn’t have come. I thought the doctor had you on bed rest,” Mia said, concerned. “I had no idea you were feeling so poorly.”

Ella fought to catch her breath. “I wanted to come see you. I mean, you just came into town.”

“Everything’s going just fine. But you shouldn’t be concerned with me. You should concentrate only on yourself.” Mia bit her lower lip, feeling guilty. “When is the baby due?”

Ella gave her a weak smile. “Not for another month.”

Guilt filled Mia’s heart. “I’m so sorry. I should have come sooner.”

“Oh, hush.” Ella held onto Colton’s arm to steady herself. “You’ve had your hands full. Don’t you spend one moment worrying about me.” She bit her lower lip and then dug her nails into Colton’s arm as another pain grabbed her. “Mia, I really should be getting back. I’ve been on my feet more than I should today.”

“I’ll go get the buckboard.” Colton looked up at Mia and Caleb. “Stay with her. I’ll be right back.”

“Of course.” Mia nodded as Colton rushed off. Mia held Ella’s arm, steadying her. “Ella, we have to get you to a doctor—”

“No, Mia.” Ella grabbed her arm. “I’m fine.” Then a pain gripped her stomach, and she dug her nails into Mia’s arm, biting her lower lip. It was obvious that Ella was trying to hide the pain. “I’m so sorry, Mia. This is your wedding day.”

“Ella, don’t worry about that. You need a doctor.” Mia looked at her friend in concern. “Let’s at least go to a restaurant so you can rest. What happens if you have the baby on the way back home with no midwife or doctor?” Mia glanced at Caleb with pleading eyes, and he nodded.

“Ella, let’s go to a restaurant to celebrate, like Colton suggested,” Caleb chimed in. “At least you’ll be able to sit down for a spell to see if the pain goes away.”

Relief washed over Mia when she saw that Caleb was focused on Ella, still holding Hailey. Mia reached for Shane’s hand, but he pulled away, holding onto his father’s coattail.

Ella nodded and then forced another smile as she grabbed her stomach and bit her lower lip. A moment later, she relaxed.

A crease formed between Mia's eyes, instinctively knowing that Ella wouldn't make it to a restaurant. "Let's go back inside the church and sit down for a moment."

Ella nodded. The fact that she didn't argue about it was testimony that it was more serious than Ella was letting on. "It was just a little pain. I've been having them every now and then all day. It's nothing to cause concern."

Colton pulled the buckboard up and parked it on the side of the street. Then he pulled back on the brake and jumped down. He took one look at Ella and shook his head, letting out a deep breath as he rolled his eyes. Without a word, Colton scooped her up into his arms and carried her to the buckboard as Mia and Caleb followed, carrying the children.

"Why didn't you tell me you were hurting?" a crease formed between Colton's eyes.

"I didn't want you to be concerned."

Colton slid her gingerly into the back of the buckboard.

Ella gripped Colton's arm as another pain rushed through her.

Without another word, Mia took charge. "Caleb," she whispered. "Do you know if there's a doctor around here?"

"There's one a few streets from here on the edge of town," Colton blurted out before Caleb could answer, and then looked up at Mia. "I'm taking her there."

"Colton, I'm fine!" Ella yelled as another pain gripped her. "I'm so sorry! I didn't

mean—” Her voice cut off as she bent over and gripped her stomach again.

“Ella, I’m worried about you.” Mia took her arm.

“No. Actually, that’s my job,” Colton interjected.

“Oh!” Ella groaned, grabbing her stomach.

Without saying another word, Colton held his wife as she doubled over in pain.

“Caleb.” Mia grabbed his arm, claiming his attention. “I have to go.”

“Go,” he ordered. Then he looked over at Colton. “We’ll follow you!” He hurried with the children to his buckboard.

Colton nodded once as Mia sat behind Ella, letting her lean against her.

Mia looked up at Colton. “I have her! Let’s go! Unless you want to be the one delivering the baby!”

Colton nodded once as he jumped into the front of the buckboard and shook the reins hard. “Yah!” The horses leaped immediately into a full gallop and Caleb followed behind in the buckboard.

Mia rubbed Ella’s arm. “Just breathe, Ella. It’s going to be fine. Just breathe—”

“Don’t worry, honey! We’ll be there in just a minute!” Colton yelled from the front as the buckboard rounded a corner. Mia just hoped that the doctor was in.

“Yah!” Ella groaned as she bent over, holding tightly to her stomach, squeezing Mia’s hand.

“Don’t worry, Ella. We’re almost there,” said Mia as the sound of the wagon and the horses’ hooves pounded hard against the muddy road where the snow had melted off.

Colton looked over his shoulder at Ella, then turned his attention back to the road. People shrieked, jumping out of the way as Colton pulled the team to a stop in front of a small white house on the edge of town. A wooden sign hung above the door that read RUFUS ALLAWAY, M.D. Colton pulled back on the brake, jumped out, and ran up the stairs. He beat on the door so hard that it rattled the frame.

“Confound it!” a voice bellowed from the other side of the door. “I’m coming! Patience is a virtue, you know!” A moment later, the door opened abruptly and a middle aged, slightly overweight and balding man biting down on a cigar stood on the other side. “Well, what do you want?”

Colton looked him over. “Are you the doctor?”

“I am,” the man said around his cigar. “What do you want?”

“My wife’s pregnant and having pains. She’s not due for another month.” Colton pointed toward the buckboard where Ella was doubled over in pain. Mia rubbed her back.

The older man rolled his eyes, perfectly calm. “Calm down. It’s not the first time a baby’s been born on my watch.” He threw his cigar into the snow. “Well, let’s not waste any time. Bring her in.” He was so nonchalant that Mia felt foolish for having gotten so excited. But she was sure that the doctor was used to dealing with the small matter of birthing babies. In a growing town like this, it was probably an everyday occurrence.

Colton ran back to the buckboard and Mia helped Ella slide to the end. Colton scooped her into his arms and carried her with ease up the stairs.

“Bring her in here.” Doc Allaway started barking orders as they followed him into a room with a hospital bed, covered in white sheets. He rolled up his sleeves. “How close are the contractions?”

“Pretty close,” Ella answered.

The doctor looked over at Mia. “Miss, go get some sheets from that cabinet.” He motioned with his head toward a thin wooden cabinet on the wall.

Mia nodded and then hurried to do as he instructed.

“Get her a cool rag, too,” Colton yelled to Mia when she came back with the sheets. “She’s burning up! I don’t know why I didn’t notice it before.”

“I’ll be right there,” Mia yelled as she grabbed a washcloth from the same cabinet. A porcelain pitcher and basin sat nearby, so Mia used it to soak down the washcloth, wrung it out, and rushed back over.

Ella fisted Colton’s shirt. “Don’t worry....” Another pain must have grabbed her, for she bit her lower lip, obviously trying to stifle a scream.

Doc Allaway took a stethoscope from a nearby drawer and wrapped it around his neck. He placed the earpieces over his ears and the bell over her stomach. A crease formed between his eyes as he listened.

“There, there,” Mia cooed, dabbing Ella’s forehead with the washrag. “It’ll be okay.”

Without warning, Ella screamed, doubling over in pain. “Something’s wrong!”

“Leave us.” Doc Allaway looked down at Ella but was talking to everyone else in the room.

“No, I’m not going anywhere.” Colton took his wife’s hand, seeing only her.

The doctor was suddenly kind as he placed a hand on his shoulder. “Sir, I have to check my patient.”

Mia waited for Colton at the door, who was obviously torn between leaving his wife in the hands of a doctor he didn’t know and doing as the doctor asked.

“Mister,” the doctor pointed out, peering at him over his spectacles. “I need to check your wife... now.”

Colton nodded, and Mia led him out. In the waiting room, Caleb rose to his feet and the children looked up from where they were playing quietly on the floor.

Colton wrung his hands as he paced the floor.

Caleb placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Colton. She’s going to be fine.”

“We shouldn’t have made the trip today,” Colton babbled as he paced. “She hasn’t been doing well. I should have—”

“Hey, hey....” Caleb stood in front of him to get his attention, interrupting his pacing. “You need to put her in God’s hands. Have faith. She’s going to be okay.”

Colton looked as if he was going to say something more, but just nodded instead.

The doctor came out a moment later and closed the door behind him.

Colton hurried across the room and stood before him. “How is she?”

The doctor sighed. “The baby’s breach and needs to be turned.”

“Is there anything we can do?” Mia asked.

“Pray.” The doctor walked back in, and Mia and Colton followed, going to either side of the bed. “Ella,” Doc Allaway began in a calm, soothing voice. “The baby’s breech and needs to be turned.”

Quicker than Mia would have thought possible, Ella grabbed his arm and squeezed, her eyes open wide. “Doc,” she panted as sweat beaded on her forehead, drenching the tendrils around her face. “If it comes down to saving me or the baby, I want you to save the baby.”

“No!” Colton yelled, his eyes wide.

Ella ignored him, her eyes searching the doctor’s. “Promise me!”

He let out a deep breath and nodded once.

“No! You save my wife!” Colton yelled as he started toward the doctor.

“Caleb!” Mia yelled, and he immediately appeared in the room. “Take him out of here!”

“Come on, buddy,” Caleb coaxed, edging him toward the waiting room. “The doc here is going to take good care of both your wife and the baby, but he can’t do his job if you interfere.”

“You save my wife!” Tears streamed down Colton’s face as he pointed at the doctor.

Caleb placed a hand on his chest, holding him back. “Colton! Let’s go!” he yelled,

getting his attention. When Colton looked at him, he added, “She’s in good hands. Now, we need to get out of here so the doc can do his job.”

Colton nodded. “Ella, I love you! I’ll be right out here!”

“Yah!” she screamed in answer as another pain gripped her.

“Don’t push! Don’t push!” Doc Allaway instructed as he rolled up his sleeves. Then he covered her lower body with a sheet.

Mia didn’t know what to do so she held Ella’s hand. “Breathe, Ella. Don’t push. Everything’s going to be fine.”

“Okay. I’m going to turn the baby now,” the doctor instructed as he reached under the sheet.

Ella nearly broke Mia’s hand as she screamed.

“Hold on, Ella!” Doc Allaway coaxed. “You’re doing good. Don’t push!”

Ella dug her nails into Mia’s hand from squeezing it so tightly, but Mia said nothing.

“That’s it, Ella. Just breathe,” said Mia. “I’m here for you—”

“Okay,” Doc Allaway interrupted as relief washed over him. “The baby’s in position now. Go ahead and push.”

Ella pushed down hard as she screamed.

Mia placed a hand on her back to help her, never letting go of her hand.

“That’s it, Ella!” Doc Allaway urged, sweat beading on his forehead. “You’re doing just fine! Now, push one more time.”

“Yah!” Ella screamed again as she bore down.

A moment later, the sound of a baby crying filled the room.

“Ella, you’re the proud mother of a baby boy.” Doc Allaway laid the baby on Ella’s stomach, cut the cord, and wrapped him in a small blanket.

But Ella was still screaming. “What’s happening? Is something wrong?” Ella gasped, and then screamed as another pain rocked her body.

“Miss, take the baby,” Doc Allaway ordered Mia.

After taking the baby, Mia used the water from the basin to clean him up, and then swaddled him in a blanket.

Doc Allaway smiled. “You’re fine, Madame. But your job’s not over yet.”

“What?” Ella screamed as she panted.

The doctor smiled. “There’s another one.”

“Another baby?” Ella screamed, suddenly panicked.

“Yes, now hold still and don’t push yet,” Doc Allaway instructed. “I need to check you again to make sure the baby’s in position.”

Ella nodded as she panted.

Mia looked down at the baby in her arms and he looked directly into her eyes. He was beautiful, with a shock of dark brown hair like his father. Mia laid him in a nearby bassinette and hurried back to Ella and took her hand.

“Okay, Madame,” Doc Allaway ordered, concern coloring his voice. “The baby’s in position, so push, Ella! Push!”

“Yah!” Ella screamed as she bore down.

“Stop! Don’t push!”

“Breathe, Ella! Breathe!” Mia yelled as she squeezed her hand.

“Okay. Now! Push!” Doc Allaway’s voice was urgent. “One more time! Push now!”

She pushed again, but this time, the sound of a baby’s cry didn’t fill the room.

“Is he okay?” Ella asked, her voice weak as she lifted her head.

Doc Allaway didn’t answer, but quickly cut the cord and turned the baby over. Mia looked over, and the baby was blue. He held the baby up by its feet and gently swatted its bottom. He rubbed the baby all over and checked its mouth, and then held it on his arm, face down, and gently tapped its back. A moment later, the baby gasped and let out a bloodcurdling cry as a pink color washed over her.

Mia sighed in relief.

“It’s a healthy baby girl,” Doc Allaway announced, and then handed the baby to Mia. “She has some lungs on her! That’s for sure!”

Mia cleaned up the baby girl. She was just as beautiful as her brother but was much

more willing to voice her displeasure. As dark as her brother's hair was, hers was the opposite—a bright blonde.

“That’s it,” Mia cooed as she cleaned the baby up and then swaddled her in another small blanket.

“Are there any more?” Ella asked the doctor, lifting her head.

He laughed. “No, I don’t believe so.” He smiled as he finished up.

“How are they?” Ella asked as concern filled her eyes, her hair drenched in sweat. “Are they okay?”

Doc Allaway nodded as he smiled. “Yes, they’re both fine. Ella, would you like to hold them?”

Ella nodded. “Yes, but one at a time for now. I don’t trust myself just yet.”

Mia handed her the little girl, and tears streamed down Ella’s face. Then she crossed the room to the bassinette, picked up the baby boy, and carried him to his mother.

The doctor turned to Mia. “You can call the father in now.”

A broad grin spread across her face. When she opened the door, Colton and Caleb were on their feet.

“Papa, you can come in now.” Mia smiled.

“Is she okay?” Colton walked toward her across the waiting room, tears filling his eyes.

Mia smiled. “Come in and see for yourself.”

When he walked in, Ella was holding one baby, and the doctor was holding the other. Tears flowed down Colton’s cheeks, making his eyes bright. “My God! Twins?” he asked Ella as he gently touched a baby’s cheek.

The doctor smiled as he carefully handed him his son. “Congratulations, papa. Mother and Babies are doing just fine.” As brash as the doctor had seemed to be when they first arrived, Mia was surprised at his tenderness now.

Ella nodded, smiling. “This one’s a baby girl and the one you’re holding is a boy.” She waited for it to sink in.

“Oh, a boy and a girl!” Colton gushed. “What in the world—”

Ella laughed. “Yes! Can you believe it?”

“Your son is the oldest by two minutes,” Mia interjected, taking in the sight of the new family, amazed. Ella and Colton had entered the clinic as a couple, and they were going to leave as a family. God surely did work in mysterious ways.

Tears poured openly down Colton’s cheeks as he sobbed. “They’re beautiful!”

Ella placed a hand on her husband’s cheek. “Shh... it’s okay. I’m okay, and the babies are fine.”

When Colton calmed down a bit, the doctor interrupted. “Both of the babies are fine, but I must talk to you about the birth.” Both Colton and Ella nodded, waiting. “The boy was born first, but he was breach, so I had to turn him. Once he was in position, he was born just fine. But when the girl came, she was born blue.”

“What?” Colton demanded.

Doc Allaway nodded. “Yes. The cord was wrapped around her neck and had cut off the flow of oxygen to the brain. For how long? I’m not sure. But once I removed the cord, the baby could come naturally. Once she was born, I was able to work with her and then she regained consciousness and her color returned.”

Colton breathed a sigh of relief as tears streamed down Ella’s face. “Did it hurt her? Being without oxygen?”

“I’m not sure. It depends upon how long she was without it. It may have been only for a few seconds or a few minutes, at the most.” Doc Morgan swiped his hand across his forehead. “But I’m not going to lie to you. If it had been a few minutes more, we could have lost her.”

Ella cried openly now as she caressed the baby girl in her arms.

Colton kissed her tears away. “It’s okay, Ella. The babies are fine now. It’s really a miracle.”

Doc Allaway let out a deep breath. “Your wife really needs to rest now.” He reached over and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “Madame, you did well. You really are a brave woman.”

“Mrs. Hill. But please call me Ella.” Ella smiled as she handed the baby girl to Mia.

Doc Allaway nodded. Then he turned to Colton and offered him his hand. “You have a lot to be proud of, Mr. Hill.”

Colton shook his hand. “Thanks, Doc. I owe you everything.”

“We’ll settle up later.” Doc Allaway smiled. “But the only thing I want you to do right now is to take good care of your wife and those two little ones.”

Colton laughed, breathing a sigh of relief. “That goes without saying.”

“That’s good enough for me.” The doctor started putting things away.

“Oh, Doc?” Colton asked, claiming his attention.

The doctor lifted his eyebrows as he turned to look at him.

“I’m so sorry about yelling at you... and almost going after you....”

Doc Allaway laughed, peering at him over his spectacles. “Not to worry. Believe me, I’ve seen worse.”

Everyone in the room laughed.

Doc Allaway touched Ella’s leg on top of the sheet. “You can stay here until you’re fully recovered. Now, get some rest.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Ella nodded, her eyes growing heavy.

Mia followed the doctor into the waiting room, and he turned to shake her hand. “Congratulations, miss,” he praised in a low voice. “You did a great job, and you stayed calm during the crisis.”

Caleb walked up and placed his hand on the small of her back.

Doc Morgan turned to him. “Your wife did a good job in there.” Then he turned back to Mia. “If you’d like, you could train to be a midwife. Where do you live?”

Caleb smiled. “Whiskey River.”

The older doctor nodded. “Doc Morgan could train you.”

Mia’s eyes widened. “I would love that!”

Doc Morgan smiled. “Good. I’m sure there’s a midwife there, too, who could give you a few tips on the fine points of birthing.”

Mia smiled as her heart fluttered. “That would be wonderful! Thank you.”

Caleb reached out his hand to the doctor. “Dr. Allaway, thank you for everything. I’m the preacher in Whiskey River. If you’re ever in the neighborhood on Sunday morning—”

“I’ll be sure to look you up.” Doc Allaway shook his hand.

“Please do.” Caleb’s lips curled into a smile. “Well, we could use another doctor in Whiskey River. Doc Morgan is overworked at present.”

“But then what would the fine folk of Laramie do?” Doc Allaway teased, giving Caleb’s shoulder a manly squeeze. “Well, if you don’t mind, I’m going to check in on Mrs. Hill and then I’m going to get some sleep.”

Caleb nodded. “We’ll come by to check on Ella and the babies in the morning. Thanks, Doc, for everything.”

“All in a day’s work.” The doctor smiled. “It’s a long drive to Whiskey River. You and the missus might want to stay the night here in Laramie and then head out in the morning.”

Caleb let out a deep breath. “It’s early yet. We’ll be fine.”

Mia’s smile faded. Of course, he wouldn’t want to stay the night and risk having to share a room with a woman he didn’t know, even if she was now his wife. When she had agreed to their arrangement, she knew that love was out of the question. But she wondered if he would ever come to care for her like a husband would a wife. Well... maybe someday.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Caleb

Caleb watched as Mia looked in on Ella. Colton was sitting in the rocking chair by the hospital bed with his two children as he watched Ella sleep. After she had the babies, the doctor transferred her to a bed.

“Colton,” she whispered from the doorway as Caleb looked on. “We’re leaving. Is there anything else we can do before we leave? Anything you need?”

Caleb couldn’t help but notice how beautiful Mia looked in the soft golden glow of the oil lamp. The way she pitched in and helped out during the crisis stirred something in his heart.

Mia held out her hand as Colton started to get up. “Don’t get up.”

“We’ll be fine.” Colton’s voice came from inside the room. “Mia, thank you.”

She nodded as she smiled. “Tell Ella we’ll come by to see her tomorrow morning.” She gently closed the door.

Caleb placed a hand on the small of her back as he looked over her shoulder. “Let’s go,” he whispered. The children were asleep on the floor, tired from the long wait. By all rights, he should rent a room in Laramie. But he wasn’t ready to share his bed with this woman... even if she was his wife. He sighed, knowing he could afford two rooms.

Mia turned to him and smiled, melting his heart. But he quickly pushed the emotion

down. He had asked her to be his platonic wife, and he was determined to keep it that way.

His heart fluttered at just the simple act of touching her shoulders as he helped her on with her coat, but he quickly pushed the thought aside and turned to pick up his daughter.

“Pa?” she asked sleepily.

“It’s me, princess.” He kissed the top of her head and handed her to Mia. Then he bent down and picked up his son. “Shane? Are you hungry?”

Shane nodded as he nuzzled onto his shoulder and then sat bolt upright and wanted down, glaring at Mia.

“Come on, little man.” Caleb reached down and took his hand, and then placed his other hand on the small of Mia’s back. “Ready?”

She nodded and he escorted her out to his buckboard and helped her in, and then walked around and slid in beside her. Shane hopped into the back.

Caleb made a clicking sound with his mouth and the horses immediately started walking. “I’m proud of you, Mia.”

A smile lit her lips. “I was so worried about Ella.”

He nodded. “So was Colton.”

“Thank you for getting him out of the room when you did.” A laugh escaped her lips. “He was ready to punch the doctor, and then we would’ve really been in trouble.”

“When I pulled him out, it was all I could do to keep him from going back in.” Caleb smiled at the memory.

Mia’s head snapped up. “How did you do it?”

Caleb sighed. “I told him that he could do more good by praying. We spent most of the day in prayer until you came out.”

Mia looked away. “Between us, when the baby was born blue, I thought we’d lost her.”

Caleb stopped and looked into her eyes. “The baby was born blue?”

Mia nodded. “The little girl.”

“Well, thank goodness she pulled through.” Caleb glanced over at her, his heart pounding at her beauty. “You were a big help to the doctor tonight, you know.”

Mia smiled. “Thank you. I just wish I could have done more.”

“You did enough.” Pride shone in his voice.

As the horses plodded on through the snow, he knew that he needed to talk to her.

“Mia, I’m sorry for being so abrupt to you earlier today.” He let out a deep breath. “You deserved better than how I treated you when you got off the train.”

“It’s okay, Caleb. I understand.”

He shook his head. “No. You’re a good woman, Mia, and you deserve to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

She looked back at Shane and then into his eyes. “I appreciate that, but I don’t think now is the time.”

He nodded, knowing she was right.

“Caleb, I know it hasn’t been easy for you and the children.”

“It’s been hard,” he admitted, letting out a deep breath.

She covered his hand with hers. “I know, but you have to find a way to let go of the past and move on.”

He smirked without humor as he looked into her eyes, pulling his hand away. “So, you want me to forget?”

She shook her head. “No, of course not. Never forget. But someday, you’ll have to find a way to move on.”

“It’s easier said than done.” He let out a deep breath, shaking his head.

She let her hand drop. “Take all the time you need.”

A few minutes later, he pulled the team to a stop in front of the hotel in Laramie. “Mia, I hope you don’t mind, but I thought about it, and I don’t want to get caught on the road in the dark this time of year. Also, we can’t leave Colton and Ella to get back on their own with the babies. Although it hasn’t snowed for the past few weeks, we’re not out of the woods yet. And if it starts snowing with the children before we get home—”

“Say no more.” Her eyes met his, looking so beautiful that it overwhelmed him, but he quickly pushed the thought aside. “I don’t mind... really.”

Caleb pulled the brake. "I'll be right back." Shane started to get down. "Come on, buddy."

Shane happily hopped down and took his father's hand. He was always following him, emulating him. It was clear that he idolized his father. Caleb just wanted to live up to it.

Inside, Caleb and Shane walked up to the front desk where a man was standing behind the counter.

"Welcome to the Laramie Inn!" the man behind the desk beamed, a bit too chipper. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like two rooms please." Caleb didn't want to think that it was technically their wedding night, and he also didn't want to think about losing the kindest, most beautiful woman in the world. Guild reared its ugly head within his chest.

The man turned around and pulled two skeleton keys from a peg board behind him. "That'll be .75 cents each or \$1.50 for two."

Caleb pulled the wallet from his back pocket. The price was a bit steep but having the extra room was necessary. He didn't know Mia, after all. And even though he knew that Mia was a good person, he didn't want to take a chance... not with his children.

"Here you go." Caleb slid the bills to him across the counter and he handed him his change.

"Name?" the front desk clerk asked, ready with pen in hand.

"Henley. Reverend Caleb Henley."

The clerk wrote it down and then turned the ledger toward Caleb. “Here. Sign this.”

Caleb scribbled his name, as his insides fluttered. He felt as nervous as a bride himself, although he had no idea why. He wasn’t even going to be sharing a room with her. Guilt filled his chest once more as thoughts of Jessica and their wedding night years ago flooded his mind.

The clerk laid two sets of keys on the counter and slid them toward him. “Here you go, Reverend Henley. Upstairs to the left.”

“Thanks.” Caleb slid the keys into his pocket and took Shane’s hand. “Come on.” Together, they headed out into the cold air. Caleb felt guilty for leaving Mia and Hailey outside. It was cool when he and Shane went inside but it seemed to have gotten colder in that short amount of time. He guessed they weren’t through with the cold weather completely yet.

“Pa!” Hailey’s face lit up as she reached out for him.

“Come here, baby girl.” Caleb reached for her, and she went to him immediately. Then he extended his hand to Mia to help her down, unable to meet her eyes. “Let’s get you inside. I’ll come out for your bags in just a bit.”

Mia nodded. “I’ll come down with you to pick out some things from my trunk so you won’t have to carry it upstairs.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll need to bring it inside anyway so no one helps themselves to your things.” He walked with her up the stairs and then stopped before the two rooms and opened the first door.

“Yippee!” Shane ran in and jumped on the double bed.

Caleb laughed. He set Hailey on her feet, and she ran inside and jumped on the bed along with her brother. “Well, I guess this room is ours.”

Mia laughed but said nothing.

Caleb unlocked the door to the other room for her and handed her the key. “Here you go. I’ll be up with your trunk in a bit.”

Mia nodded, nervously wringing her hands. “Thank you.”

“Would you mind watching the kids for a minute while I bring up your trunk?” Caleb asked, his voice cracking a bit. “I’ll only be a minute.”

“I’d be glad to.” She stood in the doorway between the rooms.

“Kids, stay here with Mia and I’ll be right back up.”

“Oh, I want to go!” Shane wailed, plopping himself down onto the bed, landing on his bottom.

“No, I need you to stay here with your sister,” Caleb said sternly. “I’ll be right back up.”

Caleb hurried away but glanced over his shoulder at Mia one more time. She looked at him with the most beautiful green eyes he’d ever seen.

When he rounded the corner, he took off his cowboy hat and ran his fingers through his dark brown hair. “What are you doing, Caleb?” Never in his wildest dreams had he ever imagined he’d marry a woman other than Jessica, let alone a woman he didn’t know.

Outside, white puffs of snow flurried around and then fell to the ground. Caleb was suddenly thankful that they had decided to stay the night in Laramie. Although it was a bit rowdy, especially at night, he never would have forgiven himself if anything happened to the children or Mia on their way back home. And then they'd have to make the trip back to Laramie in the morning to help Colton and Ella anyway.

Caleb lifted the trunk out of the back of the buckboard and carried it inside the hotel and up the stairs. Mia was sitting at a small table just inside the door of his room, watching the children. She smiled as he walked past and set her trunk on the floor just inside her room.

"I'll be right back."

She nodded and he hurried back down the stairs. Outside, white cottony bits swirled around. He just hoped they didn't get stranded here in Laramie. Although Caleb had some cash with him, he couldn't afford hotel rooms for a week, either.

"Just get through tonight and tomorrow will take care of itself." He climbed into the buckboard, released the brake, and headed toward the livery stable.

After leaving the horses and his rig at the livery stable, he pulled the collar of his coat up over his neck and headed back toward the hotel. He darted inside in a flurry of snow.

"After the blizzard we had at Christmas, I thought we were nearly through with this." The front desk clerk shook his head, leaning against the counter.

"So did I." Caleb headed up the stairs. The door to his room was still open and the children were playing happily on the bed. When Caleb walked in, Mia rose to her feet.

“Well, if you don’t need me anymore, I’ll go freshen up a bit.”

Caleb nodded, knowing he should say something, but unable to bring himself to.

Mia smiled as she walked out and closed the door behind her.

Although he had no intention of anything else, there was no reason why they couldn’t spend an enjoyable evening together. He looked over at the children and said, “Stay here. I’ll be right back.” As he headed over to Mia’s room, he knew that she would never be his real wife, but he hoped they could find some middle ground.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Mia

After Mia closed the door to her room, she let out a deep breath. Exhausted, she walked over to the bed and plopped down, then leaned back and closed her eyes. Silent tears streamed down her cheeks from her closed eyes.

Although she knew they would have a platonic relationship, she hadn't expected to feel the rejection that was weighing so heavily on her. She had been used to turning men down. She wasn't used to being the one rejected. And never had she thought she would be rejected by her own husband.

No, she had to steel her heart against him, or she would never survive. She would open it up to the children, but not to him. He had set the rules and now she was determined to live by them.

Knowing she was being ridiculous, Mia sat up, wiped the tears from her cheeks, and crossed the room to her trunk. Then she pulled the chair from the small round table over to it and started rummaging through, looking for a handkerchief to keep by her bed just in case. Then again, maybe she'd feel better if she washed her face.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, causing her to jump. When she opened it, Caleb was standing on the other side.

"Sorry for the interruption." He looked over at her open trunk, but made no effort to walk in. "Look. Why don't you leave that? I have other plans. After all, it is our wedding night."

Mia's eyes opened wide. Of all the things she had expected to come from his mouth, that wasn't one of them. Her heart pounded as she looked around, and her eyes landed on a glass vase setting near her on the dresser. She grabbed it and held it above her head. "Don't you even think of coming near me tonight!"

One corner of Caleb's mouth curled into a smile, revealing a dimple on his cheek. "No, that's not what I meant. I just wanted to take you and the children to dinner in the restaurant downstairs." He walked over to her and slowly took the vase from her hand, his big blue eyes never leaving hers, suppressing a smile. "And let's try not to break anything tonight. I can't afford to replace it."

Mia lowered her hands, feeling like an idiot. Of course he wouldn't want to touch her or come near her, even if it was their wedding night. "I'm sorry. I thought...."

Caleb arched an eyebrow, suppressing a smile.

"Never mind what I thought." She wiped her hands on her dress. "Give me a minute to freshen up and I'll be right over."

He nodded once and walked out, closing the door behind him.

Mia headed over to the bed, trying to keep what little that was left of her dignity. She sat on the edge of the bed as tears brimmed her eyes. But she didn't have time for a good cry. She would save that for later.

Instead, she squared her shoulders and resigned herself to make the best of the situation. Her mother would have told her as much, if she were still alive. Mia crossed the room to a beige porcelain basin and pitcher with pretty pink and blue flowers along the edge, poured some water, and splashed some on her face, careful not to muss her dress. Then she smoothed the loose blonde tendrils back, slipped on a pair of beige gloves to match her dress, and adjusted her hat and pinned it back into

place. She pinched her cheeks and then walked out and closed the door behind her.

When Caleb opened the door to his room, his eyes flickered with interest for a split second as he took her in, but it was so quick it caused her to wonder if she were just seeing things. He and the children were standing in the center of the room, their hair combed, and Hailey's dress straightened. "Ready?"

She nodded. "Yes. Are you?"

Shane narrowed his eyes at Mia, and then ran out the door.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Deep down, Mia was asking about much more than just going downstairs to dinner. "We can bring something up instead, if you like."

Caleb nodded in the direction Shane went. "Just give him time. He'll come around." It was almost as if he was saying it about himself, too. "Let's go."

As she walked into the hallway, Hailey left her father's side and slipped her hand into Mia's, taking her by surprise. "Ready to go, baby girl?"

A broad grin spread across Hailey's face, nodding excitedly.

When they stopped at the top of the stairs, Shane was waiting at the foot with his arms folded across his chest. He looked away when he saw them.

Mia pretended not to notice.

Caleb extended his arm to her, the perfect gentleman. After she slid her arm in his, he led her and Hailey down the stairs, meeting Shane at the bottom.

“Hmph,” Shane grunted as he turned away, his arms still folded.

Caleb frowned as he looked down at his son. “Straighten up.”

“Welcome!” A waitress approached, her face bright, a bit too chipper. “My! Don’t you look fine this evening! Four for dinner?”

Caleb smiled. “Yes, please.”

The waitress lifted two menus from the box beside the stand. “Right this way.” Mia and Caleb followed her until she stopped before a round table and set the menus down at two place settings. Caleb held the chair for her as she sat and then slid into the chair across from her. The children sat on the other chairs between them. “What can I bring you to drink?”

“Lemonade all around,” Caleb answered without even asking her.

“Okay. I’ll have that out to you in a minute. By the way, my name’s Dolly, if you need anything.”

“Thanks, Dolly.” Mia opened her menu and Dolly walked away. Then Hailey climbed onto her lap and smoothed her hand over her gloves.

“You like these?” Mia asked.

Hailey nodded. Mia observed that she didn’t say much. Losing her mother had obviously taken a toll on her.

“Well then! I’ll have to make you a pair.”

A crease formed between Hailey’s eyes. “How did you do that?”

“Make these?”

Hailey nodded.

“I sew. In New York, I used to sew for a lot of people.”

“And you danced, too,” Shane added flatly.

“Shane!” Caleb scolded. “You apologize to Mia right now.”

Mia wondered how he knew, but she guessed that he must have overheard his father talking. Her heart sank as she wondered who else he had told. She wasn’t ashamed of having been a dancehall girl, but she didn’t want to be reminded of it constantly, either.

“No, I won’t,” Shane yelled, “because it’s true!”

Caleb was about to say something else, but Mia intervened. “Yes, I was also a dancer in New York. But my favorite thing to do was to sew. In fact, I’m going to make you both some new clothes when I have the chance.”

“My clothes are just fine,” Shane blurted out.

“Pa, too?” Hailey asked, her eyes hopeful.

Caleb looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

“Yes, of course.” Mia smiled. “And I’ll teach you, too, when you’re old enough. Would you like that?”

Hailey nodded excitedly.

“She doesn’t need to know how to sew,” Shane retorted.

“Shane!” Caleb warned. “That’s quite enough!”

Mia pretended not to notice. “Everyone should know how to sew. I can show you how to sew, too, if you like. Or I could show you how to make candles.”

Shane’s eyebrows rose. “You know how to make candles?”

Mia nodded. “I sure do.”

“It’s good that you came when you did,” Caleb said without looking at her. “In December, the blizzard had locked down the town completely. The pass was closed and there was no way in or out. You would have been stuck in Laramie until I could come to get you.”

Shane chuckled under his breath. Mia was sure that images of her freezing to death in the blizzard were going through his mind.

“I just hope we don’t get snowed in here.” Mia started to peruse her menu and then smiled. “But we can make the best of it if we are.”

Caleb nodded. “Yes, but I don’t think that it’ll be necessary. This is the first snow we’ve had since the blizzard. It’ll probably stop snowing by morning.”

“Good because I don’t want to be stuck here with her.”

“Shane!”

“She’s not my mother!” Shane got up and ran to the front of the restaurant and placed his hands on his hips.

“Shane!” Mia called to him, trying not to make a scene. “Come here!”

Shane planted his feet firmly on the floor. “You’re not my mother, and you can’t tell me what to do!”

Mia’s mouth fell open in horror as they caught the attention of everyone in the restaurant.

“Shane! Get over here and apologize to Mia right now!” Caleb’s voice bellowed as he rose from his seat.

A tall man with broad shoulders, wearing a cowboy hat standing at the front smiled. “Looks like you have your hands full tonight, mister.”

Finding inspiration from Shane, Hailey slipped off Mia’s lap and started running around, Caleb caught her and shoved her in Mia’s arms again. Then Caleb marched across the room through the tables as Shane’s eyes grew wide. Then he took off up the stairs toward their hotel rooms with his father hot on his heels, much to Mia’s horror.

Mia forced a smile as Hailey started to whimper. “It’s okay, Hailey.” She rubbed Hailey’s back in a soothing motion, trying to calm her.

Dolly approached the table and set four glasses of lemonade down. “I’m so sorry it took a minute.”

“No need to worry,” Mia replied as she set Hailey in a chair. But Hailey started crying and reached out for Mia, kicking her feet. Mia picked her back up and set her on her lap.

“You must be new to town,” the waitress observed in a friendly voice.

“Yes, we are. My husband lives in Whiskey River.” Mia cringed at the slip.

Dolly’s eyebrows pulled together in concern as she frowned. “Don’t you live there, too?”

“We just got married today,” Mia replied, quickly losing her patience. “What do you have for dinner? We haven’t eaten all day, and the children are hungry.”

Dolly’s eyes flew open wide. “Oh! Yes, ma’am! Ralph’s fried chicken is the best.”

“I’ll take some, and bring her a chicken leg, too.” Mia looked down at Hailey, and then added, “Make it two.”

“What vegetables would you like?” Dolly asked, waiting patiently.

“Mashed potatoes for Hailey, and I’ll take whatever you have.”

Hailey was crying openly now, so Mia picked her up and started rocking her back and forth.

“Mashed potatoes, corn, and green beans okay?” Dolly asked.

Mia knew that Dolly meant well, but couldn’t she see that she had her hands full?

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“Don’t you ever run away from me like that again!” Caleb’s voice bellowed throughout the restaurant as he marched down the stairs with a crying Shane tucked under his arm. “And you owe Mia an apology!”

“Never!” Shane wailed. “She ain’t my mama!”

“And don’t you use the word ‘ain’t’! Your mother taught you better than that!” Caleb looked around the restaurant, and then marched toward Mia with all eyes on him. He appeared not to notice.

Thank goodness the restaurant wasn’t crowded. But Mia was sure that they would be the talk of the town by morning. Thank goodness they didn’t live here.

“I’m so sorry about this.” Caleb planted Shane hard onto a chair and then pointed his finger at him. “Sit there and don’t you move!”

“Umm....” It was obvious that Dolly didn’t quite know what to say. “What would you like, sir?”

Besides a corral? Mia thought as she continued to rock Hailey, who was falling asleep on her shoulder.

“What’s she having?” Caleb asked, nodding toward Mia.

“She is having the fried chicken,” Mia replied, quickly losing her patience. The least he could do was not to talk about her as if she wasn’t there.

Caleb appeared not to notice as Dolly waited, stunned. “I’ll have the same, and so will he.”

“No, I won’t!” Shane folded his arms across his chest. “I’m never going to eat again!”

“That could be arranged,” Caleb agreed.

Shane’s eyes flew open wide.

“I think that’ll be all,” Mia stage-whispered to Dolly.

Caleb slid the lemonade sitting in front of him aside. “On second thought, could you bring me some coffee?”

At that moment, Mia realized that she didn’t know the first thing about Caleb. In the few days while she was preparing to move, she had created an image of him within her mind. The perfect man with the perfect children in the perfect town. But she had no idea who the real-live man was sitting across from her now.

“Yes, I’d be glad to.” Dolly’s eyes shifted between them. “I’ll be right back.” Then she left the table as quickly as she could, obviously questioning their sanity.

Mia couldn’t blame her for wanting to get away as quickly as possible. If Mia could have left, she would have, too.

“Your hair is too light!” Shane yelled at Mia out of the blue. “My ma didn’t looked like you!”

Tears welled up within Mia’s eyes, as her stomach began to tighten. “I’m not your mother, Shane, and I don’t intend to take her place.”

“That’s it, young man!” Caleb yelled. “You’re going straight to bed when we get upstairs!” He turned to Mia. “I am so sorry. He never behaves this way.”

Mia gave him a small smile, trying to will the tears in her eyes to keep from spilling over as a lump formed in her throat. The last thing Caleb needed right now was a blubbering wife. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not okay.” Caleb narrowed his eyes at his son. “We’re going to have a serious talk when we get upstairs, young man.”

“Here you go!” Dolly interrupted, setting the plates on the table filled with fried chicken, corn on the cob, green beans, and mashed potatoes topped with brown gravy.

It smelled delicious to Mia, but her stomach was so tight that she didn’t think she could eat. “Thank you. It looks delicious.”

Dolly smiled. “I’ll let Ralph know. Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No, we’re fine,” Caleb replied without looking at Mia.

Mia shook her head. The least he could have done was to ask her if she wanted anything instead of answering for her. Caleb didn’t have to treat her as he would a wife, but she demanded respect and common courtesy as an adult.

“Well, if you change your mind, let me know,” Dolly announced a bit too cheerfully, as she hurried from the table.

Shane started to push his plate away, but Caleb pushed it back and then said in a low voice, “You are going to eat. I’m paying good money for this meal, and you are not going to let it go to waste.”

“I didn’t ask for it.” Shane folded his arms across his chest.

“But you will eat it,” Caleb corrected sternly.

Shane started to push the plate away again but stopped when Caleb glared at him.

Hailey was asleep on her shoulder, so Mia laid her across her lap and continued to rock her. She picked up a chicken leg and took a bite, but crumbs fell onto Hailey, so she set it back on the plate.

“Here.” Caleb reached for his daughter. “Let me take her so you can eat.”

But Mia just shook her head. “No, you go ahead. I’ll eat in a bit.”

Caleb nodded, and then dug into his meal.

Shane picked at his dinner, but then hunger must have taken over and he started eating with gusto.

They ate in silence, and everyone in the restaurant turned their attention back to their own conversations.

Mia took a sip of her lemonade. “So, how long have you lived in Whiskey River?”

Caleb set down his chicken breast, letting out a deep breath. “Jessica and I moved here after I became a preacher. I found out they needed a preacher here, so we talked about it and then decided to move. Shane was just a baby.”

Mia nodded. “So, for about three years?”

He swallowed the bite of chicken in his mouth. “Have you always lived in New York?”

Mia shook her head. “No, I’m originally from Connecticut. I moved to New York after my parents died.”

Caleb’s demeanor suddenly changed, obviously going into his preacher persona, appearing to put his own needs aside to focus on her. “Oh. I’m so sorry to hear that.”

Mia gave him a small smile. “And what about your parents?”

Caleb let out a deep breath. “My mother died when I was young, and my father still lives in San Francisco.”

Mia’s head snapped up. “You’re from California?”

He nodded. “In fact, my father still preaches there.” He sighed. “When I took the job in Whiskey River, I tried to get him to come with us, but he refused, wanting to stay there and attend his congregation, saving people from the sin of greed. You know, from the Gold Rush, even though it was years ago.” He took a sip of his coffee and set it down. “But in his defense, people still go out there looking for gold. Greed can be very controlling.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

Caleb shrugged. “I’m not. I have no regrets.” He stood and looked down at Hailey. “Here. Let me take her while you eat.”

“Are you finished?” Mia asked, concerned.

He smiled. “I’ve had more than you. Besides, I can eat and rock at the same time.”

Mia nodded, guessing that she had a lot to learn about parenting, if only for her own survival. “Thank you.”

“Come here, princess,” he cooed as he scooped his sleeping daughter into his arms. “I’ll be right back.” Mia nodded, and he walked with his daughter to the front of the restaurant by the windows to talk to the man behind the counter.

Mia let out a deep breath as she looked down at her untouched food.

“I’ll take it if you don’t want it,” Shane blurted out.

“No, you have plenty. Now, eat,” Mia said, having had enough of his antics.

A broad grin spread across his face. “So, what are you going to do? Tell my father?”

Mia forced a smile. “No, I’ll take away your privileges.”

The boy’s eyebrows pulled together. “What do you mean?”

Mia shrugged, still smiling. “It means that you won’t be allowed to play with your toys, and you will only be allowed to go outside to do your chores... until I say otherwise.”

Shane stood so quickly that his chair fell backward, crashing to the floor. “You can’t do that to me!”

“Oh yes I can, and I will,” Mia replied softly. “Now, pick up your chair and eat. You won’t get anything else tonight.”

“Pa!” Shane whined as he marched across the restaurant to his father.

Leaving the chair on the floor, Mia unfolded her napkin and laid it across her lap. The lump in her throat was so large that it nearly prevented her from swallowing... nearly. Determined not to let a child get the best of her, she forced herself to eat, even though it felt like it was going to come back up with every bite.

A moment later, Caleb marched over to the table, picked up the chair, and pointed to it as he looked at his son. “Sit down and eat! And I don’t want to hear any more about it!”

Tears rimmed Shane’s eyes as he sat at the table and started eating without another word.

Mia smiled as she ate. When she forced down the last bite of food, she dabbed daintily at the corners of her mouth with her napkin, laid it on the table, and then looked over at Shane. “Are you ready?”

Shane was picking at his potatoes, but had made a sizeable dent in his plate, despite his protests and antics. He looked up and smirked at Mia. “Almost.”

Mia let out a deep breath. “Well, hurry up. We have to go upstairs and put you to bed.”

Shane dropped his fork onto his plate, clinking loudly against the porcelain. “I don’t have to do what you say!”

“We’ll see about that.” Mia knew she was going to war... against a four-year-old boy, but she didn’t care. She wasn’t about to let him rule the house.

“I think it’s time to go,” Caleb announced, but didn’t say a word to his son. “I’ve already paid the bill.”

She stood and reached for Hailey. “You want me to take her?”

“No, I have her.” Caleb’s eyes were cold. Then he glanced over at his son. “Let’s go.”

“But I’m not ready—” Shane protested.

“Oh yes, you are,” Caleb cut him off, and then walked upstairs, expecting them to follow.

Mia looked at Shane, and he glared back. “Shane, I know I’m not your mother, but—”

He stood, and his fists were balled up at his sides as tears spilled onto his cheeks. “Don’t you dare talk about my mother! You know nothing about her!” Then he stormed up the stairs after his father.

Mia looked around apologetically, and all eyes were on her. She slowly let out her breath to keep from crying, pushed in her chair, and walked up the stairs with what little dignity she had left.

Upstairs, Caleb and the children were already in their room.

Mia could feel every muscle in her body, and her arms were about to fall off from the weight of having carried Hailey all day and not being used to it. As she opened the door to her hotel room, she tried to remind herself of the reasons she had agreed to this arrangement in the first place.

Mia had just collapsed onto the bed when there was a knock on her door. She let out a deep breath and sat up. “Coming.” When she opened it, Caleb was standing on the other side. “Mia, I’d like to speak with you... alone.”

She stepped back and he walked in and closed the door. Anger welled up within Mia’s chest as she waited for what was to come.

“First of all, please do not threaten my children,” he ticked off the first of what she was sure was going to be a long list.

“Threaten?” Mia asked, unable to believe what she was hearing.

“Second, they are my children. Not yours.”

“Now, wait a minute—”

Caleb held up a finger. When he spoke, he lowered his voice. "If my son needs discipline, then you will let me know and I will take care of it."

Mia folded her arms across her chest. "Is that all?"

He shrugged. "For now."

"Okay, now you will listen to me," Mia announced in disbelief, never raising her voice. "First of all, if I go to you for every little thing, Shane will have no respect for me. Secondly, we are legally married now, so that makes them my children, too."

Caleb started to object, but she held up her finger, just as he had done to her.

"Third, do not ever speak to me this way again. And fourth, if our son speaks to me again like he did downstairs, I will take away his privileges, which is what I told him. In case you don't know, that means that I will take away his toys, not allow him to play, and he will be allowed to go outside only to do his chores. I would never lay a hand on the child, but I will not tolerate him speaking to me like he did in the restaurant, either." She took a deep, calming breath and lowered her voice. "Caleb, I realize that you and the children are hurting, and I'm not trying to take Jessica's place, but I can't live in her shadow, either. I am Mia, not Jessica. And no matter how hard I try, I never will be." She opened the door and waited. "Now, I would appreciate it if we can continue this conversation tomorrow. I'm tired from traveling."

After he walked out, she slammed the door closed behind him. She knew there were other guests in the hotel, but at that moment, she really didn't care. As she sat on the edge of the bed, alone where no one could see, tears flowed down her cheeks. After a few moments, she rose from the bed, took off her dress, and hung it up. She rummaged through her trunk and found a sleeping gown, dressed, and fell onto the bed, exhausted both physically and mentally. But try as she might, she was unable to

sleep. Finally, she resolved herself to the fact that she was going to see this through, even if it killed her.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Caleb

As the night wore on, Caleb tried to sleep. But try as he might, he couldn't put the events of the day out of his mind. Giving up on sleep, he sat up and scrubbed his hands across his face, remembering seeing Mia for the first time, how nervous he'd felt as he waited for her to arrive, and how his heart leaped within his chest when she stepped off the train onto the platform, looking beautiful in her long coat and beige hat tipped forward on her head. Her hair was pulled up, but little tendrils had fallen down around her neck. She had reminded him of spring, even though it was still winter. Seeing her for the first time, it was as if she had brought a much-needed breath of fresh air into his life.

He forced the memory of her creamy complexion and gorgeous green doe eyes from his mind, as well as how they looked at him with interest. He didn't want her to be interested, and he didn't want to be interested in her, either. The only thing he wanted was for their relationship to be strictly platonic.

But what he wanted seemed to be of no consequence to his body and how it reacted to her, sending electricity through him when he touched her, how his heart pounded when she came near.

Guilt reared its ugly head within his chest at the thought of having betrayed his wife, his lovely Jessica, by even entertaining the thought of marrying another woman, let alone going through with it. Deep down in his heart, he knew that Jessica would have wanted their children to have a mother, and for him to have someone to care for, and someone to care for him.

But knowing those things sure didn't make it any easier.

Alone, he knelt by his bed and prayed that God could forgive him, and that Jessica could forgive him for making this choice, even though he felt it was the only choice he could make.

But now that the choice was made, he was determined to make the best of it.

He leaned back onto the bed and pulled the pillow over his face in an effort to push the memories and guilt from his mind, but to no avail. After a while, he gave up trying to sleep and sat up in the bed. When he glanced over, his children were sleeping peacefully, huddled together like puppies, the room illuminated only by the moonlight streaming in through the window.

Caleb rose from the bed and looked outside at the snow, blue in the moonlight. Bits of fluffy puffs were still falling to the ground, but not as heavily as it had been earlier. Unable to sleep, he pulled on his trousers and his shirt and slipped on his boots. Maybe the cold would clear his mind and help him to sleep. After slipping into his coat, he looked over at his sleeping children once more.

They would be fine. He wasn't going far.

"Good evening, sir," the front desk clerk greeted him as he descended the stairs.

But Caleb paid no attention as he stormed past, pushing open the front door. The blinding cold hit him harder than he had thought it would, but he welcomed it. He needed to be slapped in the face for what he had done. Caleb shoved his hands in his pockets and walked purposefully to who knew where. But he had no choice. He needed someone to care for his children and the house while he worked to support his family.

He thought he could do it, have a platonic relationship with a woman... but then Mia stepped off the train. The moment he caught sight of her, he was done. And he hadn't expected it. Soon, he walked past a cemetery, another reminder of Jessica.

Unable to take any more, he pushed through the wrought iron gate. Even the bare trees hanging over the graves seemed to mock him, shaming him for what he had done. Finally, he fell onto the snow-covered ground under one of the wicked trees, cold wind blowing bits of snow over him.

Unable to take any more, he punched the ground, not even feeling the cold. "God, why? Why, Jessica?" he screamed at the top of his lungs as tears rolled down his cheeks. "Why did it have to be you, Jessica? God, why couldn't you have taken me instead? Damn it! You could have taken me and not her! Jessica!" he screamed as tears coursed down his cheeks, finally letting it out. He had done a good job of holding it together since he had lost her, but not now. Not ever again.

"Jessica! I need you!" he screamed as he beat his bloody fist on the ground. "Jessica, I love you! Come back to me! Don't leave me alone! Come back!" he yelled as tears rolled down his cheeks. "Come back...."

Finally, he sat down and sobbed into his arms. He cried for Jessica... and now for Mia. Mia was an innocent bystander to the catastrophe that had become his life. Although she was now legally his, he couldn't bring himself to think of her as his wife—physically and emotionally—and he didn't know if he ever would. But then again, he knew he couldn't go on like this.

Now that he was married, he had to find a way to let Jessica go. But how? How could he let go of his life? The woman who had made everything so perfect, who had made their house a home. And now he was going to bring another woman into it. How could he have done something so foolish?

Maybe he should just let Mia go before it went any farther. They could get an annulment. He could give her enough money to stay in Laramie or perhaps go back to New York.

But as he sat alone in the cemetery, he knew he'd never find anyone else like her. Never. But how could it ever work out between them... if he couldn't give her his heart?

Exhausted, he made his way back to the hotel.

"Sir! Your hand! Are you hurt? Where you attacked?" the front desk clerk asked, eying Caleb's hand.

But he said nothing in response as he made his way up the stairs, taking two at a time. He reached for the doorknob of his room, and then paused, looking over at Mia's room instead. Then he let out a deep breath and walked inside his room.

Thank goodness, the children were still asleep, huddled together, just where he had left them.

He let out a deep breath as he crossed the room. He stood watching his children sleep for a long while, and then pulled the blanket up over them and tucked them in. It was cold and getting colder by the second. It was then that he noticed the dried blood covering his knuckles.

Careful not to wake the children, he crossed the room to the basin and the pitcher filled with water in the corner of the room and washed his hand.

The water stung. It was the first time that he had felt the pain. He never felt it while he was punching the ground. But now that he recalled, he hadn't felt pain in a while, just the dull throbbing ache that had filled his chest since he had lost his Jessica.

Caleb dried his hand and hung up the towel. His hand was no longer bleeding, so he decided to try to salvage what was left of the night and get some sleep. He laid down beside the children, exhausted.

Caleb was walking down the streets of Laramie when a mist appeared on the ground around him. He looked over and Jessica was standing by the same tree in the cemetery where he had just been. She walked over and sat down on a nearby bench. “Come, Caleb. Sit with me.”

“Jessica, I’m so sorry....”

She looked up at him and smiled. “Please, sit with me.”

He nodded as he sat on the bench beside her. “Jessica—”

“Shh,” she whispered. “Don’t worry. You did what you had to do.”

Tears stung his eyes. “Jessica, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t be.” She smiled. “All I want is for you and the children to be happy.”

“Jessica, I wish it would have been me and not you.”

“Don’t ever say that.” She sighed as she looked into his eyes. “Caleb, I’m happy... and I want you to be happy, too.”

Caleb nodded. “Jessica, I miss you.”

A slight smile lit her lips as she gazed into his eyes. “Why? I’m always with you.”

Then she rose from the bench and started walking into the mist.

“Jessica, don’t leave....”

She turned and smiled, radiant in the moonlight. “I never left.”

“Pa?” Shane asked, shaking his father’s shoulder. “Are you awake?”

Caleb opened his eyes and the blinding sunlight stung. Even though he hadn’t gotten much sleep, he felt rested... more rested than he had in a while, sensing that Jessica was at peace.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Mia

When Mia woke the next morning, the events of the previous day came rushing back to her and she realized that she had spent her wedding night alone. “This isn’t a marriage. It’s a circus,” she mumbled to herself. But Caleb had set the rules of their marriage being platonic, and she was going to abide by them. Mia dressed for the day, thankful for the few moments that she had alone.

When she was ready, she checked her trunk to make sure her belongings were packed and threw her coat over her arm. Outside their door, she heard that Shane and Caleb were awake. She was tempted to just go downstairs and order some coffee and wait for them to come down, but she knew Caleb would need help with the children. So, she steeled herself and knocked on the door. Caleb opened the door slightly.

“Good morning. Would you like some help with the children, or would you like me to go down to the restaurant and wait?”

Caleb opened the door, and he was buttoning his white shirt, but not before she caught a glimpse of his tight, bare muscled chest.

“Come on in.” Caleb stepped back. “The children are nearly ready. Would you mind taking them downstairs? I’ll be right there. And could you order me some coffee?”

Mia smiled, glad to see that a good night’s sleep had improved his temper. “I’d be glad to.” But when she looked over at Hailey, her hair was a mess and sticking out in every direction. “Here. I’ll be right back with a hairbrush.”

Mia went next door and got her hairbrush, two rubber bands, and some ribbon. She was going to just walk right in, but thought better of it, opting to knock lightly.

“Come on in, Mia.”

When she walked inside, Caleb was sitting on the edge of the bed, slipping on his boots. Mia’s heart fluttered, noticing how Caleb’s white shirt flattered his naturally tanned skin. But she pushed the thought aside and headed over to the vanity. “Hailey, would you like me to do your hair?”

“She doesn’t need you,” Shane muttered under his breath.

“Shane,” Caleb warned. “Let’s not get that started again.”

Mia ignored the jab. “Shane, after I’m finished with Hailey, I’ll brush your hair, too.”

“No, thank you.”

“Oh yes, you’ll let her,” Caleb intervened. “Your hair’s a mess and I don’t have a hairbrush, since we weren’t planning on staying here in Laramie. So, let her do your hair, too, when she’s ready.”

Shane huffed and folded his arms across his chest, glaring at Mia.

She sighed, making a mental note to try and find a way to reach him. But for now, she turned her attention back to Hailey. “Come on, little girl.” She picked her up and set her on the dainty bench seat at the white, wooden vanity. She brushed her beautiful curls, careful not to hurt her, and then braided first one side and then the other. Then she tied the pigtails off with rubber bands and added shiny blue ribbons to the ends. When she was finished, Mia placed her hands on Hailey’s shoulders and looked at her in the mirror. “Well, what do you think?”

A broad grin spread across the little girl's face. "Pretty!"

Without a second thought, Mia bent down and gave her shoulders a squeeze, placing her cheek against the little girl's as they both looked in the mirror. "Beautiful."

Hailey jumped down off the bench and scampered off to her father. "Look!" She turned her head proudly from side to side.

Caleb scooped her into his arms. "You look like a princess." Then he kissed her cheek.

Mia patted the stool, looking at Shane. "Okay! Your turn."

"No! You're not touching me!" he shouted, folding his arms across his chest.

Mia was sure the neighbors heard.

"What was that, young man?" A crease formed between Caleb's eyes.

"Hmph!" Shane hopped down, his footsteps heavy against the wooden floor. Then he plopped down hard on the seat and folded his arms across his chest again, glaring at Mia in the mirror, as if daring her to make him look presentable.

"Let's see here." Mia smiled, trying to lighten the mood as she picked up her hair brush and ran it through his light blond hair. A moment later, every hair was in place. "Now, isn't that better?"

He glared at her and then jumped down off the bench.

A crease formed between Caleb's eyes, obviously not pleased with his son's behavior. Then he turned his attention back to Mia. "Why don't you take the children

downstairs to the restaurant while I carry your trunk down?"

"We'll wait for you downstairs," Mia replied as she took Hailey's hand. "Ready?"

Hailey nodded vigorously, her eyes wide.

"Shane?"

He let out a deep breath and then stormed out of the room.

Caleb shook his head. "I'm so sorry. He never behaves this way. It's just been so hard—"

"He'll come around," Mia cut him off, looking into his eyes. At that moment, she vowed to try and make life easier for them, if not anything else.

Caleb shook his head, glaring at his son. "Well, I hope he comes around a bit sooner than later."

Mia gave him a reassuring smile. "He will." When she headed out the door holding Hailey's hand, Shane was sitting in the hallway, stooped down on the floor.

"Ready?" Mia asked.

Shane rose from the floor without a word and headed down the hallway.

"Stay with me, Shane." Mia led Hailey down the hallway, holding her hand. "Shane come back here right now!" She didn't want to take a chance of being asked to leave the hotel. But then again, would it have made a difference? They were getting ready to check out, anyway. But after their performance in the restaurant the night before, she was sure the management would be more than happy to see them go.

After a moment, Mia gave up, scooped Hailey up into her arms, and ran as quickly as the long skirt of her dress would allow to catch up with him. At the top of the stairs, she stopped short. Shane was standing at the bottom, smirking at her.

“Oh, no you don’t, buster,” Mia called down to the bottom of the stairs, attracting the attention of everyone in the room.

The desk clerk’s shoulder’s slumped, but he looked up at her and plastered on a smile.

“Stop right there and don’t you move!” Mia lifted her skirts and marched down the stairs headed toward him.

A sly smile lit Shane’s lips, but when he turned, he ran into someone. When he looked up, he had run smack dab into Colton Hill.

“And where do you think you’re going, little mister?” Colton looked down at him, grinning.

“I... I was just....”

Colton laughed. “There’s nothing to worry about.” Colton swung him up and onto his right shoulder as Shane laughed.

“Thank you so much for catching him for me.” Mia was a bit breathless from having to practically run down the stairs, afraid that Shane might run out the door.

Colton looked up at him. “You were running away from Mia?”

Shane nodded, hanging his head.

“Don’t do that. Mia is a good person who cares about you very much.” He set him down on his feet and then knelt down at his level. “Can I tell you something, man to man?”

Mia bit her lower lip, suppressing a smile. Shane nodded vigorously, his eyes wide.

Colton propped his elbows on his knees. “Gentlemen always treat a lady like a lady. Gentlemen protect ladies and keep them safe, too. So, now that Mia has joined your family and since you are a man in the house, it’s your job to protect her and your sister, and to always treat them like ladies. That means you say ‘yes, ma’am’ and ‘no, ma’am,’ too. Okay?”

Shane let out a deep breath as he smiled, obviously liked having been referred to as a man.

“Can you do that?” Colton’s eyebrows rose, awaiting an answer.

“Yes, sir,” Shane replied, hanging his head.

But Colton placed a finger under his chin and lifted it up until his eyes met his. “Also, a man is always strong. And if he always tries to do what’s right, he has nothing to be ashamed of. Okay?”

Shane nodded.

“Thanks, Colton.” Mia tried to adjust Hailey on her hip, but the little girl was reaching for Colton.

He scooped Hailey into his arms and nuzzled her neck. “It’s my pleasure.”

“So, how’s Ella doing?” Mia smiled, relieved that Colton happened to be there. She

just wished that Caleb had been the one to give his son that speech.

A broad grin spread across Colton's face. "She's fine. Just hungry as all get out. That's why I'm here."

"And the babies?" Mia asked.

Colton grinned. "The same. Poor Ella's exhausted and the babies are hungry every few hours."

Mia chuckled. "I don't think either of you will be getting a lot of rest any time soon."

"I'm counting on it." Then he handed Hailey back to her. "Well, if you'll excuse me. I have to take Ella some breakfast before she threatens to eat the bed and everything in the hospital."

Mia chuckled. "Would you like to join us for breakfast? Then we can walk back together. We were going to come right over to check on Ella and the babies right after we ate."

Colton shook his head. "No, thank you. But maybe I'll join you for a cup of coffee while I wait?"

"Of course!" Mia grinned just as Caleb walked down the stairs carrying her trunk.

"Here. Let me help you with that." Colton rushed over and took one side.

"Thanks, Colton! It's good to see you here this morning." Caleb adjusted his grip.

Mia felt a bit ashamed for having brought so much with her. After all, she had been a dancehall girl and had lots of clothes. She had to. Her job depended on it.

Caleb glanced over at her as they passed. "Go ahead and get us a table. We'll be right back." They walked over to the front of the lobby and set the trunk down by the wall. Caleb said something to the front desk clerk and then he and Colton walked out.

Mia let out a deep breath, knowing she was going to have to have a long talk with him. She wasn't used to being told what to do. She hadn't been in a long time, and she wasn't about to start now.

Mia stepped into the restaurant and a gentleman approached, carrying menus. "Joining us for breakfast?" He looked at her with interest, even though she had two children with her.

"Yes, for my husband, my children and me, and a friend. Five in all," Mia replied flatly.

"Yes, of course." The man's smile disappeared as he cleared his throat. "Right this way, madam."

It seemed strange to be referred to as madam and to have an instant family. But even though it had been less than twenty-four hours, she truly felt that this family was hers now, too.

The waiter laid the menus on a large round table. "Here you go, ma'am."

"Thank you." The gentleman held the chair as she sat with Hailey on her lap. Shane slid onto another seat without incident. At that moment, Mia was grateful to Colton for having had the man-to-man talk with him about women, much to her surprise. But it was refreshing to see a man wanting to teach a boy how to become a man, even at Shane's age.

"Could I start you off with some coffee?" the waiter asked.

“Yes. Three cups, please, and two lemonades.” Mia gave him a courteous smile and then turned her attention back to the menu.

“Right away, ma’am.” The waiter hurried away to do their bidding.

Shane straightened his back and picked up a menu. It was upside down, but he looked so cute trying to read it.

“So, what are you going to have?” she asked Shane, enjoying him trying to act like a man.

“Umm... I’m not sure, but the pancakes look good.”

Mia covered her laugh with a cough. “I make really good pancakes... and French toast, too.”

Shane ignored her and went back to pretending to look at the menu. But at least he wasn’t running around the restaurant this time.

Caleb and Colton walked into the restaurant and Mia waved them over.

“We took care of the trunk and the rig,” Caleb said as he sat down beside Mia. Colton took the other seat. “It’s parked right out front.” Then he turned to Colton. “Thanks for helping me with the trunk. That thing’s heavy.”

Colton’s eyes danced as he glanced over at Mia. “It sure was.”

Mia straightened her back. “Well, a lady needs her things.”

Colton laughed. “Yes, that’s what Ella tells me, too.”

“How are Ella and the babies?” Caleb asked.

Colton grinned. “They’re doing just fine. I have to be getting back soon. Don’t want to leave her with two screaming babies alone for too long.”

“Isn’t the doctor there?” Mia asked.

Colton nodded. “Yes, but he might be called away at any moment.”

Just then, the waiter returned with three cups of coffee and two glasses of lemonade.

“If you don’t mind,” Colton interjected, “I need two orders of pancakes to go. My wife just had twins and I need to get back to her.”

The man’s eyes brightened. “Well, congratulations! Right away, sir.” Then he turned to Mia and Caleb. “And for you?”

“I’ll have the same.” Caleb closed his menu.

Shane repeated his father’s actions, laying his menu down. “Me, too.”

One corner of Caleb’s lips curled into a smile. “Bring one for my daughter, too.”

“I’ll have the same,” Mia quickly interjected before Caleb could order for her. “If you could please make his order first, though, it would be a big help.” She nodded toward Colton.

The waiter nodded. “Right away, ma’am.” Then he hurried away.

“Thanks for that.” Colton took a sip of his coffee and swallowed. “I don’t want to leave Ella alone for too long.”

Caleb took a sip of his coffee and swallowed. “If you like, we can help you bring Ella and the babies back.” Steam rose from his coffee cup as he wrapped his hand around it.

“I would appreciate that, reverend.” Colton smiled. “I’m not sure how we would manage with two newborn babies alone in a buckboard in this snow.”

“Is she well enough to travel?” A crease formed between Mia’s eyes. “We can always come back to help when she’s ready.” The scent of fresh coffee wafted toward her as she lifted it to her lips. The delicious hot liquid rushed down her throat, instantly warming her.

Colton shook his head. “No, we’ll have to go back today. I have some cash with me, but I wasn’t planning on staying here for long.”

Caleb nodded. “Well then, breakfast is on me.”

Colton’s head snapped up, his eyes wide. “Now, preacher. I can’t let you do that.”

“No, it’s the least we could do after all you’ve done for us.” A broad grin spread across his lips. “Besides, we’re celebrating the birth of your children!”

“Yes, we are.” Colton lifted his coffee up and Caleb touched his cup against his, the clinking sound resonating in the small space.

Just then, the waiter approached with a small box. “Here you go, mister. That’ll be—”

“Put it on our tab,” Caleb cut him off.

“As you wish.” The waiter nodded to Caleb. “Your meals will be ready in just a

minute.” Then he hurried to the front of the restaurant where a lady was waiting alone.

Colton shifted the box to one arm and offered his hand to Caleb. “Thanks, preacher. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yes, Colton, I did.” Caleb stood and shook his hand. “We’ll be over just as soon as we finish eating.”

“See you then.” Colton tipped his hat to Mia. “Ma’am.”

Mia nodded. “Give Ella my best and tell her I can’t wait to see her and the babies.”

Deep down, she wondered if she would ever have a baby, too. But with the arrangement that she and Caleb had, it was unlikely. She would have to be content with mothering Shane and Hailey, and being a surrogate aunt to Ella and Colton’s children.

A broad grin spread across Colton’s lips. “I will.” Then with one last nod, he headed out the door. He had so much pep in his step it was clear that he was over the moon about the births of his children.

“Did you sleep well last night?” Mia asked innocently, taking a sip of her coffee.

“Tolerably.” Caleb wrapped his hands around his coffee cup. He lifted an eyebrow as he looked into her eyes, causing her heart to flutter at just the simple gesture. By the way her body was reacting to this man, she was going to have a hard time trying to abide by Caleb’s wishes to keep their relationship platonic. “And you?”

“Tolerably.” She took a sip of her coffee to hide what she was feeling. Despite being completely exhausted, she had tossed and turned the whole night, thinking of Caleb.

“Here you go.” The waiter placed their plates on the table before them. “Can I get you anything else? More coffee, perhaps?”

Caleb nodded. “Yes, please.”

“Right away, sir.” The waiter hurried away, checking on the pretty woman sitting alone a few tables down from theirs.

“So, tell me about Whiskey River,” Mia coaxed in an effort to lighten the moment as she cut up Shane’s pancakes and then Hailey’s. “How are the people?”

Caleb’s face brightened. “Well, Wyatt Nash is the new saloon owner, and his wife is Madison....” He continued talking between bites as he dug into his pancakes.

After the children were squared away, Mia listened as he went on about the townsfolk of Whiskey River, telling her all about them, sparing no detail. From the way he was talking about them, it was clear that he loved the town and the people in it.

“And then there’s the princess....”

Mia nearly spit out her coffee. She dabbed at her lips. “A princess? I thought that Ella was just kidding.”

“Nope!” Shane bounced in his seat. “Her name is Gabriella, and she really is a princess!”

Caleb smiled. “That’s Mrs. Price to you.”

“Is this true?” Mia arched an eyebrow.

Caleb chuckled. “Every word.”

“So, how did she come to be in Whiskey River?” Mia was intrigued, catching herself leaning in a bit closer to listen.

Caleb told her the story of how Gabriella was kidnapped and literally fell onto Dirk Price’s doorstep. When he finished the exciting tale, Mia was so intrigued that she almost forgot to eat as she fed Hailey.

Caleb dabbed at his lips with his napkin. “Well, I think we’d better go before it starts snowing again.”

When Mia looked out the window, the sun was shining outside. It was clear that it had stopped snowing for the moment. “Do you think it’s safe?” Mia finished her meal and the last of her coffee. Then sat back, fully sated. It was the first meal she was able to enjoy since stepping off the train.

Caleb finished the last bite of his pancakes and swallowed. “The snow stuck last night, but not enough to keep us from going home. So, we have to git while the gittin’s good.” He smiled as he finished the last of his coffee and stood. “I’ll be right back.” He walked over to the front register to settle their bill.

Mia wished she could contribute, but she had brought little money with her. She only had a few dollars to her name—the last of what Trent Jericho had given her. She reconciled herself to taking in sewing to make money when they get to Whiskey River, if they need it. But for the moment, she would have enough to do stepping into her new life caring for the children and the household. Of course, making their clothes herself would save them a lot of money, too.

“Come here, little girl.” Mia picked up a cloth napkin and wiped the syrup off Hailey’s sticky hands and face. “There you go. Much better.” Then she turned to her new son. “Shane?”

But he quickly picked up a napkin and sloppily wiped his face and his hands. "I can do it myself."

"So you can." Mia smiled as she took Hailey's hand and pushed in her chair. Shane was about to run off toward his father, but Mia stopped him. "Push in your chair first and stay with me."

Shane narrowed his eyes at her but did as she said. When she reached for his hand, he pulled away. But one thing to his credit was that he walked by her side instead of running away this time.

After paying the bill, Caleb slid his wallet into his back pocket and turned to Mia. "Ready?"

She nodded and he took Hailey from her, holding her with one arm. "Ready, baby girl?"

Caleb held the door open for Mia. Much to her surprise, Shane waited for them instead of running ahead and jumping into the back of the buckboard. She guessed that he had taken Colton's little talk to heart. Even though she wished it had been Caleb to give him the talk instead, Mia knew she had to be patient with him.

Outside, snow covered the ground in a soft white blanket, but the sun shone brightly overhead. As Caleb had said, they didn't appear to be in danger of getting caught in another snowstorm on the way home. Home. She hadn't even laid eyes on it yet, but she was already coming to think of Whiskey River as her home.

Caleb offered her his hand and helped her into his buckboard and then handed Hailey up to her. The little girl went to her with ease and sat on the bench seat between them, but Mia kept her arm around her to keep her from falling.

Shane climbed up into the back of the buckboard and sat with his back against the bench seat, while Caleb climbed in the front beside Mia. Within minutes, they pulled in front of the little white house that served as the doctor's office and makeshift hospital at the edge of town.

"Whoa!" Caleb pulled the team to a stop, pulled the brake, and then stepped down and walked around to Mia. "Shall we?" He reached for Hailey and then took Mia's hand. Just his simple words caused her face to flush. As she stepped down from the buckboard, she knew she was going to have to get her emotions under control before she made a fool of herself.

If he saw her reaction, he didn't acknowledge it, but he offered her his arm and she took it, letting him help her through the snow and up the wooden steps leading to the doctor's office.

Caleb knocked and a moment later, it swung open.

"Welcome!" Doctor Allaway said, another cigar between his teeth. "Come on in! I suppose you're here to see your friends."

"Yes, please." Caleb stepped back and let Mia walk in first. "So, how's your patient doing?"

The doctor chuckled. "You mean patients. Mother and babies are all doing just fine." The doctor closed the door behind them and then walked back into his makeshift hospital, expecting them to follow.

"Mia!" Ella was sitting on the edge of the bed, fully dressed and holding one of the babies. She motioned for her to come to her and then pulled her in for a hug. Colton was standing off to the side, holding the other baby.

“How are you feeling?” Mia’s eyebrows lifted in concern.

“Sore, but good.” Ella held the baby up to her. “Would you mind taking Hannah for me for a minute?”

“I’d be glad to.” Mia smiled as she carefully took the baby.

“Caleb, would you take Blake for me?” Colton’s eyebrows pulled together in concern.

“Yes, of course.” Caleb took the baby boy and Colton rushed to Ella’s side to help her up.

“Can you walk, or would you like me to carry you?” Colton asked.

Ella smiled. “Don’t be silly. Just give me your arm.” He helped her up and she walked slowly.

“Oh, the hell with this.” Colton carefully swept her up into his arms.

Ella cringed a bit but wrapped her arms around her husband’s neck. “Colton! Your language! The preacher!”

Everyone laughed, standing back to clear the way for Colton as he carried her purposefully out the door. “Oh, I’m sure it’s not anything Caleb hasn’t heard before.”

“Colton!” Ella chuckled.

“Oh, it’s all right.” Caleb laughed as he and Mia carried the babies, following them out. “He’s right. It’s nothing I haven’t heard before.”

Outside, Colton had placed some blankets in the back of his buckboard so she and the babies could ride in comfort, with the promise of returning them back to the doctor. He placed Ella in the back and then climbed up to help her get comfortable. She didn't lay down, but sat up, leaning against the back of the front bench seat. Then he took the baby from Caleb, swaddled him, and handed him to Ella.

"Mia, would you mind riding in the back with Ella?" Colton asked, taking the baby from her.

Mia smiled. "I'd be glad to." Then she turned to Caleb. "Would you mind? Hailey can ride in the back with us."

"No, not at all." Then Caleb turned to his son. "Shane, would you like to ride with the women or with me?"

Shane scrunched up his nose. "No, I'll ride with you." He squared his shoulders. "I'm a man now." He looked over at Colton and smiled.

Colton gave him a wink.

Caleb laughed. "I have a feeling that I'm missing something."

Mia chuckled. "I'll tell you about it when we get home." She was about to give him a hug, but it felt too awkward.

Caleb gave her a small smile as he helped her into the back with Ella. "I'm looking forward to it." Then he handed Hailey up to her.

Once she was settled, Colton handed her the other baby. Mia looked into the baby girl's eyes, and she was just as beautiful as her mother. It was obvious that both babies had inherited their parent's good looks.

“She’s beautiful.” Mia’s eyes were filled with wonder. “You did good, Ella.”

“She’s just as beautiful as her mother,” Colton proudly interjected.

“Well, it’s obvious that both babies have inherited their parents’ good looks,” Mia agreed.

Caleb reached over the back and gave Mia’s hand a gentle squeeze. “Will you be all right?”

Mia smiled, touched by the gesture. “Yes, of course. Besides, Ella and I haven’t had a chance to get caught up on our gossip yet.”

Caleb laughed. “Well, in that case, I’m out of here.” Then he turned to Colton. “You take the lead and I’ll follow closely behind.”

Colton nodded. “Much obliged. We’ll see you in Whiskey River.”

“If you need anything, just pull over.” With that, Caleb turned to Shane. “Let’s go, son.”

Shane puffed up his chest and climbed up into the buckboard on the bench seat beside his father.

When everyone was settled, they started the slow journey home. On the way, Mia wondered what she would be going home to.

“So, how’s everything going?” Ella asked, bringing her from her reverie when they were alone and could talk without anyone listening.

“What?”

“Between you and Caleb,” Ella replied as if Mia should have known what she was talking about. “How’s it going?”

“So far, so good.” Mia chuckled. “Although I owe Colton.”

A crease formed between Ella’s eyes. “Uh-oh! What did he do?”

“Colton gave Shane a man-to-man talk this morning about how to treat women.” She chuckled at the memory. “It was priceless.”

Ella gasped. “He didn’t!”

Mia laughed. “Yes, he did.”

“Colton needs to learn how to keep his nose out of other people’s business.”

Colton looked over his shoulder. “What was that?”

“Nothing,” Mia interjected. “Nothing at all.” Then she turned her attention back to Ella. “No, he did just the right kind of interfering. Shane was running away from me when Colton stopped him. In fact, he might have run right out into the street if Colton hadn’t intervened. Then he gave him a talk about the fine points of how a gentleman treats a lady.” Mia chuckled. “I loved it. I just wish Caleb had been the one to tell him.”

Ella nodded, turning her attention back to the baby boy in her arms.

“So, you’re a mother now.” Mia smiled. “Do you have enough baby clothes?”

Ella shrugged. “I have plenty. My friend Madison, Wyatt’s new wife, has been helping me make baby clothes, along with the other ladies of the church. But she’s

been quite busy between teaching school and settling into married life.”

Guilt filled Mia’s chest. “I’m so sorry. I should have been helping you to prepare. I’m afraid that I haven’t been the best friend in the world lately.”

“Oh, hush.” A crease formed between Ella’s eyes. “You’ve had your hands full trying to make ends meet after I left. I’m so sorry I left you high and dry.”

“Well, I think you’ve had enough to think about without having to worry about me.” She looked down at the baby in her arms as she spoke to Mia. “But let’s make a deal. Let’s not feel guilty about the past. After all, life just took us in different directions.”

“But you’re here now.” Ella smiled as a devilish look appeared in her eyes.

Mia could just imagine what was going through Ella’s mind as she remembered the times they shared in the tenement in New York. “Yes, I am. And that means that if you need anything, let me know. I’m here to help.”

Ella smiled. “As much as I like hearing that, I’m afraid you’ll have enough to think about with settling into your new life besides worrying about me.”

Mia sighed. “I just hope that Caleb comes to accept me into his family.”

Ella’s eyebrows pulled together as one corner of her lips curled into a smile. “What do you mean? He married you, didn’t he? If that isn’t acceptance, then I don’t know what is.”

Mia shrugged. “I hope you’re right.”

Mia and Ella spent the rest of the long ride to Whiskey River talking and getting caught up on things after not having seen each other for so long. But before long, they

came to a farmhouse with a long drive, blanketed in snow.

“Well, this is it!” Ella announced. “Home sweet home.”

Mia took in the wraparound front porch, and the big house with the barn in the back. “Oh, Ella! It’s lovely! It suits you both perfectly.”

“Thank you.” Ella cringed when the wagon jolted to a stop.

“Are you okay?” Mia asked.

Ella held a finger to her lips. “I’m fine, but please don’t tell Colton anything. He worries too much.”

Mia smiled, nodding in agreement. After all that she and Ella had been through together, it was good to see her so happy. A lot had changed in such a short period of time. They had both gone from being single dancehall girls to married women in less than a year. The good Lord sure did work in strange ways.

“Well, this is it!” Colton announced, walking around from the front of the buckboard. “Here. I’ll take him.” Colton took the baby boy from Ella’s hands as if he were precious cargo. And he really was.

“Here. I’ll help.” Caleb reached for the baby and Colton handed him to him.

Then Colton climbed up into the back of the buckboard and helped Ella to the end. Once she was ready, he jumped off and scooped her up into his arms with ease.

“Land’s sake!” Ella announced, trying to brush him off. “I can walk. I’m not an invalid.”

Colton shook his head and smiled, obviously enjoying the feel of his wife in his arms a bit too much. “Not while I’m around. You just had the babies yesterday and you need me to take care of you.”

Ella just shook her head as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “If you say so, dear.”

A triumphant smile spread across his lips. “Now, that’s more like it!”

“Oh, stop it!” Ella hit him playfully on the chest.

Colton started to walk away, but said to Caleb over his shoulder, “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Caleb laughed, shaking his head in disbelief. “We’ll be right here.” After he was gone, he glanced over at Mia and smiled. “What did he think? That we were going to take off with his children?” Then he helped her down out of the wagon, both of them holding the babies, and then they helped Hailey down, too.

Mia laughed, adjusting the baby in her arms. “No, he’s just being a good husband and a good father.”

Caleb’s smile faded, nodding in agreement.

A moment later, Colton bounded down the stairs and took his daughter from Mia’s arms. “Come on in, preacher. Stay a while.”

Caleb shook his head. “No, thank you. We’ll help you get settled in, but we have to be getting home. I’d bet ol’ Bessy is about to bust right now.” When he saw Mia’s eyebrows pull together in concern, he added, “Bessy’s our milk cow.”

“Well, while you men talk, I’m going inside to say goodbye to Ella.” Mia hurried down the walk, up the stairs, and then opened the door. “Ella?”

“In here!” Ella’s voice came from another room.

Mia walked in her direction and stepped into her bedroom. Ella was in bed, lying on her side. “Feeling okay?”

Ella nodded. “I just need to rest.”

Mia crossed the room and gave her friend a kiss on the forehead. “Take care of yourself and get some rest. I’ll see you soon.”

A smile spread across Ella’s lips as her eyes began to close. “See you Sunday.”

With that, Mia walked out and met Colton and Caleb in the living room. Hailey was holding onto her father’s coattail, yawning. Mia scooped her up into her arms and Hailey laid her head on Mia’s shoulder. “Ella’s nearly asleep.” Then she glanced down at Hailey. “And it looks as if someone else is ready for a nap, too.”

Colton nodded. “I’ll be right back.” He headed into the bedroom and was back within seconds and took the other baby from Caleb. Smiling, he looked into Caleb’s eyes. “Thanks for everything.”

Caleb gave his shoulder a manly squeeze. “No, thank you. What you did for us... well—”

“No need to say anything more.” Colton stopped him. “What are friends for, right?”

Caleb and Mia said their last goodbyes and then closed the door behind them. Shane was playing outside in the snow.

Mia looked over at her new son. “Shane, why don’t you hop up into the seat and let’s go?”

He folded his arms across his chest. “You’re not my mother, so don’t tell me what to do!”

Caleb gave him a swat on the bottom and Shane’s eyes welled up with tears. “Shane, I told you that we treat each other with respect... and that includes Mia. You don’t have to call her Ma if you don’t want to, but you will treat her with respect. And if she asks you to do something, you will do it. Understand?”

Shane nodded, saying nothing as he glared at his father.

“What was that?” Caleb asked, his eyebrows raised.

Shane swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

“Now....” Caleb looked into his son’s bright blue eyes. “Would you like to climb up into the front seat of your own accord, or would you like me to put you there?”

Without another word, Shane climbed up onto the front seat.

Once everyone was settled in, Caleb took the reins, and clicked his tongue. Immediately, the horses launched into an easy trot. On the way home, Caleb didn’t look over at Mia at all, nor did he speak. Now that they were alone, it appeared that he was going to talk to her only when necessary.

On the way home, she reached for Shane’s hand, but he pulled away and folded his arms across his chest, silent tears flowing down his cheeks. She had hoped that Colton’s talk would have sunk in, and it wouldn’t have come down to this. But she guessed that a confrontation was inevitable. After all, the boy was being forced to

tolerate another woman in the place of his mother. Her heart went out to him. She knew that he would never think of her as his mother, but she hoped that, one day, he would at least come to accept her as a member of the family.

Mia was lost in thought as they rode home. The rhythm of the horses' slow trot lulled Hailey to sleep in no time, and before long, Shane leaned his head against Mia's arm and drifted off to sleep. Then he caught himself and sat up abruptly, gave her a dirty look, and turned his eyes to the road.

Mia's heart sank. She hadn't quite known what to expect when she came here, but this wasn't it. She knew that Caleb and the children were hurting, but she hadn't expected Caleb to treat her like an outsider invading their territory, speaking to her only when necessary. She knew it would take time for them to accept her into the family, and she just had to have patience. At that moment, she vowed to do what she could to lessen their pain and win them over.

Mia just hoped that she could get past the shadow of his late wife. She could see her everywhere. In Caleb's eyes every time he looked at her, and in the eyes of the children. She felt her presence in Shane's loyalty, in Hailey's need for a mother, and in Caleb's loyalty by only speaking to her when necessary.

This was Mia's first real relationship, and definitely not what she had expected. As a child, her dreams were the same as every girl her age: to be swept off her feet by her knight in shining armor and carried away on his white steed.

But dreams were overrated.

Before they were married, Caleb had made no pretenses about their relationship and what he had expected from it. He needed someone to care for his children and his home. Nothing more. And that was what she had agreed to in exchange for a good home, food in her stomach, and to be treated with civility. And Caleb had done just

that so far. What was there to complain about? Giving up her dream of romance was a small price to pay.

Then her thoughts went to Ella and the babies. She let out a deep breath, knowing that she would never have a baby. But she had already come to think of his children as her own. And right now, they were more than enough.

Mia adjusted the quilt once more over herself and the children to keep them warm. Shane pulled away from her every time she tried to tuck the blanket in around him. But when he started shivering violently, he relented. She felt bad for the children to be out in the cold like this, but she knew they would soon be home.

Twilight began to fall over the earth, casting golden and orange hues and long shadows across the snow. Just then, Caleb pulled the team onto a sprawling farm where a white, wooden house with a huge front porch stood in the middle of a field blanketed in snow. It looked cozy, even if it didn't quite feel like home yet.

Caleb pulled the team to a stop in front of the house, and Shane jumped over the seat into the back and then jumped down out of the buckboard and ran inside.

"Well, this is it," Caleb announced a bit too cheerfully. He pulled the brake and wrapped the reins around the front bar. "What do you think?"

Mia jumped slightly, surprised that Caleb had finally spoken to her and was asking her opinion. "I like it," she answered, smiling. "It's beautiful." It sure beat the tenement she had rented in New York with Ella. But at that moment, she missed it profoundly.

Caleb smiled. "It's not much, but it's home."

"It's wonderful," she replied, smiling as he took Hailey from her and helped her from

the buckboard.

“I’m glad you like it.” He offered her his arm to help her up the stairs. “I’ll put some more salt on the steps so it won’t be slippery for you and the children.”

She smiled. “It’s fine.”

He held the door open for her, but her breath caught when she walked in. Everything was in order, probably thanks to the ladies of the church. It appeared that he had tried to clean up before she came, but it could definitely use a woman’s touch. It was clear that he and the children had been on their own for a while, even if it had been for just a few short months.

A lump formed in her throat as she looked around the house, although she wasn’t exactly sure why. Mia guessed that it was because she felt as if she were invading another woman’s home. When she looked around, Jessica was everywhere.

Hailey woke up and struggled to get down, so Mia set her on her feet and watched as she scampered off. Even though Hailey was little, Mia’s arms felt as if they were about to fall off from carrying her. She had never been around children for any length of time before and wasn’t used to carrying a little one around so much.

“Come with me and I’ll show you around,” Caleb offered happily. He opened the door to what she assumed was the spare room, and everything in there was fairly neat. There were some toys on the bed, but the room showed promise. “This is your room. I’m in the process of moving the children’s things over to the master bedroom.” He closed the door, and then walked over to what she had assumed was the master bedroom. It was a bit larger and there was a curtain hanging in the center across the length of the room, dividing it into separate spaces.

The children were already sitting on the floor, playing. Shane’s eyes narrowed when

he saw Mia, and then he went back to playing with his soldiers.

“I’ll share this room with the children,” Caleb announced, claiming her attention, “and you’ll have the spare room to yourself.”

Mia made a mental note to make cleaning this room a priority when she had the chance.

Caleb rubbed his hands together, causing his arm muscles to flex under his crisp white shirt and gray vest. “Okay, then. I’ll leave you to settle in. I’ll be right back with your things.”

“Would you like any help?” she offered, her eyebrows lifting.

He shook his head as he hurried out of the bedroom. “No, I’ve got it. I’ll be right back.”

She nodded her thanks, glad that he was talking to her again, at least.

Mia looked around, not quite knowing where to begin as the muted sounds of the children playing filled the house. Well, first thing’s first, she thought to herself. If she was going to make the house a home, then she’d better get started.

She walked into the kitchen and dainty, frilly doilies lay across the countertops and on the table. She carefully folded the doilies on the countertop and opened the drawers until she found where they belonged, not to rid the house of Jessica’s memory, but to open up some workable counter space.

Next, she filled two steel buckets that she found in the utility room off from the kitchen with water and put them on the stove to boil. The kitchen and the house reminded her of her childhood. Making bread and baking with her mother had created

fond memories that had sustained her through many hard times. This kitchen was very much like her mother's kitchen from her childhood.

Mia unbuttoned and pushed up the sleeves of her dress and prepared to wash the few dishes that were in the sink. She knew she should have changed her clothes first, but she was eager to get started in her new home. Also, they hadn't eaten anything since breakfast and, although they hadn't said anything yet, she knew they must have been starving.

"Where are Jessica's doilies that were on the counters?" Caleb froze as he entered the kitchen.

Mia let out a deep breath. "I folded them up and put them in a drawer." She looked at him kindly. "Caleb, I'm not trying to get rid of her. I just need the counter space."

Caleb raised an eyebrow as if he were about to say something, but then he nodded in understanding. "I want you to make yourself at home here."

She nodded. "And in order to do that, I'll have to move some things around."

"Yes. Do what you must." Then he turned on his heel and left the room abruptly.

As she prepared their dinner, she wondered if he would ever come to accept her. Not as his wife, but as a part of the family.

Caleb

Faint rays of morning sunlight shone through the window as Caleb tried to orient himself the next morning. Suddenly, the events of the day before ran through his mind. He sat up and scrubbed his hands across his face.

Guilt reared its ugly head within his chest at the thought of having betrayed his wife by even entertaining the thought of marrying another, let alone going through with it. But deep down in his heart, he knew that Jessica would have wanted their children to have a mother, and for him to have someone to care for, and someone to care for him.

But knowing those things sure didn't make it any easier.

Alone, he knelt by his bed and prayed that God could forgive him, and that Jessica could forgive him for making this choice, even though he felt it was the only choice he could make.

But now that the choice was made, he was determined to make the best of it.

After he finished his morning prayers, he poured water into the porcelain basin—white with a blue pattern across it—and slipped on his pants, leaving his chest and his feet bare like he did every morning. The cool morning air felt good against his skin.

He headed past the children where they were still in their beds, sleeping soundly. He stood in the doorway for a moment, watching them sleep, knowing things were just as hard on them as it was on him.

Caleb headed into the living room and placed another log on the fire. Warmth immediately filled the room. The fresh scent of coffee wafted through the house. He was surprised that Mia was up and about so early.

“Good morning,” she said, handing him a cup of coffee as he walked into the kitchen.

Even though he knew she would be there, her presence in his house still took him by surprise. “Good morning. What got you up so early?” He leaned against the counter as he took a sip. “Umm... good coffee.”

A small smile lit her lips as her eyes went from his face to his bare chest. Then, she quickly looked away, turning her attention back to the bacon that she was frying on the stove. “I’m an early riser. I can get a lot of work done if I get up early. The earlier, the better.”

He looked around the kitchen and everything was in place. The dishes were washed and put away, the counters were clean, and the kitchen table had been cleared off and was set with breakfast dishes. “From the look of it, you must have gotten up pretty early.”

She glanced over at him and smiled, and then her eyes went to his bare chest again. “Not that early. I’ve been up for a few hours.”

“Looks like it. And I thought that I got up early.” He smiled as he set down his coffee. “I’ll be right back.”

Caleb walked into the bedroom and pulled on a clean shirt, then headed back into the kitchen again where Mia was putting breakfast on the table. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again,” he said, referring to him walking around the house without a shirt.

Her eyes met his. “No, it’s all right. Don’t worry.”

“Can I do anything to help?” he asked as he took another sip of his coffee, watching her work. It felt good to watch a woman work in the kitchen again. Then he turned away as guilt filled his chest, unable to believe that his thoughts had betrayed him like that.

Mia shook her head. “No, thanks. I have everything under control. Go ahead and sit down while I put breakfast on the table.”

Caleb’s thoughts went to the night before. “Listen, Mia. I’m sorry about what I said the other night... about you disciplining the children.”

She shook her head as she scrambled the eggs. “It doesn’t matter.”

Caleb placed his hands on her shoulders, forcing her to look at him. “Yes, it does matter.” He thought for a moment as he looked into her bright green eyes. “You were right. If I handle everything with the children, then they won’t respect you.” He let out a deep breath. “Please, be patient with me. I’ve been protective of the kids for so long... I’m not used to anyone else taking charge with them....”

“Shh....” Mia pressed her finger gently to his lips, sending shivers over his body. “It’s okay. It’ll work out.” She bit her lower lip and released it. “But there is one thing that I want to speak with you about.”

“Oh?” His eyebrows rose. “And what’s that?”

She let out a deep breath. “I’ve been on my own for some time now, and I’m not used to being told what to do. In fact, I never liked it. So, if you don’t mind, please ask if you want me to do something, but don’t order me. Also, ask me what I want and don’t order for me.”

Anger filled his chest, but he nodded. Clearly, this woman wasn’t Jessica, and he

couldn't expect her to be. "Anything else?"

She let out a deep breath, her eyes meeting his. "Shane."

He nodded. "I'll talk to him today. I can't believe he acted that way in Laramie. He never does."

"I'm an outsider, coming in and invading his territory." She shrugged as she set a plate of toast on the table and turned to face him. "He's just being loyal... to his mother."

Guilt caused a lump to form in his throat. Caleb was tired of feeling guilty. Feeling guilty for not being able to handle the children, his congregation, and the farm all on his own. Feeling guilty for not having taken care of Jessica better. Feeling guilty for taking a wife out of survival.

But it was either that or lose everything... including his children, and that was out of the question. He would do anything for them, including giving his own life.

Caleb's eyebrows pulled together in concern as he watched her place the bowl of scrambled eggs on the table. And now, guilt raised up within him for having feelings for another woman. Even if he was legally married to Mia, he was still married to Jessica in his heart.

He pushed the thought aside, remembering his promise to try and make the best of it. "Everything looks great. Thank you, Mia."

She shrugged as she spooned scrambled eggs onto her plate. "It was my pleasure. I'll try and see if I can get the house in order today."

Caleb nodded as he took a bite of his bacon. "Sounds good." He thought for a

moment, and then added, “Mia, I hate to leave you alone on your first day here, but I have to visit some parishioners. I’m behind on my visits. Will you be okay with the kids and the house?”

She nodded. “Yes, of course. Also, I was thinking that if we needed extra money, I could take in some sewing... maybe even sew for the dress shop.”

Caleb shook his head. “That’s not necessary. Let’s just take it a day at a time for now.”

She nodded, giving him a small smile.

From her reaction, Caleb thought that she might like to work. After all, she was used to working and providing for herself all this time. He suspected that it might be difficult for her to get used to having a man to care for her. But, for now, he just wanted some normalcy to his life again.

“Is there anything else you’d like me to do today? Anything pressing?” she asked casually, bringing him from his reverie as she nibbled on a slice of toast.

Caleb shook his head. “No, I was just going to ask if you could get the house in order and take care of the children, but it looks as if you have everything under control.”

She nodded as she took another sip of her coffee.

“By the way, there’s plenty of food in the pantry,” Caleb continued. “And if you feel up to it, there are plenty of chickens out back in the henhouse.”

Mia nearly spit out her coffee. “You want me to... kill a chicken?”

He shrugged, not understanding what the problem was. “Didn’t you kill chickens

back east?"

She laughed. "No, we went to the meat market."

Caleb frowned as he got up and placed his plate in the sink. That was all he needed, a frail woman who couldn't kill a chicken. After all, it wasn't as if he had just asked her to kill a cow. "Don't worry. The men and I slaughter the pigs and cows in the summer."

Her eyes flew open wide. "How many do you kill?"

He shrugged. "One cow and one pig per family. Then, we cure the meat, smoke it, and it lasts all winter. The rest, we sell."

Mia's body went rigid. "And what part will I play in that?"

Caleb sighed. "Well, usually the women help out in the kitchen and with curing the meat. It's actually a lot of fun. A community affair." Taking in the frown on her face, he added, "Here in the country, we all pull together. We wouldn't be able to survive otherwise."

She nodded as she pushed her plate aside.

Caleb shook his head, knowing that she had lost her appetite. He poured himself another cup of coffee to take with him. It was too good to let go to waste. "Have a good day."

"Shall I expect you home for lunch?" Mia asked, raising her eyebrows.

Caleb hated seeing the hopeful look in her eyes. He didn't want her to show interest in him. To care for him. Just caring for the children would be enough.

“No.” He put on his cowboy hat and slipped on his heavy coat. “One of the parishioners usually asks me to stay for lunch.”

A disappointed look appeared in her eyes, and then it was gone.

Now, he felt guilty for not allowing himself to care for Mia. But wasn't providing a roof over her head and food in her stomach enough? Many women would love to stay at home and care for the children while the man worked. He gave her a nod, silently telling her goodbye.

“What time shall I expect you home for dinner?” she asked, hopeful.

He placed his hand on the door but didn't look at her. “I won't be back home until later tonight.” Then a thought occurred to him as he looked in her direction but didn't look in her eyes. “Will you be okay with the children alone all day?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her nod. “We'll be fine.”

He nodded as he walked out, closing the door tightly behind him.

As he hitched up the team, his thoughts went back to Mia. He could tell that she was a loving, caring person, and he knew that, one day, just caring for the children wouldn't be enough. A woman like that needed someone to care for her, too. But he just didn't have it in him. That part of him lay dormant, having died right along with Jessica.

At least he would be able to make his rounds without feeling guilty for leaving the children in the care of a neighbor. For that peace of mind alone, Mia was worth her weight in gold. At least that was something.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Mia

After Caleb left, the children were still sleeping, so Mia decided to go out to the henhouse to collect the eggs and milk the cow, knowing that, in the west, it would be the responsibility of the wife to do such things. In the city, she would have just dressed the children and went to the market. But she had a feeling that she would be laughed out of town if she went to the general store to buy things that were plentiful on their farm.

Mia looked in on the children once more, and they were still sleeping, so she slipped on a heavy coat and went out to the henhouse. The door to the henhouse was barely big enough for a chicken to fit through, but she crawled in as the chickens clucked and fussed and flew right at her while she gathered the eggs. A few minutes later, feathers were everywhere—even in her hair—and the chickens were very upset, but by the time she was finished, she had all the eggs in a basket. Feeling accomplished, she set the basket on the counter in the kitchen, and then went in to check on the children.

Since they were still sleeping, she headed out to the barn, found a clean milk pail setting off to the side, and then tied the cow up to what she assumed was the milking post. Then she placed her hands on her hips and looked at the cow. The cow looked at her as if she was a crazy woman with feathers in her hair and who knew what else all over her.

“Now, you and I are going to have a little talk.” The cow turned around and looked at her. “After what I went through with the chickens, I don’t want any trouble from you.” Again, the cow just looked at her. “Now, don’t you look at me that way.”

Feeling sure that she and the cow had a mutual understanding, she set the pail under the cow, took an utter in each hand, and the cow kicked her, sending her flying backward into the slushy mud where people had walked through over and again.

Determined not to let the cow get the best of her, she set the stool beside the cow again, took an utter in each hand, and pulled. Only one little squirt of milk came out. “Well, now! That won’t do! That just won’t do at all!”

“Would you like some help?” a feminine voice asked behind her, sounding like a proper Georgia society lady.

Mia jumped to see an older woman with silver, curly hair watching her.

“Oh!” Mia gasped as she attempted to smooth her hair in place. “I’m sorry! I didn’t hear you come up!”

The woman suppressed a smile. “I’m sorry to startle you, but I’m Mrs. Abigail Jenkins. I own the boardinghouse. So sorry for the intrusion, but I heard that Preacher Henley got married, and I wanted to come over to meet you and to see if you needed any help.”

Mia looked at her sheepishly. “Do you know how to milk a cow?”

The elder woman nodded, but to Mia’s relief, she didn’t laugh. “I do, but most folks around here keep their milk in the root cellar. The preacher may have already milked the cow this morning before he left. Now, let’s go inside and get you cleaned up. Besides, the children should be waking up soon.”

Mia put the cow back in the barn, along with the milk pail, rubbing her chest where the cow had kicked her. “Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins.”

The elder woman slid her arm in hers. "I'll show you how to milk a cow later, if you like." She looked her over and pulled a feather out of her hair.

"I'm so sorry," Mia said, embarrassed. "I must look a fright."

Creases formed around the woman's eyes as she smiled. "Don't worry. We've all had our moments when we were just starting out. Are you from the city?"

Mia nodded. "New York."

"I see," Mrs. Jenkins said, guiding her toward the henhouse. Upon seeing Mia, the chickens started fussing again. "Life in the west is a bit different."

"I'd say!" Mia chuckled as she attempted to brush some muck off her coat.

"Before we go in, would you mind if I show you how to gather the eggs without disrupting the hens?" Even though Mia was sure she looked funny, the woman was kind, maintaining a straight face as she spoke to her.

Mia sighed with relief. "Yes, please."

Mrs. Jenkins showed her how to walk around the outside of the henhouse and slip her hand in through the slats on the outside of the henhouse for the eggs. The chickens fussed a little, but they weren't in a complete tizzy as they were earlier. "That way, you don't have to go inside the henhouse to collect the eggs."

"Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins," Mia said as they walked toward the house. "I knew there had to be a better way."

Mrs. Jenkins chuckled. "There usually is, but we have to learn them. I guarantee you that before long, you'll be a professional at all of this." She waved her hand around

them dismissively.

“I sure hope so,” Mia said as they approached the back door. “Would you like to come in?” She could see that the woman meant well, and that she wasn’t there to snoop or to collect information to carry back to her friends. “Also, would you mind keeping this between us?” Mia pointed to her hair.

The elder woman laughed. “What?” she teased, a sparkle in her eyes. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Mia laughed. “Thank you. You’re too kind.”

“What happened to you?” Shane scoffed, standing in the middle of the kitchen with his hands on his hips, still dressed in his long johns.

“Go get dressed, Shane Henley,” Mrs. Jenkins said. “You should know better than to come out here dressed like that around ladies.”

Shane’s eyes grew wide, and he ran off to his room right away.

“How did you do that?” Mia asked appreciatively.

Mrs. Jenkins whispered conspiratorially, “The trick is not to show any fear.”

Mia laughed, knowing that she already liked the woman. “I’ll clean up and will be right back.”

“Take your time.” Mrs. Jenkins was already making herself at home as she put a pot of coffee on to brew when she realized what she had done. “Oh! I’m so sorry. I’m so used to making myself at home in the kitchen. Do you mind?”

Mia shook her head, a smile lighting her lips. “No, not at all.”

“I’m sorry, but I’ve been helping out with the children and old habits die hard.”

“Not to worry,” Mia replied. “Actually, I’m grateful for the help. Make yourself at home, and I’ll be right back.”

She disappeared into her bedroom and peered in the mirror. Feathers stuck out of her hair in all directions. It was a credit to Mrs. Jenkins that she hadn’t died laughing with just one look at her. She cleaned up the best she could, changed her clothes, and then headed back into the kitchen.

When she walked in, Mrs. Jenkins already had the children dressed and sitting at the table. Shane was dressed in mismatched clothes, but dressed he was. Mia made a mental note to make sure that the children were properly dressed before Caleb got home. She didn’t want to give him any fuel for her incompetence, although she was pleasantly surprised that breakfast that morning had gone so well. She sighed as she pushed the memories of his perfect, bare, muscular chest from her mind.

“I’ll make the children some eggs,” Mia said as she walked into the kitchen, washed and dried the eggs, and then set them beside the potbelly stove.

Mrs. Jenkins suppressed a smile. “Just to let you know, Caleb usually keeps the eggs on the counter in a bowl under a dishtowel.” She lifted the dishtowel to reveal more than enough.

They both burst out laughing.

“I found enough eggs for mine and Caleb’s breakfast this morning, but didn’t think there was any more,” Mia said in her defense.

“Also, just to let you know, the milk is in the root cellar,” Mrs. Jenkins added. “Caleb usually milks the cows before visiting his parishioners or working on the farm.”

“Good to know.” Mia was relieved that the woman had come by to show her the ins and outs of farm life. Otherwise, it would have taken much longer to master, learning on her own.

Hailey let out a sleepy yawn, and then headed toward Mia and held out her arms.

Mia scooped her up and propped her on her hip as she continued working. Hailey immediately laid her head on Mia’s shoulder. “What’s the matter, baby girl? Still sleepy?”

Hailey nodded, and then laid her head back on Mia’s shoulder and put her thumb in her mouth.

“We’ll have to work on that.” Mia kissed the top of her head as she took her thumb out of her mouth. Without missing a beat, Mia expertly cracked some eggs with one hand as she held Hailey, scrambled them, and then poured them into a hot skillet.

“So, you can cook?” Mrs. Jenkins asked, obviously impressed.

Mia shrugged. “Simple things.”

“Do you know how to make biscuits?” Mrs. Jenkins poured two cups of coffee, and set one on the counter beside Mia.

Mia shook her head. “No, but I used to make bread with my mother when I was little.”

Mrs. Jenkins raised her eyebrows. “Do you still have the recipe?”

She shook her head. “No, my aunt took them all after my parents died.”

“I’m so sorry to hear that.”

To Mia’s relief, it wasn’t the kind of crippling sympathy that so many other people were quick to give.

Mia guessed that, in the west, people died and experienced loss. It was a fact. It was just how one dealt with it that mattered. “It happened long ago.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Mrs. Jenkins said cheerfully. “I have some recipes that I’ll bring over tomorrow, if you like.”

“That would be nice.” Mia poured the cooked eggs into two bowls. “Do you happen to have a bread recipe, as well?”

Mrs. Jenkins nodded. “Yes, of course.” She gave her hand a gentle pat. “I’ll be sure to bring them over. Here in the west, neighbors help one another....” She leaned in conspiratorially. “And that means sharing recipes, too.”

“Thank you.” Mia smiled as she set one of the bowls in front of Shane. Then, she sat down with Hailey on her lap and started feeding her.

Mrs. Jenkins took Mia’s coffee to her, then sat in another chair and nodded to Hailey. “It looks as if she’s taken right up with you.”

Mia gave Hailey a quick hug. “She’s my girl.”

Hailey looked up and smiled.

“She is not your girl!” Shane yelled as he stomped out of the room, walked into the

bedroom, and slammed the door, rattling the windows in the rest of the house.

Mia let out a deep breath as she continued to feed Hailey. "I'm sorry about that."

Mrs. Jenkins shook her head. "It appears that he's having a difficult time."

Mia nodded. "Everything is just so new. I mean, I haven't even been here for twenty-four hours yet." She sighed, glancing over at the closed door. "He's just showing loyalty to the memory of his mother. I guess he thinks I'm coming in here and taking over... and I guess I have. It's just a lot for him to handle." Mia hugged little Hailey. "But this little one was too little really to know what was going on at the time, so I guess it's easier for her."

Mrs. Jenkins listened attentively. "She needs a mother."

"They've all been through a lot."

Mrs. Jenkins sighed. "How's Caleb handling it?"

"Not well." Mia shook her head. "He won't talk to me unless it's necessary. We went to dinner last night in town, and it was a disaster." It was nearly an exact repeat of the dinner scene in Laramie with Shane running around while Caleb chased him around the restaurant, and Mia trying to hold it together, internally ready to climb under the table. A small smile lit her lips as she gently nudged Mrs. Jenkins' shoulder with hers. "But I'm sure you heard all about it this morning."

The elder woman chuckled. "Don't worry about it, my dear. The princess is old news now, so your arrival and the preacher getting married out of the blue is now the hot gossip. But don't let it get you down. Before long, there will be someone new for the townsfolk to talk about, and you'll be old news." She shrugged. "I guess that's how it works in small towns. Without that, no one would have anything to talk about."

Mia laughed, knowing she was right. “I know we’ve just met, but I feel as if I’ve known you for a very long time.”

Mrs. Jenkins reminded her so much of her mother it was uncanny. Their interaction was what Mia would have imagined it would be like with her own mother, if she was still alive.

Mrs. Jenkins smiled, patting her hand. “After you take care of Hailey, would you like me to show you how to make biscuits? It’s a staple with every meal here in the West.” Mrs. Jenkins shrugged. “That is, unless you make bread.”

“That would be nice. Thank you.” Mia turned her attention to Hailey as she scooped the last bite of egg into her mouth. “Are you full?” Hailey nodded. “Want some more?” The little girl shook her head as she struggled to get down off her lap and scampered into the bedroom. “She doesn’t talk a lot, does she?”

Mrs. Jenkins shook her head. “Some. It’s just been hard on them all. But now that you’re here—”

“I just hope that I can be of help.” Mia sighed. “That’s all Caleb needs right now, a wife who is a liability and not an asset.”

“And that isn’t you.” Mrs. Jenkins gently patted her hand and headed into the kitchen. “I’ll get everything ready.”

“I’ll dress Hailey and will be right back.”

When Mia walked into the bedroom, Shane stormed out and Mia let him go, making a mental note to have a talk with him later.

Mia let Hailey pick out her own dress and she was presentable a few minutes later.

When she was ready, Mia joined Mrs. Jenkins. In that short period of time, the woman had already set out the flour and everything they needed to make biscuits.

After a while, the fresh aroma of homemade biscuits filled the air. But what meant the most to Mia was that Mrs. Jenkins had taken the time to teach her. It had been a while since she had a friend around. She had been alone since Ella left, and despite everything that was going on with Caleb and Shane, she was glad she was there.

“Would you like one?” Mia asked when she pulled the tray of biscuits out of the oven.

“Don’t mind of I do.” Mrs. Jenkins smiled as she sat down, suddenly looking tired.

“I would offer you some honey or jam, but I’m not sure if we have any.” Mia set the plate of biscuits on the table in front of her.

Creases showed beside her eyes as Mrs. Jenkins smiled. “There might be some jam down in the root cellar. I’m not sure, because I don’t go down there unless I have to. As for honey, it’s usually not plentiful this time of year, but Caleb has some on the counter.” She let out a deep breath, as if debating whether or not to tell her something. “Jessica liked it, so he kept it in the house for her all year long.”

Mia nodded, hoping that, one day, Caleb might care for her like he did his late wife. “I’ll get it.” She rose from her seat, thankful for the distraction. A few seconds later, she set it on the table before Mrs. Jenkins.

“Thank you.” She picked up the honey, spread it over each side of her open biscuit, and took a bite. “Now, this is what I call a biscuit!” she gushed between bites. “I do believe this is the best biscuit I’ve ever had.”

Mia laughed, shaking her head in disbelief. “I think you’re going a little overboard,

but it's very kind of you to say."

Mrs. Jenkins's eyes and mouth opened wide. "You don't believe me? Taste it and see for yourself."

Mia smiled in disbelief and took a bite. "Umm... this is good," she said, surprised with her efforts.

"See? What did I tell you?" Mrs. Jenkins smiled as she looked at her pocket watch. "Oh, my goodness! I have to go." She reached over and squeezed Mia's hand. "Are you sure you'll be okay, dear?" The elder woman reminded Mia of a proper Georgia peach and probably had an interesting backstory to go along with it. But that would be a story for another time.

Mia smiled as she gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Yes, of course. I appreciate you coming over today. It's hard to believe that we just met. It feels as if I've known you all my life."

"Thank you. I feel the same way." Mrs. Jenkins rose to her feet. "I really must get home, but I'll be back tomorrow."

Mia smiled. "Thank you for coming over and for showing me how to make biscuits. I look forward to your visit tomorrow."

The woman pulled her in for a dainty hug. "You take care, now." She sighed as she looked at her with kind eyes. "I know it's hard, Mia, but try to have patience with Caleb. He really is a good man. He's just been through a lot."

Mia gave her a small smile. "I will. Besides, I don't give up so easily."

Mrs. Jenkins returned the smile. "I'm glad that you don't."

After she left, Mia looked at the clock. Three o'clock. "Oh my goodness!" She ran into the children's bedroom, and they were playing on the floor. "Shane, go ahead and put this on." She rummaged through the chest of drawers and pulled out a shirt that matched the pants he was wearing.

He folded his arms across his chest. "I don't have to do what you say!"

"Oh yes you do, little mister," Mia said, taking a deep breath. "Shane, let's make the best of this and try to get along. Okay?"

"You're not my mother!"

He started toward the door, but Mia stopped him. He struggled a bit, but she held on.

"Shane," she cooed in a soft, soothing voice. After a few seconds, he stopped struggling. "Come here and sit down beside me. I want to talk."

He let out an exasperated breath. Then, he sat down beside Mia and folded his arms abruptly across his chest.

Mia let out a deep breath. "Shane, I know that I'm not your mother."

Shane looked at her sharply.

"And I don't intend to be," Mia began. "I mean, I'll never be able to take her place. I know that."

Tears came to his eyes as he listened.

"But I'd like to be your friend, if you don't mind." Mia's eyebrows lifted, her eyes filled with hope.

Shane glared at her as tears brimmed his eyes. “I don’t need you!”

Pain shot through Mia’s chest, but she wore her best Poker face. “Well, I’ll be here if you do. In the meantime, let’s just learn to get along. I know your mother’s not here to take care of you, so I’d like to do that, if you don’t mind.”

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he hung his head.

“Hey, hey,” she cooed, pulling him to her chest. “Shane, your mother will always be right here....” She touched his chest. “In your heart.”

He began sobbing openly, so she pulled him onto her lap and rubbed his back, rocking him back and forth while he cried. Hailey looked up at her brother and scooted onto the bed beside Mia. When he was almost cried out, he said, “What should I call you?”

Mia ran her fingers through his hair. “I don’t expect you to call me Ma or Mama, but how about Mia?” He looked up at her, and she shrugged. “Then, if and when you’re ready, we can think of something else, if you like. Either that, or it can just be Mia. Is that okay?”

He nodded.

“Shane, if I could bring your mother back, I would,” she whispered as she stroked his hair. “But I’ll be here for you and Hailey any time you need me.”

Shane nodded, and then his eyes started growing heavy. Mia picked him up and laid him on the bed and covered him over with a blanket. She was about to give him a kiss on the cheek but thought better of it, not wanting to muddy the waters. Hailey held up her arms and Mia swept her up. Then, she laid her on the bed beside her brother, and Hailey immediately curled up on her side.

“That’s a good girl.” Mia pulled the blanket over her. Then, she gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Sleep well.”

As she walked toward the door, she looked over at Shane, and he curled up toward the wall, not making eye contact. Mia knew it would take time, but at least she felt they had taken a baby step in the right direction. She couldn’t come into a family and expect everything to go smoothly right off the bat.

Mia left the door ajar so she could hear the children when they wake and headed into the kitchen. After cleaning the house thoroughly, she collapsed on the rocking chair in the living room and looked around, pleased with her progress. The house was starting to look as if a family actually lived there.

“Dinner,” she said aloud.

She was exhausted, but she had to get dinner on the table. So, she headed into the kitchen and opened the pantry, making a mental note to try out her new biscuit-making skills to go along with dinner. Then, she thought that country ham would go well with it, so she decided to go down into the cellar and look to see what was there.

Before she went down, she checked on the children again, and they were still sleeping. She suspected that they would be asleep for a while, so she took a knife and a plate with her down the stairs with the intentions of only staying a few minutes.

In the root cellar, she found several smoked hams, and saw the one that had been cut. She cut several slices and was ready to go back upstairs when she heard a loud crash and then crying.

“Hailey?” Mia yelled as she ran up the stairs as quickly as was humanly possible.

In the kitchen, sitting on the floor with glass all around her, was Hailey.

“What’s going on in here?” Caleb asked. Before she could respond, he walked over the glass and it crunched under his boots, ringing out in her ears as she looked on, stunned. He scooped his daughter into his arms and quickly looked her over. When he saw that she was all right, he turned to Mia. “Where were you?”

“I... I was down in the root cellar—”

“What in the world possessed you to go down there instead of up here watching my children?” he demanded, and then walked over to the kitchen table and sat down with Hailey on his lap.

“I was only down there for a few seconds,” she said as tears came to her eyes. “I checked on the children, and they were still sleeping—”

“At this hour?” He looked Hailey over, and she appeared to be fine except for a few very minor cuts. “What time did you put them down for their nap?”

Anger began to replace the fear that she was feeling. “Three o’clock.”

“Three o’clock? You should have put them down after lunch!”

“Well, I didn’t know that!” she yelled back. “Mrs. Jenkins came over, and she showed me how to make biscuits. We lost track of time—”

“Well, see that you don’t,” he cut her off. “From here on out, you will stay up here during the day with the children. That is your primary job. If you need anything from the root cellar, you will tell me, and I will retrieve it for you when I get home.”

“I’m not a child, and you will not talk to me that way.” Mia calmly walked into the kitchen and began sweeping up the floor. “I don’t care if I am your wife, you will respect me at all times.”

He scoffed. “You expect me to be calm when I come in here and my daughter is sitting in a pile of glass?”

Hailey whimpered softly.

“Heavens no! And lower your voice!” She dumped the glass into the trash. “You’re scaring her.”

“Oh? I’m scaring her?” he demanded as he stood with Hailey on his hip. “I think the only thing that scared her was ending up in a pile of glass!”

“I only went downstairs for a moment.” Mia put away the broom and dustpan and turned to face him, her hands on her hips. “I had no intention of the child getting hurt.”

He looked at her with cold eyes. “Well, the way to hell is paved with good intentions.” With that, he marched into the bedroom and slammed the door.

Tears welled up in her eyes as she stomped to her bedroom and slammed the door, too. Two could play at that game. She paced in her room, wringing her hands. Let him fix dinner! Let him see how easy it is to care for a house and children when you’ve never done it before!

“Oh, that man is so infuriating!” she said aloud as she paced.

The more she paced, the madder she got. Then her thoughts went to Hailey, sitting on the kitchen floor with shards of glass all around her. Tremors rocked her body as tears filled her eyes. What if something had happened to Hailey? Mia forced the thought from her mind, knowing that she would never be able to live with herself if the child had gotten hurt.

For a split second, she thought of going back to New York, but she quickly pushed the thought from her mind, determined to see this through. Tears streamed down her face as she sat on the edge of the bed. She knew she couldn't walk away. Not now. Even though she had just met them, she had become attached to the children. She loved them, in fact. And she couldn't leave them. Not now. Not ever.

Caleb

It was dark when Caleb opened his eyes the next morning. After seeing his child in the pile of glass and then yelling at Mia, he was up half the night. Guilt ran through him again, knowing he shouldn't have spoken to her that way. Deep down, he knew it had been an accident and that she would never intentionally hurt the children. But seeing Hailey sitting in a pile of glass was just too much for him.

Caleb dressed in a button-down flannel shirt and jeans and put a log on the fire in the living room. Then, he walked out to the kitchen, lit the stove, fixed the coffeepot, and set it on the stove. For a moment, he had thought of making breakfast and surprising Mia, but his stomach was too tight to eat. Another wave of guilt threatened to crush him. Never before had he ever spoken to anyone that way, let alone his wife.

When the coffee was ready, he filled two cups and set them on the table. Then, he sat in the dark and sipped his coffee, waiting for Mia to wake. He had thought of going out to the barn and getting an early start on the day, but he just couldn't. Mending fences with Mia was more important.

But then he remembered Mia's reaction to him telling her that there were chickens out back if she wanted to cook one for dinner and her aversion to killing one. So, he quietly slipped on his boots and his coat and headed out to the henhouse. He found a plump chicken and took it to a stump where an ax set.

After he drained the blood, he brought it in and put it in the sink as a surprise for Mia. Then, he washed his hands, hung up his coat, and sat down to enjoy his coffee.

Even though he knew it wasn't true, he felt as if he was being unfaithful to Jessica. The whole time they had been married, he had been faithful to her and had never even thought of looking at another woman, let alone marrying a total stranger. Deep down in his heart, he still wanted to be faithful to Jessica. But just the thought of bringing another woman into his home—married or not—made him feel as if he were being unfaithful.

“Yah!” a woman's scream brought him from his reverie. “Oh! You scared me to death!”

“I'm so sorry,” he said, warming his hands on his coffee mug. “I had no intention of scaring you.”

“The road to hell is paved—”

“I know,” he said, letting out a sigh. “Please, sit down. I'd like to talk.” He motioned toward the coffee cup sitting at an empty place setting.

Mia sat down and added some sugar. Then, she stirred her coffee and waited.

Seeing her like that in the dark with her blonde hair down around her shoulders stirred emotions within him that he hadn't felt in a long time, sending another fresh wave of guilt through him. “I'm sorry that I spoke to you that way. I've never spoken to anyone like that before in my life.”

“And I'm sorry, too. I couldn't sleep last night. Flashes of Hailey sitting in the glass...” Mia shook her head, unable to finish. “I promise that I'll never go into the root cellar again unless someone is there to watch the children for me.”

Caleb shook his head. “No, if you don't mind, just tell me what you'd like in the morning and I'll get it for you before I leave, or when I get home.” He reached over

and squeezed her hand. “Please. It would make me feel better.” Her warmth coursed through his body. When he pulled his hand away, he immediately felt her absence.

Mia nodded, her lips forming a straight line.

“I have to tell you something.” He took a moment to collect his thoughts, and then continued. “I was upset not only because Hailey was in danger, but because of the whole... situation.” Caleb let out a deep breath. “And that isn’t your fault. I’m sorry if I took it out on you, and I promise to try to do better.”

She nodded in understanding, reaching for his hand. “If you need to talk, I’m here.”

This time, he didn’t pull away. “Thank you.”

Mia pulled back, and then wrapped her hands around her coffee cup. “So, are you making more rounds today?”

He shook his head. “No, I have to tend the farm.” He sighed. “The cow needs milking, the cattle fed, and so on.” He took another sip of his coffee, trying to concentrate on the chores ahead of him and not the perfect curve of her jaw in the early morning sunlight.

Mia smiled as she looked into her coffee cup. “Being the preacher, I’m surprised that you have a farm, too.”

“Here in Whiskey River, everyone who wants to eat has a farm.” He took another sip of his coffee. “As the town preacher, I don’t make much. I make the majority of my money from selling cattle and horses. Then in the summer, I plant vegetables and we sell the excess that we don’t need.” He felt another twinge of guilt as he realized that he said—‘we’ and not ‘I’.

Mia bit her lower lip. “Caleb, you’re going to have to stop thinking of me as an outsider,” she said as she placed her hand over his. “You can talk to me.”

He pulled away, knowing that she meant that he could talk to her about Jessica, but he just wasn’t ready. “I know. But you don’t understand how hard this is for me.” He didn’t tell her that, in his mind, he was still married to Jessica.

Mia nodded. “I know. It’s been hard for me, too. But if we start working together, we can accomplish more.”

Caleb sighed. He could do that. Even if he couldn’t think of Mia as his wife yet, he could think of working together with her. Somehow, it made it easier and took some of the pressure off. “Yes, you’re right. I’d like that. I’ll do my best to try.”

Mia smiled, and then took another sip of her coffee. “Me, too.” Her coffee was getting cold, so she got up to get the coffee pot. “Want more?”

He nodded, and she filled his cup for him and then hers. Then, she set the pot on the stove and turned toward the sink. “Eek!” Mia squealed, loud enough to wake the dead.

“Lands sake!” Caleb said, suppressing a smile. “Haven’t you ever seen a dead chicken before?”

“Yes, of course I have!” she squealed. “But not without warning!”

Caleb laughed in spite of himself. “After the way you reacted yesterday when I mentioned the chickens, I thought you might have an aversion to killing one for dinner. So, I thought I’d surprise you.”

Mia nodded, her eyes wide, never leaving the chicken. “And surprise me you did.”

Caleb laughed again. "Sorry. Next time, I'll give you fair warning."

"Yes, that would be nice."

Caleb took another sip of his coffee. He had thought of going out to the barn but wasn't ready yet. "Come sit down and enjoy your coffee."

"I'm waiting for my heart to start beating again." She chuckled, holding her hand to her chest. Then, she sat back down and started to relax.

He laughed. "So, tell me. Do you have any other family?"

She shook her head. "No, both of my parents died of influenza a few years ago, so I moved to New York."

A crease formed between his eyes. "They didn't leave you anything?"

She shook her head. "No, the house and their assets had to be sold off to pay the bills. They had owned a logging business and owed a lot of creditors. I barely had enough left over to move to New York."

He nodded, realizing that her life hadn't been all peaches and cream, either. He couldn't imagine being a young girl and losing everything. "If you don't mind me asking, is that why you became a dancehall girl?"

"It paid the bills." Mia shrugged. "As a woman, our job choices are limited."

He bit his lower lip, understanding. "So, you're from Connecticut?"

Mia nodded, taking another sip of her coffee.

“I heard it’s beautiful up there.” He looked into her eyes, seeing her anew.

“Yes, it is. But the winters are cold and harsh, and there’s not a lot of work up there.” She shrugged. “I started taking in sewing before I left but didn’t make enough to support myself.” A smile spread across her lips as she looked away, enjoying a memory. “I met Ella when I moved to New York, and she helped me get the job at the Breckenridge Saloon where she worked, and we ended up sharing a tenement and splitting the bills. It helped a lot.”

Caleb smiled. “So, you and Ella have been friends for a while?”

She nodded. “The best. I don’t know what I’d ever do without her. After she left, I had a hard time making a go of it alone.” Mia let out a deep breath. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to visit her sometime and see how she’s doing.”

He nodded as a smile lit his lips. “Of course. Just let me know when you’d like to go, and I’ll take care of the children.”

She smiled her thanks. “Even though she never complained, I’m sure the pregnancy took its toll on her. Now, trying to recuperate while caring for newborn twins, I’m sure she could use the help.” She shrugged. “I’ll go over to visit her soon.”

He smiled, feeling lighter than he had in a while. “She’d like that.”

Mia bit her lower lip. “Maybe I can take her dinner.”

“That would be very thoughtful.”

Mia smiled as she poured herself more coffee and then refilled his, glad she and Caleb were getting along. “Would you like some pancakes?” She looked through the cabinets and took out a bowl.

A smile curled his lips. "Where did you learn to make pancakes?"

She shrugged as she started measuring out flour and poured it into the bowl without looking at him. "My mother taught me in Connecticut before she died."

Caleb finished his coffee and rose from the table. "Well, I'm going to get to work. Let me know when it's ready."

Mia smiled. "I will." Then, she turned her attention back to expertly throwing ingredients together.

Caleb slipped on his hat. "You know, you really are full of surprises."

She chuckled. "You have no idea."

He laughed, shaking his head.

"Wee!" Shane yelled as he ran into the room in his long underwear, skidding across the hardwood floor in his socks.

"What in the world?" Caleb asked, placing his hands on his hips. "You can't run around here in your underwear! There's a lady present!" He looked over at Mia and blushed.

"Come along, little man. Let's get you dressed." Mia chuckled as she took his hand and guided him into the bedroom.

Caleb shook his head, laughing. As he headed out to the barn, he laughed aloud at the memory of Mia screaming at the top of her lungs when she saw the dead chicken in the sink. His new wife really was full of surprises.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Mia

Mia shook her head as she walked toward the bedroom. “Now, let’s get some clothes on you, young man.” She rummaged through the chest of drawers and pulled out a matching outfit. To her surprise, Shane didn’t try to run away this time, and he didn’t give her a hard time.

Mia slipped his shirt over his head. “I’m sorry... Mia.”

She looked into his eyes. “What for? I know running into the kitchen in your underwear wasn’t the best choice, but—”

“No, I meant... I’m sorry.” A worried look appeared in his eyes.

Mia wrapped her arm around his shoulder as her heart swelled, touched by the admission. “It’s okay. I understand.” She stroked the hair away from his face. “Hey! I have an idea. You want to help me make pancakes?”

Shane nodded vigorously, smiling. “Let’s go!”

Hailey stirred and then sat up. When she opened her eyes and saw Mia and Shane sitting on the bed, she immediately held her arms out to Mia. When she scooped her up, Hailey laid her head on her shoulder. “Not quite awake yet, baby girl?”

She shook her head.

“Hailey! Guess what? We’re going to make pancakes with Mia!” Shane’s eyes were

wide. “Wanna help?”

Hailey’s face brightened as she nodded. Then, she shoved her thumb into her mouth and laid her head on Mia’s shoulder.

“Shane, why don’t you go play and we can make pancakes in a bit?” She stood while she rubbed Hailey’s back. “Is that okay?”

Shane let out a deep breath. “Will you let me know when you’re ready?”

“Of course.” Mia smiled as she ruffled his hair. “Thanks, buddy. It won’t be long.”

He nodded, and then started playing with his soldiers on the bedroom floor.

Mia carried Hailey into the living room and sat with her on the rocking chair. Hailey curled up on her lap, and Mia rocked her back and forth as she stroked her hair.

“Sing,” Hailey said.

“What?”

“Sing me a song,” she said, looking up at her with hopeful eyes.

“All right,” she said, and then began singing the Cradle Song, Brahms’ Lullaby, as she rocked her back and forth.

Mia rocked her for a while, and soon, Hailey struggled to get down.

“Let’s get you dressed now.”

Mia picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. Then she dressed her in a pretty

blue dress and brushed her long dark blonde hair. She also checked her cuts, and they were healing nicely. She only had two—one on her arm and another on her leg. Relief washed over Mia as guilt filled her chest about the incident.

After Hailey scampered off, Mia turned to Shane, still playing quietly on the floor. “Okay, Shane. Would you and Hailey like to help me make pancakes?”

“Yippee!” Shane ran out the door toward the kitchen as quickly as his little feet could carry him.

“Want to help?” Mia asked Hailey.

She nodded, and Mia took her hand and led her into the kitchen.

Mia pulled a chair up to the counter and stood Hailey on it. “Now, hold on and be careful,” she instructed.

The little girl nodded, holding onto the back of the chair. Mia got out a bowl, the flour, and the other ingredients needed to make pancakes. Before he went outside, Caleb had brought up some milk from the root cellar for the children, so she used some for the pancakes.

She let the children stir the batter, but when it came time to pour it onto the hot cast-iron skillet, Mia did that. A few minutes later, a few of the pancakes were finished and laying on a plate.

A few minutes later, Mia heard a carriage pull up outside, and voices coming from the back. Mrs. Jenkins was talking to Caleb. A few minutes later, she walked in the back door, carrying a small recipe book.

“Hello, Mrs. Jenkins,” Mia said, flanked by the children who were a safe distance

from the stove. “You’re just in time. We’re making pancakes. Would you like some?”

“Well, maybe just one.” Mrs. Jenkins sat down and laid the recipe book on the table. “It looks like you have some great helpers this morning.”

Mia smiled. “Yes, they wanted to help.”

“We’re making pancakes!” Shane announced excitedly.

Mrs. Jenkins laughed. “I see that! And you seem to be doing a good job of it, too.”

Shane smiled, and then went back to supervising the pancake making.

When the last pancake was laid on the plate, Mia helped Hailey down from the chair and then carried the plate of pancakes to the table. The children helped, and together, they set the table. Then, she set the children in their chairs, and called for Caleb.

“Well, it smells great in here,” he said as he walked in. The children were beaming.

Caleb headed into the bedroom and came out cleaned up and wearing a clean shirt. Then he sat at the head of the table.

He said a wonderful blessing over the meal, and thanked God for the good company of Mrs. Jenkins, as well.

As Mia listened, she smiled as pride welled up in her chest. When Caleb finished, she placed a pancake on each of the children’s plates and passed the rest around.

“Wow! Everything looks wonderful!” Caleb stabbed a pancake and slid it onto his plate, and then poured maple syrup over the top. “Thank you, Mia.”

Mia smiled proudly. “It wasn’t just me. The children helped.”

“Really?” he asked as he looked at the children.

Shane nodded vigorously. “I dumped everything in, and Hailey and I took turns stirring.”

Caleb nodded his approval as he took a bite. “Well, you all did a wonderful job. It’s delicious.” Then, he turned to Mia. “We haven’t had pancakes for a while.”

Mia grinned, happy that she had done at least one thing right.

“I agree,” Mrs. Jenkins added. “You all make a great team.”

“Thank you.” Mia reached over and gave Shane’s hand a squeeze. “The children really are great helpers.”

“I can’t stay long today, and I won’t be over tomorrow.” Mrs. Jenkins took another bite of her pancake. “Ella Hill isn’t feeling well, so I thought I’d go over and lend a hand.”

Mia’s face fell. “How is she doing?”

Mrs. Jenkins sighed. “She’s fine, but it’s difficult caring for twins while she’s still healing. Colton is doing all he can, but he has work to do.”

Mia set down her fork as her stomach tightened. “If there’s anything I can do—”

Mrs. Jenkins laughed. “Well, it looks as if you have your hands full here with these little ones.”

Caleb gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I'll watch the children later so you can go over and visit."

Mia nodded her thanks.

Then, Caleb turned to Mrs. Jenkins. "I'll stop by to check on her, too." As the town preacher, Mia was sure he was often called upon in times of need.

Mrs. Jenkins took another bite. "I'll tell her you're both coming. I'm sure she'll appreciate that."

"I feel bad for not going over to visit until now." Mia sighed, leaving her pancakes untouched. "I'm sure Ella has her hands full and can use all the help she can get."

"One thing about this community is that we all pull together and help one another in times of need." Mrs. Jenkins finished her last bite of pancake and took a sip of her coffee.

"Would you like more?" Mia asked, already reaching for the pancakes.

Mrs. Jenkins patted her plump belly. "Oh, heavens no! But that was delicious!" Then, she turned to the children. "If you keep this up, you'll be able to open your own restaurant and give Harrison Curry some competition!"

Mia chuckled. "Well, before you start naming our restaurant, I think we have enough on our plate for now."

"Oh!" Shane said. "That would be fun!"

"But next year, you're going to start school," Caleb interjected. "So, I think that might be a bit more important."

“School? Yuk!” Shane grimaced as he took another bite of his pancake.

Mrs. Jenkins laughed. “How do you know? I hear that Madison Nash is doing wonders with the school.” Then she turned to Mia and added, “She’s the town schoolteacher.”

“Whiskey River has just one teacher?” Mia asked, surprised.

The elder woman nodded. “Here in the country, we’re lucky to have her. There are some towns that don’t even have one. They have to go miles to get an education or be schooled at home by their mothers.”

“Then, we’re lucky indeed.” Mia finished off the last of her pancake.

Caleb had cleaned his plate and dabbed his lips with a napkin. “Mia, thank you. That was delicious.” He slid the chair back and rose to his feet. “I hate to leave good company, but the farm waits for no man. I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

“We have everything under control,” Mrs. Jenkins added as she started collecting the dishes. “Don’t worry.”

After they finished, Mia cleaned up the children and they scampered off to play in their bedroom.

“If you need me, let me know,” Mia yelled after them. She and Mrs. Jenkins gathered the dishes but set them aside when she remembered the chicken in the sink.

Mia pinched a leg in her fingers and lifted it, but then set it back down. “I have no idea where to even begin.”

Mrs. Jenkins laughed. “Come on. I’ll show you what to do with it.”

They spent the morning pulling feathers from the chicken, and then she washed it well. When the chicken was clean and feather free, Mrs. Jenkins showed her how to cut it up, and then taught her the fine points of frying it.

Mia really enjoyed having the camaraderie with the elder woman. But after the chicken was frying in the pan, Mrs. Jenkins announced, “Well, I really must go see Ella.”

“Please give her my best and tell her I’ll be by to see her soon,” Mia said as she turned a piece of chicken over in the pan. “Please tell her that I’m sorry that I haven’t been by yet.”

Mrs. Jenkins smiled. “Well, you haven’t even been here but a few days.” She gave her a motherly pat on the arm. “But I’ll tell her you’ll be by to visit soon.”

Mia nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins.”

“Oh! I almost forgot,” she said, slipping into her coat. “I’ll leave my recipe book here. You can look through them and copy down whatever you want.”

Mia’s eyebrows lifted in concern. “Are you sure you won’t need them?”

Mrs. Jenkins smiled. “Not right now. You can give them back to me when you’re finished.”

“Thanks, again.” Mia dried her hands and gave her a quick hug. “So, I’ll see you when I see you?”

“If not anything else, I’ll see you Sunday at church.” Mrs. Jenkins bit her lower lip and released it. “I hate to tell you this, but the preacher’s wife is responsible for organizing the after-service potluck dinner.”

“What?” Mia asked, panic rushing through her.

“Now, don’t you worry.” She gave her a motherly pat on the hand. “Each week, the ladies bring their specialties. The only thing that the preacher’s wife is expected to do is to organize—tell everyone where to put everything. In the spring and summer, the men of the church bring the tables outside, and we hold it there. But in the winter when it’s cold, we set everything up in the recreation hall.” She tied a scarf around her neck. “But don’t worry. I can help until you get the hang of it.”

Mia smiled, giving her arm a gentle squeeze. “Thank you. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for all your help.”

Mrs. Jenkins leaned in and gave her an air kiss over her cheek. “It’s my pleasure.” She shrugged. “We all can use a little help when we’re starting out. If you need anything, just let me know.” Then, she looked down at the chicken frying on the stove. “Well, I have to go, and it looks as if you have some chicken to fry.”

“Please forgive me if I don’t show you out.”

She smiled. “Don’t worry. I know the way.”

Mia laughed. “Thanks, again. I’ll bring you some chicken on Sunday.”

A broad smile spread across the elder woman’s face. “Be careful what you offer.”

Mia chuckled and watched as Mrs. Jenkins headed out the back door. Mia heard her say a muffled goodbye to Caleb, and a few minutes later, her carriage pulled away.

Mia turned a piece of chicken over in the pan. It was funny. As a child, she had wanted a fairy godmother, but instead, she got one as an adult. Mrs. Jenkins was amazing. Mia wondered what her story was, where her husband was or if he had died.

Mia felt that she would find out eventually, but now, the elder woman enjoyed spending her time helping others—especially the new brides and new mothers.

Mia finished frying the last of the chicken, and then covered it over with a dishtowel and set it on the counter until dinner. She checked on the children, and Shane waved at her from the floor where he and Hailey were playing. Mia waved back, happy with the change in Shane. She knew they had a long way to go yet, but she was happy that at least the children were accepting her into the family. She had a feeling that it would take a while longer for Caleb.

After cleaning the kitchen until it sparkled, she sat down to look through Mrs. Jenkins's recipes. There were cookie recipes of all kinds, cakes, brownies, and meal recipes, a biscuit recipe, and then she came to what she had been looking for... a bread recipe. It was a simple recipe, similar to the one that her mother used when she was a child. Mia looked through the drawer of the writing desk in the living room and found some parchment paper and a writing quill.

Careful not to smudge the recipe, she copied it down and then set it aside to let it dry. As she waited, she started gathering the ingredients, and before long, she had kneaded the dough, formed it into a loaf in a bread pan, and then popped it into the oven. Soon, the sweet aroma of bread baking in the oven filled the house.

In the meantime, she made some sandwiches for lunch, along with fresh milk for the children and hot tea for her and Caleb in a pretty tea set. When everything was ready, she opened the back door and called for Caleb.

He walked out of the barn, wiping his hands on a small work towel, his muscles flexing under his shirt. "Be right there." He glanced up at her and smiled, waving his hand.

A thrill ran through her at the simple gesture. She waved back and headed inside and

into the children's bedroom. "Hungry?"

"Yes!" Shane yelled as he ran out of the bedroom and into the kitchen.

Hailey looked up at her from the floor.

"Ready for lunch, baby girl?" Mia asked, holding her hand out to her.

A smile spread across Hailey's face as she got up and ran to her. Mia scooped her up, and Hailey laid her head on her shoulder. Then, she raised up and wrapped her arms around Mia's neck.

"That's a good girl," Mia cooed, carrying her into the kitchen.

Caleb watched her expressionless as she walked into the room carrying his child.

Mia sat her on a chair, and then she set the loaf of bread and some country ham on the table. When she sat down, Hailey hopped off her chair and ran over to Mia and slid onto her lap.

Caleb watched as Mia slid Hailey's plate over to her and started feeding her.

"You need to eat." Mia nodded to Caleb as she made a ham sandwich. "It's getting cold."

Caleb nodded, and then made a sandwich and started eating.

"So, how's it going out there?" Mia asked, nodding toward the barn.

Caleb shrugged. "It's going well. One of the cows just foaled. I was just finishing up when you called me in for lunch."

Mia looked up from feeding Hailey with alarm in her eyes. “Did everything go okay?”

Caleb smiled. “Yes, both mother and baby are doing just fine.”

“Glad to hear it.” Mia gave Hailey another slice of bread. “You know, I could help out on the farm, too, if you like.”

“Thanks.” Caleb sighed. “But for now, I think you have enough to worry about.”

Mia shrugged. “I could at least gather the eggs before the children wake.”

“I appreciate the sentiment.” He downed his cup of tea. “But if you don’t mind, why don’t you concentrate on the children and the house? When you get into a routine, then we can talk about it.”

Mia nodded, giving him a small smile. “As I said before, I’m not used to being told what to do.”

Caleb set down his glass of tea and nodded. “I respect that. By the way, it was just a request.”

“Okay, then I’ll think about it.”

Caleb laughed. “I can’t imagine you out there birthing calves.”

“No, I draw the line there.” Mia chuckled. “I’ll leave the ‘birthing calves’ up to you.”

Caleb smiled, shaking his head. “You drive a hard bargain.”

They talked and laughed throughout the meal. A welcome change, Mia thought. After

they were finished, Caleb went back outside to finish up, the children went to the bedroom to play, and Mia cleaned up and started fixing dinner. It seemed that the majority of what she did was cooking and cleaning. She made a mental note to get herself on a schedule and cook some things ahead when she could.

Mia had a few minutes, so she snooped around, looking for Jessica's sewing things. In a way, she felt as if she was snooping into another woman's territory. And, in a way, she was. Over time, she vowed to make everything her own.

She found a small sewing basket. So, she went into her bedroom and pulled out her sewing things. She carried them into the living room and set them in the small cabinet to the right of the writing desk. When she had time, Mia vowed to set up everything she had, make the children some new clothes, and make a sewing box for Hailey out of her mother's things to use when she's older.

Mrs. Jenkins had told her that the general store had bolts of fabric. The next time she went to town, she vowed to buy some fabric—enough for some shirts for Shane and Caleb, and enough for a few dresses for Hailey. She also needed a few work dresses for herself. Most of her dresses were a bit too fancy for farm life. Moving to Whiskey River was definitely a lifestyle change, but a welcome one.

Before she came, she had given her hair feathers to Carlita, a friend she worked with, and the few boas she had to another friend. Her dancehall days were over, and she was glad for it. It was nice to be in a respectable position now. Even though she wasn't technically getting paid for it, it was definitely hard work.

"Mia!" Hailey screamed bloody murder as she ran from the bedroom with tears streaming down her face. "Shane has my dolly!" Big crocodile tears rolled down her cheeks as if it was the worst thing in the world.

"Shane!" Mia picked up Hailey and headed into the bedroom. Shane was hiding in

the closet. “Come out here right now!”

He let out a deep breath, and then stepped out, looking down at his feet.

Mia studied his posture and knew there was more to the story. “Shane, do you know where Hailey’s doll is?”

Shane’s eyes opened wide as he shook his head vigorously back and forth.

Mia let out a deep breath. “Okay. Then, help me find it, please.”

Shane ran out of the room.

“Shane! Come back here!”

A moment later, she heard the back door slam shut. She just hoped he put on his coat before he ran out.

“Okay, baby girl,” Mia cooed, kneeling beside her. “Let’s find your dolly. Okay?”

Hailey nodded slowly, and then pointed toward the closet as huge tears poured down her cheeks. “She’s dead!”

Mia’s heart sank. “What do you mean ‘she’s dead’?” For a moment, she wondered if Hailey remembered her mother and understood that she was gone. She bit her lower lip, wondering if she should explain it to her or if she should tell Caleb.

“Shane killed Dolly!” Hailey screamed, pointing toward the closet.

“Now, now,” Mia said as she rubbed the little girl’s back. “I’m sure it can’t be that bad.” Mia went into the closet, and lying on the floor was the headless body of a

ragdoll and, near it, the head. She picked it up and tried to hold the head on so that it wouldn't scare Hailey any more than necessary.

But when Hailey saw it, she screamed and a fresh wave of tears washed over her face.

"Hailey...." Mia hid the doll behind her back. "I can fix it. I promise."

"R-real... really?" Hailey's eyebrows raised almost into her hairline.

Mia smiled. "Yes, really." Then, she knelt on the floor in front of her. "I'm a very good seamstress, remember?" Mia rubbed her back in soothing circles. "I can fix it. I promise."

Hailey reached out to her, and Mia scooped her up into her arms and carried her out to the living room. She set in the rocking chair and hid the doll under a doily on the side table. Mia started rocking her back and forth, and she was almost asleep when Shane walked in and headed toward the bedroom.

"Shane?"

He stopped, looking at her sheepishly.

"Shane, come here for a minute," she said, and he stepped closer. "Did you rip Dolly's head off?"

He didn't say anything at first, looking only at his feet. Hailey sat up and watched. Shane glanced over at Hailey and then at Mia. "Yes, I did."

Mia let out a deep breath. "Shane, you owe Hailey an apology."

He nodded as he bit his lower lip, fighting back tears. "I'm sorry, Hailey." Hailey

scooted down, scampered across the room toward her brother, and gave him a hug.

“Shane, I’m proud of you for telling the truth,” Mia said. “But you know not to do it again, right?”

Shane nodded. “You really are... proud of me?”

Mia nodded, a smile lighting her lips. “Yes, for telling the truth. But promise me that you won’t rip off your sister’s doll’s head anymore. Okay?”

He nodded. “I promise.”

“Okay.” Mia pulled Hailey back into her lap on the rocking chair and started rocking. She glanced over at Shane, who was standing in the middle of the floor, watching. “Would you like to rock with us?”

A broad smile spread across his face as he climbed onto her lap. Within minutes, they were both asleep.

It felt great to be a part of a family again. Mia had been alone for so long that she almost forgot what it was like. The time that she and Ella were roommates had been the closest that she had come to having a family as an adult. Now, her family with Caleb was the real thing... if only he could come to accept her.

As she rocked the children, she was glad that at least they had accepted her. But she knew it wasn’t going to be so easy for Caleb. Would he be able to forget that she had once been a dancehall girl? Deep down, she realized that he already had, and that he understood. But could he get over losing his wife? Would there ever come a time when he would think of her as his wife instead? Would he ever come to love her?

She knew that she couldn’t live without love, and that it couldn’t be all one sided. She

couldn't live with a man who couldn't love her. A man incapable of love. But, then again, when she saw him with his children, she knew that he was capable, because he already knew how to love. But she could see that when he loved, he gave his whole heart, just as he had given his whole heart to his children and Jessica.

Mia laughed without humor as tears came to her eyes. Who was she kidding? Jessica was his wife, and she always would be. Mia feared that she would be living in her shadow for as long as she lived in this house, with this family, and she couldn't live like that. But could Caleb open his heart to let her in?

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Caleb

As streaks of orange, pink, and red marbled the evening sky, creating a beautiful ending to a beautiful day, Caleb wondered why Mia hadn't called him in for dinner. He had been so busy with the farm, shoveling stalls and trying his best to get caught up, that he had lost track of time. But the sky never let him forget. Even if he lost track of time, God always told him when it was quitting time.

Exhausted, he summoned his strength and split some wood for the night and made a mental note to split enough for the week the next day. With winters in Wyoming, you couldn't let the wood box grow empty. If you did, you could freeze to death in a short period of time.

After he gathered the wood, he carried it into the house, wondering why it was dark. He looked around, and then saw Mia asleep in the rocking chair with his two children. Still holding the wood, he watched them sleep as something stirred inside of him. Being careful not to wake them, he quietly put the wood in the wood box, put some wood on the fire, and then went into the bedroom to wash up.

When he was finished, he slid into a clean white shirt and jeans, but didn't put his boots back on, feeling more comfortable with his feet bare.

Refreshed, he lit candles throughout the house, in the living room, kitchen, and two long tapered candles in long stemmed candle holders sitting on the kitchen table. Then, he walked into the kitchen to see what he could make for dinner, knowing that Mia had fallen asleep. But he was pleasantly surprised when he found the fried chicken sitting on the counter under the dishtowel, and mashed potatoes were on the

stove, kept warm by the fire of the pilot light, along with fresh bread. Caleb went down into the root cellar for a jar of canned tomatoes, and made some stewed tomatoes, with bits of Mia's fresh bread stirred in. Then, he set the table with four place settings. Last, he put bath water on to boil.

Careful not to wake Mia, he took Shane and Hailey from her one at a time.

"Pa?" Shane asked when he woke.

"Shh...." Caleb led him and Hailey into the kitchen. "Let's not wake Mia. She had a busy day."

Shane nodded, smiling as he sat down at the kitchen table, along with his sister. Caleb fed them dinner, and then sat and enjoyed watching his children.

"Aren't you going to eat, Pa?" Shane asked as he took a bite of his chicken thigh. "Umm! This is really good."

Caleb chuckled. "It looks good, but no. I'm going to eat with Mia."

Shane nodded as he continued eating. Caleb tore Hailey's chicken into small bites for her when he saw that she was having a difficult time, but she ate her mashed potatoes by herself without issue.

When the water was heated, he poured it in to the tub in his room, repeating the process until there was enough water for the children. After they finished eating, he bathed them one at a time and dressed them for bed. They said their prayers, and he put them in bed and told them a bedtime story. Then, he kissed them both goodnight and pulled the door almost closed, leaving it cracked open.

When Caleb walked into the living room, he took Mia in, noticing the delicate curve

of her neck as it fell to her shoulders, her feminine hands, and her beautiful face. Something stirred inside him, but he quickly pushed the thought aside. Never had he ever thought he would be afraid to touch his wife. Then, guilt reared its ugly head again.

Watching her sleep, Caleb didn't have the heart to wake her just yet, and he didn't want to eat without her, so he sat in the rocking chair across from Mia. He couldn't help but think of how caring and accepting she was of his children.

Mia really was beautiful. Her blonde hair turned golden in the candlelight, and the way her jaw curved to her slender neck was lovely. Her body was perfect with curves in all the right places.

"Mia," he whispered, hating himself for waking her. He waited for a minute, but she continued snoring lightly. "Mia, wake up. It's time for dinner."

Caleb reached out and gently touched her cheek with the back of his hand. "Mia...."

She didn't stir, and it was getting a bit chilly, so he put some wood on the fire. Warmth immediately filled the room.

Caleb walked back over to Mia and decided to try one more time. "Mia, time for dinner."

She stirred and opened her eyes.

"Wake up, sleepyhead," he teased, kneeling at her feet as he looked up at her.

Mia gazed at him and smiled, and then jumped with a start. "Oh my goodness! Where are the children?"

Caleb chuckled. “Don’t worry. They’ve been fed, bathed, and put to bed.”

“Oh,” she said, looking around. “How long have I been out? The last thing I remember was rocking the children—”

“Are you hungry?” he asked, rising to his feet and extending his hand. “The fried chicken looks great.”

She looked at him, confused. “You didn’t eat yet?”

He shook his head as a smile lit his lips. “I was waiting for you.” When she hesitated, he added, “I heated everything up, but it’s going to get cold.”

She took his hand and let him guide her to the table, the glow from the beige tapered candles bathing her in a golden hue.

Mia’s eyes opened in surprise. “Everything looks great.” She slid the cloth napkin across her lap. “I’m so sorry—”

“Shh....” Caleb gently pressed his finger to her lips. “It’s okay. You’ve been working really hard... too hard,” he said, taking her hand. “Mia, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

She nodded, forcing a smile. “I see.”

Caleb wondered what he said that had changed her mood. He reached for her hand, claiming her attention. “No wonder you fell asleep.”

She smiled and looked down at his hand in hers.

Caleb pulled away, and then slid the napkin across his lap. “So, shall we?”

Mia chuckled, and his heart soared at the sound, much to his surprise.

He said a blessing over the meal, and then added, "Let's eat."

She smiled as she spooned some mashed potatoes onto her plate along with a chicken breast, and he did the same.

Then, he sliced the bread. "Where did you ever learn how to make bread like this? It looks delicious."

Blush colored her cheeks. "I used to help my mother make homemade bread when I was younger."

Caleb nodded, noticing that she didn't say "before she died". He pushed the thought aside, wanting to keep the mood light as he took a bite of his chicken leg. "This is delicious. Mia, you really outdid yourself."

She smiled as she buttered a slice of bread. "Actually, Mrs. Jenkins showed me how."

His eyes opened wide. "You mean to tell me that this was the first time you've ever made fried chicken?"

She nodded, obviously pleased with his reaction. "In fact, I've learned a lot... since I came here."

"Really?" He took a bite of the creamy mashed potatoes. "You lived alone, so you obviously took care of a house before."

She nodded as she took a bite of her bread. "I knew how to take care of and run a house, but I've never been around children. I was an only child."

Caleb nodded. “Well, you’re great with mine.”

She nodded as her smile faded. “Actually, I hope you don’t mind, but I feel as if they’re mine, too. They’re wonderful children. You have a lot to be proud of.”

Caleb smiled appreciatively. “Well, Jessica had a lot to do with that...” His voice trailed off.

Mia reached over and touched his hand, forcing him to look in to her eyes. “You know, you can talk to me about her. You were married for a long time, and she left an impact on your life. I can’t expect for you to eliminate her from your life entirely.” She held his hand, and he didn’t pull away. “And I wouldn’t want you to.”

His heart stirred, touched by her words. “Mia, you really are quite special.” What woman would talk to him about his late wife... as a friend? He pulled his hand away. “I appreciate that, but not tonight.”

Mia nodded, turning her attention back to her food.

“So, what did you do for the holidays?” he asked, not sure why.

She shrugged. “This year, I spent it alone. I worked on Christmas Eve, and then I was off on Christmas morning.”

He nodded as he took another bite of his chicken leg, and a moan involuntarily escaped his lips.

Mia let out a deep breath as she leaned back in her chair. “Caleb, may I ask you a question?”

His eyebrows pulled together in concern. “Yes, you can ask me anything.” He

reached over and gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

She bit her lower lip and released it. “Caleb, does it bother you that I was a dancehall girl?”

He smiled, shaking his head. “No, not at all. When they see what a good dancer you are, I’ll be the envy of all the men here in town.”

Mia pulled back her hand and lowered her eyes.

“Hey...” Caleb reached over and placed a finger gingerly under her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. “I was only joking. I’m sorry. I never meant to offend you.”

She nodded.

“Mia,” he said as he held her hand. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. In fact, I admire you for doing what you had to do in order to survive.”

“Well, I just wanted you to know that I only danced with men. Nothing more.”

He nodded, understanding. “What you did before we met is of no consequence. I understand that you had a life before we met.”

Mia gave him a small smile and started eating again.

Caleb’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “Mia, have you ever been married before?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Why not?” he asked, unable to believe his ears. “I mean, you’re smart, funny,

intelligent, beautiful....”

She shrugged, a delicate blush coloring her cheeks. “I guess I never met anyone who filled my heart.”

Caleb nodded, giving her a small smile. Then, he started eating again, lost in thought. Mia wasn’t the type of woman who would just marry someone out of convenience, and it wasn’t fair for him to expect her to. “Mia, I hope that you’ll be patient with me.”

Mia smiled. “Falling in love has to be natural. Not forced.” She reached over and gave his hand a gentle squeeze. “I’m not expecting you to love me, Caleb. Not now. But maybe in the future, we can have something special.” She let out a deep breath. “Caleb, I’ll never be Jessica, but you can love people in different ways. Maybe someday, we’ll come to love each other for who we are, and not for what we represent to each other.”

One corner of his lips curled into a beautiful smile, appreciating her words. “So, you think we can make this work?”

Mia smiled, nodding her head. “Yes, I do. We just need to give it time.”

He leaned forward, having an overwhelming urge to kiss her. But, instead, he rose from his seat and pulled her to her feet. “May I have this dance?”

She giggled, taken by surprise. “Why, yes, sir,” she said, giving him a slight curtsy. “I would be delighted.”

There was no music, so he began to sing “Aura Lee”.

“When the blackbird in the Spring,

On the willow tree,

Sat and rocked, I heard him sing,

Singing Aura Lea.

Aura Lea, Aura Lea,

Maid with golden hair;

Sunshine came along with thee,

And swallows in the air.”

Mia looked at him, her eyes wide. “I didn’t know you could sing.”

Caleb shrugged. “There are a lot of things you don’t know about me.”

A smile lit her lips. “Well then, we’ll have to do something about that.”

She drew closer, sending electricity through him. Caleb spun her around, and then started singing again as he guided her around the living room. He couldn’t believe she was so light on her feet. She really was a great dancer. A few moments later, he ended the song with a dip.

He held her as she leaned back and was tempted to kiss her slender neck and then her cheek and her lips. Instead, he lifted her and spun her around and bowed as she curtsied. Then, he moved her hair away and placed his hands on the sides of her face and kissed her forehead as her hands rested on his arms.

“Goodnight, Mia,” he whispered, looking deeply into her eyes. Then, he touched her

cheek with the back of his hand and smiled. “Thank you for the dance.”

She forced a smile as something filled her eyes. He wasn’t sure what it was, but it hadn’t been there before. “Goodnight, Caleb.”

He walked into the bedroom and leaned his forehead against the door after he pushed it closed. Seeing her like that, so beautiful and vulnerable, it was all he could do to walk away. A twinge of guilt filled his heart, but this time, it was a different kind of guilt. It was the guilt of not yet seeing her as his wife. The guilt of taking a wife and then not being a good husband to her.

He knelt by his bed and folded his hands. “Jessica, I think I’m falling in love with Mia. I’m confused, and I need time. You would love her. She’s great with the children, and I know she loves them. I hope you understand, but she is what the children and I need. I love you and I always will, but I can love her, too.” He let out a deep breath. “Mia said that you can love more than one person, but in different ways. After spending time with her, I know it’s true. I know that you would approve of her. She’s smart, funny, and full of surprises. Just please forgive me. It doesn’t mean that I love you any less, but I’m ready to start opening my heart again. I feel alive with her. She’s very special. I hope you understand. I love you, darling.”

Then, he sat on the edge of the bed, unable to sleep, not wanting to sleep, energized instead of exhausted from the day of hard work he had put in. Although he enjoyed visiting his parishioners, he enjoyed his time on the farm, as well.

Birthing the calf was rewarding. The cow was having a hard time delivering, and if he hadn’t been there, they would have probably lost them both. It just so happened that he was there today. The Lord truly did work in strange ways.

Caleb heard some noises out in the living room. He could have sworn he heard the rocking chair going back and forth against the hardwood floor, and wondered what

Mia was up to. Unable to resist, he walked out to check on her, and she was sitting in the rocking chair, sewing.

Caleb smiled. “Mia, you really should get to bed.” He leaned against the door facing, watching her sew. “It’s getting late.”

Mia looked up from her sewing. “You go ahead,” she said as she held up a doll’s head. “Dolly had a little ‘accident’ and I want to fix it before Hailey wakes up.”

He nodded as a smile spread across his face and he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Well, don’t stay up too late.” He walked back to the bedroom, touched by the gesture. He turned around and watched her, so intent on her sewing. “Goodnight, Mia.”

She glanced up and smiled. “Goodnight, Caleb.” Then, she went back to her sewing.

This time, when he walked back into the bedroom... he didn’t feel guilty at all.

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Mia

The next morning, Mia woke to the sound of bustling in the kitchen—pots and pans clanking—so she slipped on her robe and walked out. “What’s going on?” Mia rubbed her eyes and looked out the back window. “It’s not even light out yet.”

Caleb smiled. “It’s Sunday.”

Mia’s eyes opened wide. She must have lost track of the days, because she had no idea that it was Sunday. Her stomach flipped. There were lots of duties expected of the preacher’s wife... and that meant her. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Mia....” Caleb stopped her. “After you’re ready, would you mind getting the children dressed while I milk the cow and gather the eggs? We won’t be back for a while.”

Mia gave him a small smile. “I’d be glad to.”

“I already laid out their Sunday best.” Caleb smiled, and then headed outside.

There had been a change in him the night before, but Mia wondered if the change would continue into the light of day. She hurried to her room and slipped on a baby blue dress with small pink buds on the print, bustled in the back. It was a bit low cut for church, but the rest of it was fine. So, she added a cream modesty scarf around her neck and tucked it in to the neckline. Then, she added a matching one to her waist and tied it in the back, setting off the dress. She quickly washed her face and pulled a brush through her hair, but it was hopeless. So, she pulled it up into curls at the crown

and pinched her cheeks. Then, she added a matching pale blue hat, donned her beige shoes, threw her beige coat over her arm, and then walked out to the living room.

She looked toward the back window and the sun was just beginning to rise. So, she hurried into the bedroom where the children were still sleeping and knelt down by the boy. “Shane, honey.” She stroked his light blond hair away from his sleeping face. “Wake up. It’s time for church.”

“Okay, Ma,” he said in his sleep. “I’m getting up.”

She smiled as her heart leaped. She knew that he was just waking up and disoriented, but she hoped that, one day, he would call her Ma just as naturally.

His eyes suddenly opened wide, and then he looked over at Mia and smiled. “Good morning, Mia.”

She ruffled his hair. “Time to get up and get ready for church, sleepyhead.”

He sat up and rubbed his eyes as a huge yawn escaped his lips. “You look real pretty. I like the blue feather in your hat. It’s the same color as your dress.” His eyebrows suddenly pulled together. “But where did they ever find a bird with that color feather?”

She giggled as she ruffled his hair again, and then leaned in conspiratorially. “I think they dyed a white feather.”

“Oh!” he said, nodding thoughtfully.

She laughed. “Okay. Enough about feathers and my hat. Let’s get you dressed for church before your father gets both of our hind ends.”

He laughed, and she placed a kiss on the top of his head.

When she studied the children's clothes that he had laid out, they weren't the best. But she was sure that it was the best they had. She made a mental note to make the children new clothes before the following Sunday. She wanted the children to look their best, and to make their father proud.

After Shane was dressed, she gave Hailey's shoulder a gentle shake. "Hailey, girl. Time to wake up and get ready for church."

She turned over and gave Mia a smile. "I like your hat." She reached up and brushed the feather, giggling.

A smile spread across Mia's face. "Thank you, but don't touch the feather. Okay?"

Hailey grinned as she nodded.

"Come on." Mia scooped her up into her arms. "Let's get you dressed."

A few minutes later, the little girl was wearing her best dress, but it looked a bit too shabby for Mia. She remembered her mental note to make the children new clothes as she scooped her in to her arms and carried her out to the living room. "I have a surprise for you," Mia told her as she sat down in the rocking chair with Hailey on her lap.

Hailey's eyes widened.

Mia pulled out the repaired ragdoll and handed it to her.

"Dolly!" Hailey yelled, hugging it tightly to her chest.

Mia smiled, enjoying her reaction. “I stayed up late last night and fixed her. She’s as good as new.”

Hailey looked at Mia with puppy dog eyes. “Did it hurt?”

Mia’s eyebrows pulled together in concern. “Did what hurt?”

“Did it hurt Dolly... when you fixed her?”

Mia lifted her eyebrows. “Oh, no! Not at all! I made sure she didn’t feel anything. And she was very brave. She never whimpered once.”

A broad smile spread across the little girl’s face. “Yeah!” Then, she threw her arms around Mia’s neck, catching her by surprise. She pulled back with her hands still wrapped around her neck. “Does this mean that you’re my ma now?”

A lump formed in Mia’s throat as tears filled her eyes. “I guess so, baby girl. Is that okay?”

Hailey nodded, and then laid her head on Mia’s chest. “Thank you, Ma.”

A tear rolled down Mia’s face. “You’re welcome, baby.” Mia stroked her hair as she rocked her, then she thought of something. “Hey! I have an idea. Would you like to wear a scarf? I have one that would look nice with your dress.”

“Yes!” Hailey jumped off her lap, headed toward Mia’s bedroom, and climbed onto the bed, her feet wiggling in front of her.

Mia looked through her chest of drawers and found a dark blue scarf that complimented her dark brown dress and matched the tiny medium blue flowers in the print. “Here we go!”

“Pretty!” Hailey said as she ran her hand over the silk.

“You like it?”

Hailey nodded vigorously.

Mia smiled. “Here. Turn around.” She stood her on her feet, wrapped the scarf around her waist, and then tied it in a bow in the back. It really brightened up the dress. “Now! You look beautiful! Want to see?”

Hailey nodded, and Mia stood her in front of the full-length mirror.

Mia gazed at her new daughter’s reflection in the mirror. “You look beautiful.”

Quicker than Mia would have thought possible, Hailey turned around and pulled her in for a hug. “Thank you, Ma.”

Mia nodded, a lump forming in her throat. “Now, let’s do your hair.”

Mia sat her on a stool in front of the vanity, and then brushed her dark blonde hair up into a style similar to her own, pulled up high on the crown of her head. But instead of pinning it in place, she wrapped it in a high ponytail, and twisted her waves into ringlets that hung down her back.

“Oh, Hailey! You look lovely!” Mia stood her in front of the mirror once more.

Hailey gasped. “Thank you!” She threw her arms around her and gave her a huge hug.

Mia slipped on her shoes, and then they walked out to the living room.

“Shane! Let’s put your shoes on!” Mia called for him, and he slid into the living room across the wooden floor in his socks. “We need to put your shoes on. Go get them and I’ll help you.”

Shane turned around, saw Hailey, and stopped in his tracks. “You look pretty!”

Hailey twisted back and forth, looking down at her dress. “Thank you. Ma did it for me.”

Shane froze, and then walked slowly back into his room. He came out a moment later with his shoes in his hands, threw them on the floor, and folded his arms across his chest, glaring at Mia.

Mia picked up the shoes, and then knelt on the floor in front of him. “Shane, I know I’m not your real mother. But Hailey asked if I was her ma now. I know she knows that I’m not your real mother, but knowing that I can stand in for her... well... I think it makes Hailey feel better.” She placed her hands on his shoulders as tears formed in his eyes. “Is that okay?”

He nodded, tears running down his cheeks.

“Oh, Shane. Come here.” She pulled him to her chest and let him cry on her shoulder.

“Okay. I think we’re about....” Caleb walked in through the back door and took in the scene. “Is everything all right?”

Mia gave him a small smile. “I think so.” Then, she turned her attention back to Shane. “But you don’t ever have to call me Ma if you don’t want to.”

Shane nodded, and then gave her a hug.

As they were talking, Caleb's lips formed a straight line as he headed into the kitchen.

When he walked back in, Mia and the children were dressed and ready to go.

"My, my!" Caleb reached out for his children and stood them before him. "You both look beautiful."

Shane laughed, smiling. "I'm not beautiful! I'm a boy!"

Hailey covered her mouth as she giggled.

Caleb laughed. "Okay then," he said as he held him at arms-length. "You look very handsome." Then, he stood and took in Mia. "Mia, you look gorgeous."

She blushed at the compliment. "Thank you."

Caleb reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, giving her a small smile. "Okay! Let's get going or we'll be late." He looked down at the children. "Put your coats on, everyone!"

The family rushed to put on their coats, and Mia slipped into her long beige coat that hooked just under her breasts and fell over her dress to the floor, becoming the perfect accessory. Caleb helped Hailey into her coat and lifted her into his arms. "You look beautiful, princess." She giggled as he nuzzled her neck.

"Thank you," Hailey replied. "Ma did it." Then she pointed at Mia.

Shane hung his head as he waited for his father's reaction.

Caleb's mouth flew open, but he quickly recovered himself. "Well, she did a

wonderful job.”

Shane held his head up and smiled.

“Now, let’s go.” Caleb carried Hailey to the door. “If we’re too late, the parishioners will be waiting for us at the door.”

They all piled into the buckboard. Caleb gave them all quilts to cover themselves so they would stay warm as they headed toward the church.

“I’m sorry about the comment,” Mia said over Hailey’s head, her voice low. “But she asked if she could call me that.”

Caleb gave her a weak smile. “It’s okay.” Then he looked into her eyes. “I would have it no other way.”

Mia nodded thoughtfully. She knew it was hard on him, but he was trying. And if he was trying to make it work, then so would she.

They arrived at the church within minutes. They were the first ones there. As the preacher should be, Mia thought. Caleb helped them out, and Shane jumped down of his own accord.

“Shane, don’t get yourself dirty before church!” Mia called after him as he scampered off to play.

Caleb offered her his arm. “Shall we?”

She took his arm and let him escort her into the church and to the front pew to the right. Evidently, that must have been the place reserved for the preacher’s wife and family. He took her hands in his and looked into her eyes. “Will you be okay here?”

She smiled, grateful for his concern. “Yes, of course.”

He grinned, obviously pleased. “You look beautiful.”

Mia blushed at the compliment. “Thank you, and you look very handsome.”

Caleb smiled as he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I’ll see you after the service.”

He walked to the back and opened the doors to greet the first parishioners to arrive. He shook their hands, and they headed toward the left, but cast their gaze toward her. When their eyes connected, they gave her a welcoming smile and waved, which helped to ease Mia’s nerves.

The church filled up quickly, and Caleb greeted them all, cordial to each one. They all shook his hand warmly and took their seats. Many of the women approached Mia and welcomed her to the church and to the community. Mia thanked all of them, and a few had even invited her over for afternoon tea. But she told them that even though she appreciated the invitation, she was kept quite busy at home settling in at present. Satisfied, they smiled graciously and took their seats.

Just before the service started, Ella walked in with Colton right behind her with his hand on the small of her back as they carried in their two new children. The color was back in Ella’s face and she looked much better. Colton had guided his wife to sit in the back pew, but Mia motioned for them to sit up front with her. She swung Hailey up on her hip and headed toward them.

“Ella, Colton, come sit with me.” Mia smiled as she hugged her friend. “I’ll help with the babies.”

Ella chuckled. “Mia, you have plenty to worry about than us.”

“Nonsense,” Mia replied, giving her an encouraging smile. “Come up to the front... please.”

Ella chuckled. “Well, if you insist.”

Mia linked her arm with Ella’s. “I’ve missed you.” She led her to the front of the church as Colton followed.

“I’ve missed you, too,” Ella replied.

Guilt filled Mia at her words. “I’m so sorry. I’m afraid that I haven’t been the best friend lately.”

“Oh, hush,” Ella replied, walking slowly down the aisle. “You’ve had your hands full with settling in, I’m sure.” Ella held her hand, looking into her eyes. “And you’ve been the best friend I could ever want.”

Once Ella was settled in the front pew, Colton sat on one side of his wife and Mia sat on the other. She looked around for Shane. He hadn’t come in yet, and the service was about to start.

Mia squeezed Ella’s hand. “I’ll be right back.”

Ella nodded, smiling as she adjusted herself in the pew.

Mia grabbed Hailey and headed to the back of the church and approached Caleb, who was finishing up greeting another parishioner. “Caleb,” she whispered. “Could you call for Shane? He hasn’t come in yet.”

He nodded, and then turned to another parishioner.

Mia went back to the front pew to sit beside Ella and gave her hand a gentle squeeze.

A blonde woman and her husband approached a moment later.

“Mia, you know Wyatt Nash, and this is his wife, Madison,” Ella said. She started to get up, but Madison stopped her and turned to Mia.

“It’s good to see you again, Wyatt,” Mia said as he pulled her in for a one-armed hug. Then, Mia offered her hand to Madison. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Madison shook it. “The pleasure’s all mine.”

“I’m glad you came, Mia,” Wyatt said, sliding his arm around his wife.

Mia laughed. “Yeah, you left a mess in New York.”

Wyatt shrugged unapologetically. “Sorry about that, but it was unavoidable.”

Mia smiled. “Not to worry. It’s good to see you here in church, though.”

Wyatt chuckled, pulling his wife to his side. “Well, you have Madison to thank for that. She roped and hogtied me and dragged me in.”

Madison threw a playful elbow into his side. “You love coming here, and you know it.”

Wyatt laughed. “Yes, you tell me that all the time.”

“Ella, we’re going to go sit down now,” Madison said as she gave her a gentle hug. “I have to teach tomorrow, but I’ll be by after school to see you.”

“I’ll look forward to your visit.” Ella gave her friend’s hand a light squeeze. “I think you have enough on your hands with teaching school, let alone worry about coming to see me.”

Madison chuckled. “It’s my job to worry about you.”

Colton arched an eyebrow. “No, actually, that’s my job.”

Everyone laughed.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Madison said to Mia, and then she and Wyatt took their seats.

To her right, a beautiful young brunette woman held up her hand and smiled. “Sorry for the interruption, but I wanted to meet you. I’m Gabriella Price,” she said in a distinct French accent. “I canter here every Sunday now.”

Mia shook her hand and returned the smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Gabriella had the type of beauty that affected the self-esteem of every woman around her. But she appeared to be unaware. She was just as cordial and welcoming as everyone else in the town.

“Let me guess,” Mia said, smiling. “You’re the princess I’ve been hearing about?”

Gabriella laughed. “Yes, that’s me. But here in Whiskey River, I’m just Gabriella.”

A heavily muscled brunette man walked up behind her and slipped an arm around her waist. “Gabriella Price, that is.”

The woman giggled. “Mia, this is my husband, Dirk Price. He owns the livery

stable.”

“Yes, we met when I first came to town.”

Mia noticed that Caleb took his place at the pulpit, signaling the start of the service. Gabriella gave her hand a gentle squeeze, and then walked over to stand by the organist as Dirk sat in the row behind her.

Just before the service started, someone grabbed Mia’s shoulder from the row behind. When she looked back, Mrs. Jenkins leaned in. “It’s so good to see you here.” Mia squeezed her hand, and then turned her attention to Caleb.

Caleb said a wonderful service, and the music was exquisite. Gabriella was truly a songbird, her voice lilting over the crowd, filling the room. As she watched, Mia saw Caleb in a different light. She was amazed at his passion and his love for God as he preached. It really showed... not only in his words, but in his mannerisms and the way his eyes lit up, too.

After the service, Mia turned to Ella. “I have to go organize the after-church potluck dinner. Will you be okay?”

“You go ahead. I’ll be along in a moment.” Ella caught her hand, capturing her attention. “You’re doing a wonderful job.”

Mia smiled. “Thank you, Ella. I’ll see you in a minute.”

Colton chuckled. “Don’t worry. I’m sticking with her like glue.”

Mia nodded as she let out a deep breath. “Holler if you need me. I’ll see you in the recreation hall in just a bit.” Then she looked down at the children. “Would you like to help me?”

Hailey and Shane both nodded. Mia took the children by the hand and guided them over to the recreation hall. Immediately, she started guiding people where to set their specialty dishes, setting everything up. Shane tried to help but was mainly just repeating what she was saying. When other families and children started piling in, she let him and Hailey go play with the other children.

“Be sure to watch your sister!” Mia called after them as they scampered off.

Mrs. Jenkins let Mia take the lead, but helped out, telling the ladies where to set their dishes, and then she told the men where to set the tables and chairs. Mia felt that this was a true community and was glad to be a part of it—something that she hadn’t had in a very long time.

Ella walked in with Colton and the babies, holding Colton’s hand.

Mia motioned them over to the main table. “Here you go,” Mia said as she held a chair for her.

“Will you be all right for a moment?” Colton asked his wife.

Ella nodded. “I’ll be fine. I’m not an invalid. Go ahead.”

“I’ll be here with her, Colton,” Mia reassured him, and then added, “Don’t worry. I’ll look after her.”

“Oh, for land’s sake!” Ella interjected. “I’m fine!”

Colton smiled. “I’ll be right over here.” He chuckled as he kissed the top of his wife’s head and hurried off to help the men set up the rest of the tables.

A few minutes later, Caleb walked in and went directly over to help the men set up.

Mia watched him, proud of how he chipped in with the other men. He wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. And she couldn't help but notice how nice he looked in his Sunday suit, and how his muscles flexed under his suit coat.

A band started playing and people started swaying to the music. Others joined in, and, soon, a dance was in full swing, with children dancing as well as adults.

In the corner of the room, a man sat on a tall stool with a guitar on his knee, and another man set up makeshift drums. A few other men joined in, forming a band, and music soon filled the room.

"Care to dance?" One corner of Caleb's lips curled into a handsome smile.

"I thought you'd never ask." Mia took his hand and let him lead her onto the dancefloor.

Caleb looked into her eyes, holding her at a respectable distance as they sashayed over the floor. Soon, other couples joined them and before long, it was a true party.

When the next song started up, Hailey and Shane joined them on the dancefloor. They spent the afternoon dancing and having fun. If Mia didn't know any better, she would have thought they were finally becoming a real family.

Caleb

When dusk settled over the land, Caleb placed his hand on the small of Mia's back as he looked over her shoulder. "Let's go home."

"I like the sound of that."

She turned to him and smiled.

His heart fluttered at just the simple act of touching her shoulders as he helped her on with her coat. Everything was put away and the last person gone. Pride filled Caleb's chest as he offered her his arm and closed the door quietly behind them. He escorted her and the children out to his buckboard and helped her in, and then slid in beside her. By the time they pulled onto the main road, both of the children were fast asleep.

He made a clicking sound with his mouth and the horses immediately started walking. "I'm proud of you, Mia."

Her head snapped up. "What for?"

"You did a great job today organizing everything and taking care of the children." A smile lit his lips, and this time, he didn't feel guilty for saying it.

"It was my pleasure." A smile lit her lips as she looked out over the horizon. "It felt nice to be a part of a community... and a family... again. It's something I haven't had in a very long time."

He nodded, his thoughts going to when he first saw her on the platform at the train station, and how he had treated her at the church. “Mia, I haven’t been a good husband to you—”

“You’ve been the best.” Concern filled her eyes as she gently touched his arm.

He had the sudden urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her properly, but now wasn’t the time. Caleb looked out over the horizon as streaks of orange, red, and yellow raced across the darkening blue sky. “Mia, I’m glad you came.”

A lovely smile lit her lips. “I wouldn’t have missed hearing you preach for anything.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He glanced over at her, his eyes filled with concern. “I’m glad you came to Whiskey River.”

She nodded, emotion filling her eyes. “Me, too.”

As the horses plodded on through the snow, he knew that he needed to talk to her, to tell her what he hadn’t, what he couldn’t before now.

“Mia, I’m sorry for going to bed so abruptly last night,” he said as he let out a deep breath.

She gave his leg a gentle pat. “It’s okay, Caleb. I understand.”

He shook his head. “No, you’re a good woman, Mia, and you deserve more than what I’ve given you.”

She looked at him, confused.

Caleb let out a deep breath. “Mia, I need to tell you... what happened... to Jessica.”

Mia shook her head. “Caleb, you don’t have to—”

“Yes, I do,” he said as he turned his attention to the road. “She had a cough for some time, and when I asked her about it, she brushed it off, saying that it was nothing. I should have known better. It got to the point that she was coughing up blood.”

Mia gasped.

Caleb paused for a moment as memories washed over him. “I tried to get her to see Doc Morgan, but she wouldn’t go. Anyway, one Sunday morning, she wasn’t feeling well. I tried to get her to stay at home, but she wanted to go to church. She was fine during the service, but she collapsed afterward. I rushed her to the house and Doc Morgan came, but it was too late. She died later that night. Colton and Madison were with me, and Ella had kept the children at their farm.” He let out a deep breath. Somehow, it felt better to talk about it now. To get it out.

Mia gingerly touched his arm, bringing him back to the present. “Caleb, it wasn’t your fault—”

“Mia, I should have forced her to see Doc Morgan—”

“Caleb,” she interrupted. “There is no cure for influenza besides bedrest. There was nothing you could have done.”

He nodded. Although he knew she was right, it was still hard to hear.

“Caleb, I know it isn’t easy.”

“It’s been hard,” he admitted, letting out a deep breath.

She covered his hand with hers. “I know, but you have to find a way to let go of the

past and move on.”

He smirked as he looked into her eyes. “So, you want me to forget?”

Mia shook her head. “No, never forget. But you have to find a way to go on.”

Caleb nodded. “It’s easier said than done.”

She let her hand drop. “Yes, it is.” Mia let out a deep breath. “Take all the time you need, Caleb. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Thank you.” He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. They pulled to a stop in front of the house, his house, their house together now. It was so confusing. “Mia, just give me time.” He looked into her eyes. “I want to be a good husband to you, but I need time.”

She gave him a small smile as she nodded. “Take all the time you need. As I said, I’m not going anywhere.”

Deep down, he just hoped it was true.

As the week wore on, Mia was true to her word. Caleb noticed that she became better with running the house and soon got into a rhythm. To his surprise, she started getting up even earlier—before sunrise—to collect the eggs before the children woke, or to get something out of the root cellar. She also visited Ella and helped with the babies a few times during the week. It appeared that Mia, Ms. Jenkins, and Madison were all taking turns helping out. Caleb went over to check on them at night, as well.

He couldn’t help but admire Mia’s independence. In one way, she reminded him so much of Jessica, and then in other ways, she was nothing like her at all. It was time that he stopped comparing her to Jessica and to start seeing her for who she was inside.

One morning, Caleb walked out of the bedroom, and she was sitting on the rocking chair, sewing by the firelight, and didn't see him come in.

"You're going to hurt your eyes, sewing in this light."

"Oh!" She jumped as she quickly hid what she had been working on inside her sewing basket, and then tucked it into the writing desk and closed the doors.

It spiked his attention, but then again, women had their secrets. "When do you sleep?"

Mia laughed. "Oh, I sleep. Don't worry."

He took a step forward. "Make sure to take care of yourself."

"I'm fine."

Somehow, the words tugged at his heart. That was exactly what Jessica used to say before....

"So, what would you like for breakfast?" she asked, interrupting his thoughts. "I already made coffee."

Before he could object, she jumped to her feet, beat him to the kitchen, and poured him a cup of coffee and handed it to him. He took a sip, and it was just how he liked it: black, with one sugar. She paid attention.

Then, she poured one for herself and sat kitty corner from him at the table. "So, what's on the agenda for today?" she asked, a bit too cheerful.

He smiled at her enthusiasm. "Since it's early, I thought I'd show you how to milk a

cow. That is, if you're up for it?"

A broad smile spread across her face. "Sounds great!" Then, her face fell. "What if the children wake up while we're out?"

He shrugged. "If we go now, we'll be back in before they wake."

The grin returned. "Let's go, then."

Caleb hurried to slip into his coat, and then helped her on with hers. They walked outside in to the brisk morning air as streaks of purple and orange swiped across the sky, reflecting on the pristine snow. He headed into the barn and stopped in front of a stall as Mia followed. "This here is Ol' Bessie. She's our prize milk giver here on the Henley Farm."

Mia nodded as a smile lit her lips. "Well, we don't want to change that."

Caleb showed her how to hook the lead strap to her halter and then led her out into the hallway. "First, we tie her to the milking post." He smiled at Mia. "We don't want to have to spend the morning chasing her down."

"I thought that cows usually grazed in the field," Mia said.

"Look around." He gestured to the field that was covered in snow. "It's still too cold for the snow to melt off yet."

"When will that happen?"

Caleb shrugged. "Probably not until closer to March or April. In the Winter months, we keep the cows in the barn along with the horses. It's the only way they would survive." Then, he walked over to a wooden cabinet. "We keep the milking pails in

here.” He lifted out two clean buckets and carried them over. “And we keep the milking stool over here.” He picked up a stool on the side of the cabinet, and then carried it over to Ol’ Bessy. He placed the milking stool beside the cow’s utters, bulging with milk.

“Does it hurt her when she’s not milked?” Mia asked.

Caleb nodded. “Yes, that’s why she has to be milked every day. We get enough milk from her to supply a lot of our milk, as well as cheese and cream.” Then, he rubbed his hands together. “First, you need to warm your hands. She’ll kick you when your hands are cold.”

Mia giggled. “That explains it.”

“What?” Caleb asked.

Mia shook her head. “My first morning here, I tried to milk one of the cows, but had no luck.”

Caleb chuckled, wishing he could have seen it. “After your hands are warm, you take an utter in each hand....” He proceeded to show her the fine points of milking a cow. Once milk was streaming steadily from her utters, he stepped back. “Here. You try.”

She sat on the stool, warmed her hands, and pulled. The cow jumped. “Oh my!”

Caleb laughed. “That’s okay. Just pull and twist at the same time, but gently.”

She tried again, and milk shot directly in her face.

Caleb burst out laughing, and then handed her a rag. “Don’t worry. It’s happened to all of us.”

“Oh yeah?” she asked as a devilish smile spread across her face. Then, she pointed an utter at Caleb and pulled, causing milk to spray all over him.

“Oh yeah?” he asked.

She laughed as she took off running, and he chased her around the yard. He caught her and then swung her around as she giggled. Their faces drew near, and they suddenly became serious, but he set her on her feet and ran his hand through his dark brown hair, turning away.

“I... uh... I think the children might be awake now.” He pointed nervously at the cow. “I’ll... uh... I’ll finish up here.” Then, he walked away, when a snowball hit the back of his head. When he turned around, Mia was laughing as she hurried inside. “You’d better run! I’ll get even with you later!”

Then, she closed the door quickly behind her.

Caleb laughed as he went back to milking the cow. He was surprised that he almost kissed her. They had been married for a couple weeks now, but he still wasn’t ready. But maybe he was closer. He laughed to himself as he thought of Mia. And, for once, he didn’t feel guilty.

When he finished, he took two buckets of milk inside and carried them to the sink, where he would pour it into clean bottles.

The children were sitting at the table while Mia was fixing something on the stove.

“What’s that?” he asked as he pulled some clean glass bottles out from a nearby cabinet and started filling them with the milk.

“French toast!” Mia said happily. “You’re just in time. I need some milk.”

“French toast! French toast!” Shane and Hailey chanted in unison, bouncing on their seats.

“Have you ever had it before?” she asked as she cracked two eggs into a bowl, added milk, and then dipped a slice of bread into it and laid it in a hot skillet.

Caleb raised his eyebrows. “No, I can’t say as I have.”

Mia smiled happily. “Well, then! You’re in for a treat!”

“How do you fix it?” Caleb looked over her shoulder, watching as she demonstrated.

She flipped over a piece in the skillet, and it was golden brown. “After you fry it, then you put it on a plate and add syrup, like pancakes.” Mia took a slice out and laid it gently on a plate. Then, she repeated the process, dipping the bread into the egg and milk mixture and laying it in the hot oil.

“You really are full of surprises, aren’t you?” Caleb asked as he went back to pouring the milk.

“You just wait,” Mia teased as she plopped another slice onto a plate, drizzled them with syrup, and set them in front of the two children. Then, she cut them up into little squares for them so it would be easier for them to eat.

Caleb watched her, touched. “Let’s wait for the verdict.”

“Yummy!” Shane shouted happily, quickly swallowing another piece.

“Hey now! Make sure to chew it first!” Mia laid another piece of egg-soaked bread into the hot oil and looked over her shoulder at Caleb, holding the spatula. “See? I told you so!”

“Yummy!” Hailey opened her mouth wide and shoved in another piece.

Something stirred inside of him as he watched Mia with his children. She was loving, caring, and beautiful... everything he could ever want. This shouldn't be so difficult.

“Okay, now it's your turn!” Mia set a plate with two pieces of French toast in front of him.

All eyes were suddenly on him. “Oh-kay,” he said, dragging out the word, making a big show of sitting down to try it. The children were waiting with wide eyes as Mia smiled, waiting with spatula in hand. He slathered some syrup over it and then took a bite. His expression changed from skepticism to delight as he chewed. “This is delicious!”

“Yeah!” the children clapped excitedly.

He had no idea how breakfast became such an event, but he loved it. “Mia, you need to sit down and eat, too.”

“I will in a minute—”

“Come on....” He rose from his seat and guided her to her chair at the table. “Now, here.” He set a plate with two slices of French toast in front of her and slid the syrup over to her. Then, he looked at the stove. “What have I done?”

Mia laughed and got up from her seat. “I'll get it.”

“No, no,” he said, pointing the spatula at her. “We have enough. That is, unless someone wants more?”

“Me!” Shane yelled.

“I do! I do!” Hailey yelled, bouncing on her seat.

Mia arched an eyebrow. “Are you sure you don’t need any help?”

Caleb’s eyes widened. “No, no,” he said as he turned toward the stove. He dipped the bread in the egg and milk mixture like he watched Mia do, and then placed it in the hot, oiled pan as she had taught him. A few minutes later, he had the hang of it and made more for everyone.

Mia took a bite, moaning in pleasure. “So, Caleb, tell me honestly. Would you rather cook breakfast or milk a cow?”

He chuckled. “I can’t lie?”

She laughed, shaking her head.

“I’m not going to answer that.” Caleb sat down and drizzled syrup over two more slices of French toast and took a bite. “This is delicious!”

“That’s what I thought,” she said as she rose from her seat and put the buckets of water on the stove to boil.

After he finished the last bite, he got up and carried his plate to the sink. Then, he casually kissed the top of her head as he finished chewing. “Well, I’ll be out on the farm... doing chores... if you need me....” he teased, backing out the door.

Mia stood frozen, watching him go with a stunned look on her face.

He spent most of the afternoon thinking of the family time they had together at breakfast and vowed that they should do it more often. Yes, every morning should be family time before they went on with their day. Then his thoughts traveled to the kiss.

But, then again, it was just a friendly kiss on the top of her head, which he did out of reflex. There was no doubt about it. Mia was now a part of the family, whether he realized it or not. For a moment, he wondered what it would be like without her... and it was unimaginable. Since her arrival, she had brought much needed sunshine back into their lives.

Nothing more was said about the kiss, but the rest of the week was wonderful. They had family time at breakfast every morning, and then Mia stayed up late at night. He worried that she wasn't resting enough, but she seemed to be fine. In fact, lately she appeared to be excited about something, although he had no idea what it could be.

On Sunday morning, Caleb woke early. He slipped on his usual jeans and a white button-down shirt but didn't bother to slip on shoes. He loved Sunday mornings, the quiet before the hustle and bustle of preparing for church. Caleb rubbed his hands together, and then placed some more wood on the fire. But when he turned around, Mia was sitting in the rocking chair, asleep with a wad of fabric curled up on her lap.

He loved watching her sleep. She was so beautiful, and it was reflected in her features as she slept. He sat watching her for a few minutes, and, this time, he didn't feel guilty. After a time, he went into the kitchen and made some coffee. When it was finished, he made a cup for them both, and then headed back into the living room.

"Mia," he whispered in a sing-song voice, not wanting to scare her. "Mia, wake up." He held the coffee in front of her, letting the scent waft toward her. "Mia, wake up."

She opened her eyes and looked straight at Caleb and smiled. Then, her eyes flew open wide. "Oh, my goodness! How long have I been asleep?" She jumped and almost spilled the coffee, but Caleb leaned back just in time.

"It's okay. The kids are still asleep," Caleb whispered. "Here. I made you some coffee."

She smiled as she took a sip. “Umm... it’s just how I like it, two sugars with cream.”

Caleb grinned, pushing a loose strand of hair away from her face. “What are you working on?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said, putting it aside. “Let’s go out to the kitchen. Are you hungry?” Mia got up, and Caleb followed her to the table.

One corner of his lips curled into a smile. He thought she was hiding something but decided to let it go. “I really don’t think we have enough time. We’ll have to start getting ready in a few minutes.”

Ella sat at the table, but she was antsy. She took a sip of her coffee, and then said, “Well! I’m going to start getting ready. I’ll be out in a bit.”

A crease formed between Caleb’s eyes, knowing that she was up to something, but had no idea what it was. Instead, he slipped on his boots and coat, and quickly gathered the eggs and milked the cow. When he came back in, his jaw dropped. She and the children were standing in the living room, all dressed in new clothes. Hailey and Mia had on matching medium blue dresses, and Hailey had a matching blue ribbon tied in her high ponytail. Shane wore the same color shirt, a dark gray vest with a silk back, and matching trousers.

“My goodness!” Caleb said as he walked in. “Where in the world... how did you....”

“I made them,” Mia beamed, enjoying his reaction. “I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Caleb’s mouth dropped in disbelief. “When did you have the time?”

“This was what I’ve been working on when I was staying up late.” Mia shrugged, smiling. “I made you an outfit that matches Shane’s, too.”

Caleb smiled. “Wow! You all look wonderful!” He walked over to Mia and gave her a big hug. “Thank you. The kids have been needing clothes, but I...” He was about to say that he was going to buy store-bought clothes but hadn’t had the time. Also, Jessica was the one who had made their clothes in the past.

“You really like them?” Mia asked, beaming.

Caleb nodded. “You look beautiful... all of you.” Then, he looked around the room for his clothes. “So, where are my clothes and I’ll get dressed?”

Mia held them up.

“Mia! These are better than any store-bought clothes!”

“You like them?” she asked, excited.

“I love them!” Caleb looked over his new outfit, running a hand gingerly over the fabric. “I don’t think I’ve ever had clothes that are so nice before. They’re beautiful.” He looked directly into her eyes. “Thank you, Mia.”

He didn’t tell her this, but she was so good that she could work for any dress shop she wanted... even in New York. With the talent she had, he wondered why she had worked as a dancehall girl. He guessed that it must have been hard to find good jobs in New York.

He walked into the bedroom to get dressed, and the clothes fit him perfectly. How she knew his measurements, he had no idea. These were better clothes than any tailor could make. He slipped on his polished black shoes, combed his hair, and walked into the living room.

“My, my!” Mia looked him up and down. “Turn around,” she instructed, making a

twirling motion with her finger. He did as she asked and turned slowly. When he faced her again, she beamed with satisfaction. “Yes.”

“How did you know my size... or the children’s?”

She let out a deep breath. “Well, the children, I measured. You? I had to guess at. But it looks as if I came pretty close.”

He crossed the room to her and held her at arm’s length, gazing into her eyes. “You couldn’t have guessed any better if you tried.” Without thinking about it, he pulled her close and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, again. You did a wonderful job.”

She pulled him in for a hug. “I’m glad you like it.”

Holding her in his arms felt a bit too good. He quickly dropped his arms and took a step back. “You’re wonderful. Tell me, is there anything you can’t do?”

She shrugged as a broad smile lit her lips. “Milk a cow?”

They both laughed.

“Well, we might be late if we don’t hurry,” Caleb said, slipping into his coat.

Mia helped the children on with their coats, and then slipped on her own. They were quickly getting in to a routine.

“And I’ll be the best dressed preacher in four counties!” Caleb reached for Mia’s hand and tucked it in his arm. “Thanks to you.”

Mia laughed, sounding like bells.

As he escorted his family outside to the buckboard, he couldn't help but think of how perfect his life had become in such a short time, thanks to Mia.

Everything was wonderful, but he wondered how long it would last. He knew he couldn't keep her waiting, but she seemed to be patient with him. She was smart, funny, caring, and loving with his children. No one was perfect, but she was as close as they come.

But the question was: could he learn to let go of the past... and let love in?

## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: August 13, 2025, 4:37 am*

Mia

Bright white snow covered the ground as they drove the team to the church.

“I know! Let’s sing a song,” Mia said as they rode along.

“Yeah!” Shane stood in the back of the buckboard, holding onto the seat. Hailey sat between Mia and Caleb in the front. “What do you want to sing?”

“How about Oh My Darling, Clementine?” Mia asked.

“Yeah!” Shane and Hailey shouted in unison.

They sang at the top of their lungs all the way to church. Even Caleb joined in the fun. They sang a few verses, and before long, they pulled up to the beautiful stone church sitting in the snow. Mia noticed a river that flowed behind it. It was as if the stone church had just sprouted up out of the earth and then was covered in snow.

“I never noticed the river before.” Mia extended her hand and Caleb helped her out of the buckboard.

Caleb smiled. “That’s Whiskey River... the actual river that the town was named after.”

“Really?” Mia asked, intrigued. “I thought that the town was just named Whiskey River. Not that it was named after an actual river.”

Caleb scooped Hailey up into his arms and placed his hand on the small of Mia's back as they headed toward the church, and Shane followed.

"Yes." Caleb looked at the church with pride. "This church was the first permanent structure made in Whiskey River."

Mia was about to ask how the river got the name, but then they were greeted by a few parishioners who were waiting for them.

"My, my!" Gabriella said, standing by Dirk as she took the family in. "Don't you look nice today! Specially made outfits! Where did you get them?"

"Mia made them," Caleb announced proudly. "Come to find out, she stayed up late every night this week making them. She surprised us with them this morning."

"Wow!" Gabriella beamed. "You made these, Mia?"

Mia nodded happily.

Gabriella linked arms with her as they walked into the church. "You know, my friend Kenzie owns the new dress shop in town and is looking for a seamstress. I'm sure she'd love your designs, if you're interested."

Mia smiled. "I appreciate it, but I think I have my hands full right now. I'd love to meet her, though. Perhaps you both could come over for afternoon tea sometime?"

Gabriella nodded, a smile lighting her lips. "I'd like that."

Mia walked with the children to the front pew and took her place. People began filing into the church, and women walked up to her and greeted her, talking about their latest recipes or styles, but they all commented on the family's new outfits.

“Well, well!” Mrs. Jenkins gave Mia an air kiss over her cheek. “You all look marvelous! I love your outfits! Did you make them?”

Mia nodded, smiling.

“How’s everything going?”

Mia nodded. “Better.”

She gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I’m glad to hear it,” she said, and leaned in conspiratorially. “Remember what I said: you just need to be patient.”

Mia nodded, giving her a small smile. “Believe me, I’m trying.”

The elder woman grinned. “I’m glad. Well, if you need me for anything, just let me know.”

Mia patted her hand. “I’m fine now, but I’d love it if you’d come over just to visit sometime soon.”

“I’d like that,” she replied, and then they both noticed Caleb approaching the pulpit. “Well, it looks as if I need to take my seat. I’ll talk to you after the service.”

“Sit with us,” Mia coaxed, scooting over.

Mrs. Jenkins shook her head. “Oh, I couldn’t.”

A broad grin spread across Mia’s face. “I insist.”

“Well, if you insist.” She shrugged and she and Mia laughed at the same time.

Mia loved having Mrs. Jenkins sit beside her and the children during the service. She hadn't been a part of a family in a long time. But the people of Whiskey River had created a family of their own.

Caleb gave a wonderful sermon and Gabriella sang beautifully as she led the church in song. Mia was impressed. She could be a professional singer somewhere in Europe if she had wanted to, but here she was, happy as a lark in Whiskey River. It said a lot for the town.

Mia loved watching Caleb capture the attention of the congregation. But most of all, she loved seeing his love of God so prominent in his sermon. Watching Caleb and hearing his sermon actually inspired her to be better... to be a better person. Something stirred inside of her as she watched him, seeing him in a new light.

After the service, she took the children to the Recreation Hall and set to work organizing everything right away. It was much easier this time since she knew what was expected of her.

The band started playing as women brought in their specialties, each greeting Mia as they set their dishes where she directed them. This time, she felt like she belonged. She no longer felt like an outsider, struggling to fit in, although she didn't realize that she had felt that way before until now. Mia was sure that the more she did this, the easier it would become.

"Excuse me," Caleb said behind her as he took her hand. "But could I borrow my wife for a bit?"

Her heart fluttered at his words as the ladies around her giggled. It was the first time that he had referred to her as his wife, and it hadn't escaped her notice.

He led her out to the dancefloor and spun her around. This time, they effortlessly

launched into a waltz, capturing everyone's attention.

"I knew you could dance, but I didn't realize you could dance this well," Mia said as he guided her around the floor.

"I learned in college," Caleb said as he glided her around the floor, looking into her eyes. "But my skills pale compared to yours."

Mia blushed but held her head high as all eyes were on them. When the song ended, he leaned her back in an elegant dip as everyone clapped. Then, Hailey and Shane ran up and they all danced together.

They took a break to eat, everyone sitting on the floor against the wall or in the chairs that were available. Mia ate until she couldn't eat any more, and each dish was more spectacular than the last.

After they had finished, Caleb asked her if she would like to go with him to play with the children outside. She quickly agreed.

Watching him playing "Hide and Seek" and "Tag" with the children stirred her heart. She was amazed to see how good he was with the children. Then, toward the end of the day, Hailey curled up on her lap and went to sleep.

"Here. I'll take her," Caleb said, holding his arms out for his daughter.

Mia shook her head. "No, I have her. You stay here and have fun with Shane." She carried her inside, sat on a chair, and held her while she slept.

A few minutes later, Caleb walked in with Shane, causing Mia's heart to flutter. He smiled as he crossed the room to her and kissed his little girl's forehead. "We'll be going soon. I'll help the men break everything down and put it away and then we'll

go.” He looked into Mia’s eyes. “Is that okay, or would you like to leave now? I can take you and the children home and then come back.”

Mia shook her head as she smiled. “No, you go ahead. We’ll be fine.”

She glanced over at Shane, and he was yawning and rubbing his eyes. He would probably fall asleep on the way home.

Home. It was a small word that held so much meaning.

It was almost dark when they got home, and both children were asleep. Mia carried Hailey and Caleb carried Shane inside and they put them straight to bed. Then, they walked into the living room, leaving their door ajar, just in case.

Mia covered her mouth with the back of her hand as she let out a big yawn. “Well, I think I’m going to call it a night.” She took Caleb’s hands into her own. “Thank you for today. It really was wonderful.” She had turned to walk away, but he held her hand, stopping her.

“Would you like to sit with me for a while by the fire?” Caleb’s eyebrows lifted, hope filling his eyes, causing her heart to pound.

Mia smiled. “Yes, of course.”

“I’ll get us some coffee if you’d like to make yourself comfortable.” He disappeared into the kitchen before she could say anything.

“Would you like some help?” she yelled after him.

“No, I’ve got it!”

She threw some pillows on the floor by the couch on the oval area rug, and sat down on one of them, curling her legs under her skirt, and watched the fire as she waited. The flames lapped hungrily at the log, in tongues of orange, red, and yellow. It was mesmerizing. She was about to drift off to sleep when Caleb entered the room, carrying two coffee cups.

“Here you go, love.” Caleb handed one to her and sat on a pillow beside her on the floor. Up close like this, she noticed how his muscles played under his shirt, evidence of the hard labor he hadn’t shied away from over the years. She imagined that his stomach was just as muscled, but she quickly pushed the thought aside.

“Thank you.” Mia looked into her coffee cup, holding it with both hands. “Caleb?”

“Umm?” he asked, looking up from his coffee, propping his elbow on the couch. His eyebrows lifted, so handsome with the sharp contrast between his dark brown hair and blue eyes.

Mia smiled. “I was so proud of you today. Watching you preach. Watching you with the children. Watching how you chipped in with the men of the congregation so easily, not afraid to roll up your sleeves.” She looked into his eyes. “You might not want to hear this, but I’m proud to call you my husband.”

A smile lit his lips, but his eyes never wavered from hers. “I like hearing that.” He looked away, and Mia’s heart sank, thinking that he was going to let her down easily, but then his eyes met hers. “Mia, I’m proud of you, too. In the short time you’ve been here, you’ve become a part of the church community, and a part of this family. You were wonderful today. The community has accepted you, and so have my children. Thank you.”

Then, he placed his hand gently on the side of her cheek and laced his fingers through her blonde hair, gazing into her eyes, searching for acceptance. Then, he slowly

leaned in and pressed his lips to hers, sending shivers throughout her body and filling her heart. His lips moved with hers, and even though it was technically their first real kiss, it was as if her body knew his, as if it recognized him as hers.

Caleb pulled away a moment later, and then wrapped his arm around her and pulled her to his side. She watched the fire as she laid her head on his shoulder, enjoying the warmth of his body so close to hers. She was about to fall asleep when Caleb adjusted his arm, waking her.

He placed his hand on the side of her face. “Goodnight,” he said as he pressed his lips to hers once more.

Heat rushed through her body, and she was tempted to take the lead and deepen the kiss but thought better of it. Mia knew that this was hard for him, and she appreciated the effort. “Goodnight, Caleb.”

She rose from the pillows and headed toward her bedroom... alone.

After she closed the door, she leaned her head against it, wondering if he would ever come to love her.

Mia woke early the next morning, wondering if Caleb would ever love her the way he had loved Jessica, and if they could ever become a real family.

Even though what they had was tolerable, she wanted more. She wanted and needed someone to love her as his wife, and to want to create a family with her.

She decided to catch Caleb before he left. She needed to get away for a bit. For a moment, she thought of going back to New York to give him time to make up his mind, but the thought of leaving the children tore at her heart. But staying there was tearing her apart.

So, she decided to visit Ella and the children. Maybe it would help to take her mind off her own problems, and she could help Ella and Colton in any way that was needed.

She looked outside. It was still dark. Just a few streaks of red and purple threatened to break the sky to let the sun light through. Maybe Caleb was still here. She hurried to dress and threw her coat over her arm as she rushed out, hoping she wasn't too late.

Caleb was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping his coffee. "Good morning," he said, smiling. But his smile slowly faded when he saw her face.

She pretended not to notice. "I hope you didn't have plans," she said as she slipped into her coat. "But I need to see Ella today."

Caleb nodded as he rose from his chair. "How long will you be gone?"

"I'll be home later, but you'll need to fix dinner." She placed her hand on the door handle. "And I'm taking one of the horses, if you don't mind."

"I'll saddle one for you," he said as he downed the last of his coffee. "Are you all right?"

She shrugged. "I hardly know."

He took a step toward her. "Is there anything I can do? Anything I can say?"

She shook her head as she took a step back. "No, I just need a day."

He nodded, taking a step closer. "For what?"

She bit her lower lip as her eyes welled up with tears. "Not to sound selfish, but I just

need a day. I can't explain it right now."

"Okay." Caleb reached down beside her for his boots, slipped them on along with his coat, and then headed out the back door, letting it slam closed behind him. A few minutes later, the sound of horses' hooves shuffling in the snow resonated outside, growing louder.

Mia walked outside and stepped down off the porch. "I'll be back, all right?"

He nodded as he handed her the reins.

Mia said nothing more as she swung up into the saddle. "Look after the children for me, please."

He nodded as a line formed between his eyes.

"Yah!" she yelled, leaning in the saddle as the horse launched into a canter. She looked behind her one last time. Caleb was standing out in front of the house, watching her go.

On the way to Ella's house, she had some time to think. Could he ever love her the way he should? The way she needed to be loved? The way she already loved him?

Tears ran down her cheeks. After the night before, after he had kissed her, it had triggered her heart and all the love that had lain dormant inside. But she couldn't live in a one-sided marriage. She needed more... and so did he. She couldn't give her whole heart while he withheld his.

A few minutes later, she rode up on to Ella and Colton's farm and came to a stop in front of their house. She slid off and took the reins, ready to lead the mare to the back, but Colton walked out onto the front porch.

“Welcome, Mia!” A broad smile spread across his face as he skipped down the stairs. “It’s good to see you!” He pulled her in for a one-armed hug and took the reins from her with the other hand. When he pulled back and saw tears in her eyes, his face fell. “What’s wrong?”

Mia shook her head, quickly drying her tears. “I’m okay.”

Colton grabbed her shoulders, forcing her to look at him. “Are you sure?”

She nodded and quickly put a smile on her face. “Please, don’t tell Ella. I came over to help. Not to burden her.”

“Mia, we’re here for you if you change your mind.”

“Thank you.” She nodded, dabbing at the tears in her eyes.

“Now, go on inside,” Colton instructed as he took the reins. “Visit with Ella and I’ll take care of your horse.”

“Are you sure?”

A broad smile spread across his face. “Absolutely! I can’t wait for you to see my children! They’ve already grown so much!”

Mia laughed. “Are they ready for college yet?”

Colton chuckled. “No, not yet, but it won’t be long.”

“Bite your tongue,” Mia teased, skipping up the stairs. “They already grow fast enough.”

“This is true,” Colton agreed as he slid up into the saddle. “I’ll be inside in a bit.”

Mia nodded. “I’ll tell Ella.”

Colton chuckled, shaking his head as he disappeared around the corner, headed toward the barn.

“Ella?” Mia asked as she walked into the house and closed the door gently behind her. She took her coat off and hung it on a peg by the door, and then headed toward the master bedroom.

“In here!” Ella said just as Mia walked in. Her face lit up as soon as she saw her. “Well, hello! How are you doing today?” Ella was sitting on the bed, breastfeeding one of the babies, covered over with a lightweight blanket.

“Great!” Mia replied, smiling when she saw her. And it was true. She was much better now just seeing Ella. She looked into the cradle, and the baby girl was awake, holding her hands up to her, waving them back and forth. “I just came by to see if you needed any help... and to aggravate you, of course.”

“Good!” Ella laughed as she handed her the baby boy. “Here’s Blake. Can you hand me Hannah? I need to feed her, too.”

“It’ll be my pleasure.” Mia took the baby boy and laid him in the cradle next to his sister. The babies reached for each other and touched hands, stirring Mia’s heart. It was the sweetest thing she’d ever seen. She placed Hannah in Ella’s arms a moment later.

Ella switched sides and began breastfeeding again, and then covered them over with the light blanket. “Would you mind burping Blake?” She shrugged. “I kind of have my hands full.”

Mia smiled. "I'd love to." She lifted him from his crib, dressed in a little gown. Mia wrapped him in the blanket and carried him to the rocking chair sitting in the corner and gently patted his back. A moment later, she was rewarded. "Feel better?"

The baby cooed in answer.

"You know," Ella said as she rocked the baby, "you look great with a baby."

Mia laughed without humor. "I don't know about that."

"What's wrong?" A crease formed between Ella's eyes. "Don't you want to have children?"

Mia let out a deep breath, enjoying rocking the baby. "I do."

"Well, then. What's wrong?" Ella placed the baby on her shoulder and started burping her.

Mia shrugged. "Well, I already have two."

Ella nodded as the baby let out a big burp. "That's a good girl!"

Mia rocked Blake and watched as he shoved his fist into his mouth.

"Mia, talk to me," Ella said, rocking Hannah back and forth. "What's wrong?"

Mia looked down at the baby. "Caleb kissed me for the first time since we were married last night."

"For the first time?" Ella demanded, her eyes wide. "But you're married!"

Mia nodded. “Yes, we are.”

“What’s going on?”

Mia bit her lower lip in an effort to fight back the tears. “Ella, he’s still in love with Jessica.”

“Mia, he can love you, too,” she cooed. “Just give him time.”

Mia nodded. “I know.”

“It might take a long time.”

“I know,” Mia repeated. “But what if he never comes to love me?”

“Of course he loves you.”

Mia shook her head. “Ella, I can’t live in limbo like this.”

“Mia, he may not love you like Jessica,” Ella pleaded, “but you can love people differently—”

“I know that, but someone needs to tell that to Caleb.” Mia let out a deep breath. “I’m sorry. I should have never brought it up.”

Ella shook her head. “Mia, don’t say that. You can talk to me about anything. You know that.”

Mia nodded. “I’m not meaning to complain. I love the children. At first, it was hard with Shane. Losing his mother was really hard on him.” She paused at the memory. “But now, we get along just fine.”

Ella nodded, a crease between her eyes. “Besides going to church, what do you do together as a family?”

Mia shrugged. “We started making breakfast together every morning. No matter what is happening that day, Caleb and I get up early and make breakfast for the family.”

“Well, that’s something!” Ella encouraged. “Just give it time.”

Mia nodded, and then noticed that the baby was sleeping. “Ella, I need a man who can love me for me... and I’m not sure that’s Caleb.”

“You’re not thinking of going back to New York, are you?” Ella asked as she rocked Hannah.

Mia shook her head. “I couldn’t leave the children... no matter what happens with Caleb.”

Ella sighed. “Mia, do you love him?”

Mia nodded. “Yes, of course I love him. He’s kind, funny, wonderful with the children, handsome—”

“Okay then,” Ella replied. “Don’t you think that he might think the same things about you?”

Mia shook her head. “No, he’s never told me.” Her eyes met Ella’s. “He doesn’t love me. Ella, I can’t be in a one-sided relationship. I can’t give him all my love and then he not love me in return. It’s too heart wrenching.”

“Mia,” Ella said, her voice sympathetic. “He’s probably showing you that he loves you every day.”

Mia shrugged. “Well, how about I make some lunch? What would you like?”

“Mia, I know what you’re trying to do,” she said as the baby fell asleep in her arms.

“Okay. I’ll let it go. But I’m here if you need to talk.”

“Thanks, Ella.” Mia nodded. “But please, don’t tell anyone.”

One corner of Ella’s lips curled into a smile. “I never do.”

Mia laid Blake in the cradle. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll put the babies down for a nap and you get some rest.” Mia kissed the top of her head when she took the baby from her arms. “I’ll make us some lunch.”

Ella kissed the baby before Mia laid her down. “Well, if you insist.”

Mia smiled. “I do, Mama. Now, get some rest.”

“Okay, but wake me when it’s ready,” Ella said as she turned over.

Mia smiled. “I will.”

“Mia?”

“Yes?”

Ella chuckled. “I thought you might not want to have children after witnessing me give birth.”

Mia laughed, shaking her head. “No, I haven’t ruled it out. I still want to have more children... even though I already have two.”

A smile lit Ella's lips. "Night."

"I'll see you in a bit," Mia said as she quietly closed the door behind her.

As she walked out to the kitchen, she resolved herself to being the mother of Caleb's children... no matter what happened between them.

Caleb

The next day, Caleb woke up early and went out to the kitchen to start the coffee. He thought of making French toast but changed his mind. Mia had spent the day at Ella's house, and when she came back in, she said goodnight, went straight to her bedroom, and closed the door behind her.

Since it was morning, he hoped that she felt better and that things could go back to... well... if not normal, then their normal.

But Mia came out of her bedroom fully dressed. Somehow, Caleb knew she wasn't going to stay the whole day. "I'll start breakfast in just a minute." Mia headed into the bedroom to check on the children, and then left the door ajar when she left. "What would you like this morning?" she asked, walking past him and into the kitchen, not looking at him.

He shrugged. "Anything you like," he said angrily, and then headed to the backdoor, emptied the contents of his coffee cup outside, and set it on the table. Without another word, he slipped on his coat and went out to the barn. He didn't want to go far in case Mia decided to leave again.

Inside the barn, he leaned against a post. He didn't know why he was so upset. The day before was the first day that she began to distance herself from him... from them. He turned around and punched a board in the barn wall. His hand started bleeding, but he felt nothing.

Of course she started distancing herself from him after he kissed her. Maybe she

didn't love him. It was obvious that she loved his children, but what if she didn't love him? It was the only explanation he could manage.

He let out a deep breath as he grabbed the wheel barrel and shovel and started cleaning out a stall. When he was angry, this was what he did... shovel stalls. It was a safe way to get his anger out. Physical activity always helped him when he was frustrated, and this time was no different.

Then, a thought occurred to him. Maybe she was distancing herself because he couldn't give her his heart. He was trying, but he just couldn't let his guard down enough to let her in completely.

But, somehow, she had wormed her way into his heart, despite his best efforts to keep her at arm's length. He just couldn't give her what she wanted... he couldn't be who she wanted... what she wanted... a husband.

Mia was the sort of woman who needed love in her life. She wasn't the kind of woman who could love his children and not expect to be loved in return. But he just wasn't ready. He was mad at himself for thinking that he was. Who knew when he would be ready? Maybe next week? Next year? Maybe never. How could he have done this to himself? To her? Mia had walked into this situation with her eyes open, into his home with an open heart, and he had shut it down. He was the one who did this. He couldn't blame her, an innocent bystander to the tragedy that was his life.

Caleb walked inside, determined to talk to her. To try and salvage what was left of their marriage, of their relationship. But Mrs. Jenkins was there instead of Mia.

"What time is it?" he asked her.

"Noon," Mrs. Jenkins replied.

“Oh,” he said as he looked around for Mia. “It’s later than I thought.”

Her eyebrows pulled together in concern. “Are you all right?”

“Where’s Mia?” he asked, ignoring her question as he looked around.

Mrs. Jenkins’s eyes were filled with concern. “She went to see Ella.”

“Again?”

Mrs. Jenkins nodded as she headed over to him. “Caleb, why don’t you sit down, and I’ll fix you some lunch? Then, we can talk.”

Tears welled up in his eyes, threatening to spill over, as he shook his head. “No, thank you, Mrs. Jenkins.”

Caleb walked out and kept walking until he came to the family cemetery under a tree at the back corner of the farm. When he found Jessica’s grave, he bent down and cleared the snow away from her tombstone. Then, he turned and punched the snow-covered ground as he fell to his knees on her grave.

“God, why? Why Jessica?” he screamed at the top of his lungs, tears rolling down his cheeks. “Why did it have to be you, Jessica? God, why couldn’t you have taken me instead? Damn it! You could have taken me and not her! Jessica!” he screamed as tears coursed down his cheeks, finally letting it out. He had done a good job of holding it together since he lost her, but not now. Not ever again. “Jessica! I need you!” he screamed as he beat his bloody fist on the snow covering her grave. “Jessica, I love you! Come back to me! Don’t leave me alone! Come back!” he sobbed. “Come back....”

Finally, he sat on her grave, facing the stone, sobbing into his arms. He cried for

Jessica... and now for Mia. He had lost one wife, and now he was going to lose Mia because he couldn't bring himself to think of her as his wife. He knew he couldn't go on like this... they couldn't go on like this. Maybe he should just let Mia go. Then, he realized that he'd never find anyone else like her again. Never. Who else would have come in with a loving, open heart and loved his children? Loved him and asked for nothing but love in return? But he had no love left to give. They were doomed from the beginning. He could see that now. How could it ever work... if he couldn't even give her his heart?

But how could he let go of the past, and let love in? How could he learn to love again?

It was easier said than done.

Mia

Over the next few days, things only got worse. Mia spent time with the children in the morning and fed them lunch, and then Mrs. Jenkins watched them so she could go over to Ella's house. Mia had thought of talking to Caleb, but he was becoming bitter and angry. She wondered if he blamed her for this, but she couldn't tell. He would no longer talk to her.

One day at Ella's house, Mia fixed lunch as Ella sat in a chair, rocking Blake. Hannah was fast asleep in the cradle. Mia had moved it to the kitchen temporarily.

"How are things going?" Ella asked as she burped the baby.

Mia knew she was watching her. She had been wearing her best Poker face all morning, but she should have known better. Ella could always see right through her.

"Not that I don't enjoy your company or appreciate the help," Ella pressed, "but why are you here and not at home with your own family?"

Colton was working in the barn, so they could speak freely.

"I don't have a family."

Ella's mouth fell open. "What do you mean? Of course you have a family."

Mia shook her head, fighting back tears. "They're Caleb's children. Not mine," she said, her voice merely a whisper. "But I want them to be."

“Oh, Mia.” Ella walked over and wrapped her arm around her while she held the baby, letting her cry on her shoulder. Mia had been trying to hold it together, but to no avail. “It’s not getting any better?”

Mia shook her head, drying her tears. “It’s getting to the point where he won’t even look at me now. He’s angry and getting bitter.” Mia pulled the ham she was frying off the stove and sat down with Ella.

“Why?” Ella asked, concerned as she absentmindedly started rocking the baby again.

Mia shook her head. “Because he’s still in love with Jessica but he’s married to me.” She threw her hands up in the air. “Ella, I feel as if I’m fighting a ghost. But I can’t fight anymore.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “When I go home, I feel lonely in a house filled with people.” She wiped the tears away.

“Mia, give it time—”

“Ella, I have,” she cut her off, and then lowered her voice to keep from waking the babies. “I don’t know what else to do. People say to be patient, and I’m patient. People say to pray, and I pray. But nothing helps. He’s still not willing to open his heart to me.” She let out a deep breath. “The only thing I know is that I can’t keep going on this way.”

Ella reached over and squeezed her hand. “Mia, don’t give up. It’ll get—”

“Ella, please don’t tell me that it’ll get better.” She sat on a chair, shaking her head. “I’m so sorry. I guess I’m starting to become bitter, too.”

Ella patted her hand. “It’s okay. You don’t need to apologize to me.”

“So, how are things going with you?” Mia asked, concerned. “How are you feeling?”

Ella smiled. "I'm feeling better now. Thank you."

Mia was grateful that she let her change the subject. "So, how do you like being a mother?"

A broad grin spread across Ella's face. "I love it. Honestly, I thought I would be a mother to just one child at a time. But I'm so glad that we had twins."

Mia listened, happy that Ella had found true happiness. As she listened, Mia knew that was how marriage and having a family was supposed to be. She was not meant to be a stand-in mother. A stand-in wife. Mia had no idea what was going to happen, but she knew that she couldn't go on like this for much longer. She needed love and wanted a family of her own.

But maybe Caleb and the children could be her family after all. She resolved herself to try one last time, but she had a feeling that she was only kidding herself.

During lunch, she smiled and nodded at the right times, but she wasn't herself. She was beginning to die a little inside each day the longer this went on.

"Ella, I won't be over tomorrow," she said after she finished the dishes. "Will you and the babies be okay?"

Ella smiled as she pulled her in for a little hug. "We'll be just fine. Don't you worry one bit." She took the dishtowel from her hand. "You go on home and talk to Caleb. I can take it from here. But I'm so glad you came to visit."

Mia chuckled. "Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"How did you guess?" Ella teased as she held her shoulders. "I'll tell you what. When you have some free time, let's get together with Madison and maybe a few other

ladies. Maybe for an afternoon tea?"

Mia smiled as her eyebrows pulled together in concern. "Are you sure you're up for it?"

Ella shrugged. "Umm... let's see." She placed her finger to her chin as she pretended to think. "Have time with my friends? Always."

Mia laughed. "No matter what happens between Caleb and me, I'm so glad we had this time together."

Ella pulled her in for another hug. "Don't give up, Mia. It's not over yet."

Mia nodded, hoping she was right.

Caleb

When Mia walked in the door that afternoon, Caleb was waiting in the living room as the children played in the bedroom. He honestly didn't think she would come home until after the children were in bed, which had become the norm for her this past week. And when she got home, she usually went straight into her bedroom.

"Well, I'm glad you decided to come home today," Caleb snapped, sounding bitter even to his own ears. "You know, I've made dinner every night this week."

Mia froze. Then, she took off her coat and hung it on the peg. "Well, I'm here tonight. So, what would you like for dinner?" She walked into the kitchen and slipped on an apron.

"No, don't worry. I'll make dinner," Caleb said, following her in.

Mia jumped when she saw a bird in the sink. "What is that?"

"It's a pheasant," Caleb said as he walked over to it and started pulling out the feathers. "Mrs. Jenkins watched the children today, and I was outside when a flock of pheasants landed in the field. I grabbed my rifle and got one."

Mia went to the pantry and pulled some potatoes out of the brown bag. "My! If pheasants are coming back, then spring must be around the corner." She pulled a knife out of the butcher block and started peeling the potatoes. "In fact, on the way home, I saw some patches of grass. The snow must be melting off."

Caleb threw the pheasant back down into the sink. “Of course the snow is melting! The snow always melts when spring is near!”

Mia threw the knife down into the bowl and wiped her hands on her apron. “Caleb, I’m sorry that I haven’t been here. I’ve had a lot to think about.”

He threw his hands up into the air. “And you don’t think that I haven’t had anything to think about? I’ve been doing nothing but think!”

“Stop yelling—”

“Why?” he yelled as he looked at her. “You haven’t been around to hear!”

“I haven’t been here because you’ve been pulling away from me!”

“No wonder I’m pulling away! You haven’t been here!”

“I haven’t been here because you don’t love me!” She threw her hands up, tears in her eyes. “Caleb, I love you very much, but you don’t love me! I’m so stupid for falling in love with you, but I couldn’t help it! I just can’t live like this anymore!” Tears ran down her cheeks as she ran outside to the front yard.

Pain ripped through his chest as he held onto the counter. Then, he pushed away and followed her outside. Mia was kneeling in the snow and her shoulders were shaking. She was crying. He bit his upper lip with his hands on his hips, realizing that he had done this. He didn’t even let her get in the door before he started in on her. This wasn’t him.

He walked over and placed a hand gently on her shoulder. “Mia, I’m sorry. Come on in and let’s talk about this.”

“No!” Mia whipped around, and tears were streaming down her face. “You don’t want to talk! In fact, those were the first words that you said to me all week!”

“Well, I haven’t said anything to you because you haven’t been here!” he yelled.

“I haven’t been here because you won’t talk to me!”

Caleb threw his hands up in the air. “You really want to do this out here... in the snow?”

She swiped a hand across her face. “I don’t want to argue in front of the children.”

“Oh, that’s rich!” he said. “You don’t even spend time with the children!”

“Stop it, Caleb!” she said as tears rolled down her cheeks. “You don’t love me! You love Jessica! I don’t even feel like I’m your wife! You said you wanted a wife, but you already have one!” She let her hands fall to her sides, defeated as tears streamed down her face. “I can’t compete with a ghost. I need to be loved, Caleb.”

Caleb froze, watching her with his mouth open, knowing that what she said was true. “Mia, I’ve tried—”

“You’ve tried?” She screamed. “You haven’t tried at all! I’ve been the only one trying! You want a babysitter for the children and a maid for the house, all dressed up to look like a wife! But you don’t want a wife. Not really.” She stood close to him. “You already have one.” Then, she walked past him and stormed into the house.

Caleb placed his hands on his hips as he looked up at the darkening sky and then let out a deep breath. He walked in and knocked on her bedroom door, knowing she was in there. “Mia, come out. Let’s talk.”

She was crying on the other side of the door.

“Mia, I’m coming in.” When he heard no answer, he opened the door, and she was sitting on the edge of the bed with her head buried in her hands. He let out a deep breath, and then knelt down in front of her and placed his hands on her legs. “Mia, you’re right.”

She raised her tear-streaked face until her eyes met his.

He let out a deep breath. “I haven’t been fair to you... and I’m sorry.” He rubbed the top of her leg in a soothing gesture, but she stood and walked to the other side of the room, folding her hands across her chest. He sat on the bed. “Mia, let’s talk.”

She shook her head. “You don’t want to talk. You just want to yell.”

Caleb stood. “I’m sorry.” Then he walked toward her, but she pulled away.

Tears sprang to her eyes once more. “Caleb, you need to let go of Jessica.”

Anger suddenly filled his chest. “You want me to forget her?”

Mia shook her head. “No, I don’t. But you need to let go of her so you can move on.”

“I am moving on.”

“No, you’re not.” Tears slowly ran down her cheeks. “And as long as you hold onto her so tightly, how can there be a chance for us?”

Caleb let out a deep breath. “There is no us.”

Mia nodded. “Thank you for clarifying it for me. Please leave my room.”

Caleb looked into her eyes for a long time and nodded. “Yeah, okay,” he said as he turned toward the door with his back to her. “Mia, you’re right. I want to let go of Jessica, but I just can’t. She’s a part of me... of who I am. Please, understand.”

“I do understand. That’s the problem.”

Then, he walked out and closed the door behind him.

Caleb finished making dinner. During dinner, Shane asked where Mia was, and Hailey asked for Ma. Caleb lied, telling them that she wasn’t feeling well, although he was tempted to tell them that she wasn’t their mother. Their mother had died. But he just didn’t have the strength, and he could never be that cruel.

The night wore on, and he was sitting by the fire, drinking a cup of coffee, when Mia walked out. Her eyes were glossy from crying as she wrung a handkerchief in her hand and headed straight for the children’s bedroom. She froze at the door as she peeked in, and then walked in.

Caleb waited as he took another sip of his coffee and listened. There was no noise. He knew that she wouldn’t harm his children, but he stood and walked slowly toward the door, and then pushed it open.

Mia was sitting in the rocking chair, watching the children sleep with her back to the door.

“Mia?”

When she spoke, her voice cracked. “Caleb, before you say anything, hear me out. I’m too tired to argue.”

He waited, saying nothing.

She cleared her throat as she watched the children. “Tomorrow, I’m going back to New York.”

Caleb gasped. Although he had been expecting it, it was still hard to hear. “I’ll take you to Laramie tomorrow.” His voice was heavy with emotion.

She shook her head. “No, I’ll ask Colton to take me in the morning. It’ll be too hard if you take me.” She continued rocking back and forth.

He let out a deep breath as he placed his hand on her shoulder and gave her a gentle squeeze.

Mia reached up and held his hand.

Then, he pulled away. Caleb walked back into the living room and slipped on his coat and hat. As he headed out the door, he tried not to think of Mia and how his life had crumbled... as tears ran slowly down his cheeks.

Mia

“Mia!”

Bang, bang, bang!

When Mia opened her eyes, it was dark. She tried to orient herself as she slowly opened her eyes.

Mia’s bedroom door suddenly flew open and hit the wall with a bang.

She sat up and caught her breath, wide awake, recognizing Caleb’s voice. “What’s wrong?”

“The barn’s on fire!” he yelled as he ran out the door.

Mia ran out of the room, dressed in her nightgown.

“Stay here!” Caleb yelled, and then ran out, headed toward the barn.

Outside, flames shot out the windows and out the barn door. “My God!” She ran into the children’s room, and they were still sleeping. She shut their door and then ran outside as quickly as she could.

Caleb led a horse out of the barn when he saw her. “I thought I told you to stay inside!”

“The children are safe, and you need help!” she yelled as she ran into the barn, and he ran in after her.

He quickly wrapped a blanket over a horse’s eyes and led it from the barn.

Mia grabbed a horse blanket that was thrown over a stall door and led a white stallion out of the barn. Then she ran back inside, and the flames were higher. Her movements now had to count.

“We’ll need the milk,” she said to herself as she ran over to Ol’ Bessy’s stall and hooked the lead strap to her halter.

She unlocked the stall door and tried to lead her out, but the cow saw the flames and pulled back. Mia wrapped a blanket around the cow’s eyes. She led Ol’ Bessy toward the barn entrance when a beam crashed down on her, hitting her head and pinning her to the ground as bright orange and yellow flames blazed around her. Disoriented, she willed herself to stay conscious. She tried to push the beam off, but she was too weak... and beginning to lose consciousness.

“Mia!” Caleb’s voice echoed into the barn, frantic. “Mia, where are you?”

“Over here!” she yelled back, forcing her eyes to stay open. She tried to stay focused, but it was becoming more difficult as each second passed.

A moment later, she opened her eyes and her heart jumped, for Caleb was standing on the other side of the beam. He looked down, his eyes wide.

“Mia!” The moment he saw her, he bent down and tried to push the log off her, but it was heavy and catching fire.

Tears fell onto her cheeks. “Caleb, go! Save yourself!”

He shook his head as he pushed hard against the log, but it wouldn't budge. "I'm not leaving you!"

She shook her head. "Caleb! Look at me! You have to think of the children! Now, go!"

"If you think for one minute that I'd leave you here, then you don't know me very well," he said as he pushed the log, straining with the effort. But, this time, it moved... a little. "Yah!" he yelled as he kept pushing. And this time, the log fell off. "Come on." He bent down and scooped her up with ease and carried her a safe distance from the barn and collapsed with her onto the ground.

Mia pushed up and turned over as orange, red, and yellow flames engulfed the rest of the barn, against the darkness of the night. "What about the animals?"

"We got them all out," he said, trying to catch his breath.

She coughed, placing the back of her hand to her mouth. She looked around, disoriented as her head pounded. "Where are they?"

Caleb rolled over and opened his eyes, breathing hard. "In the back fields or in the neighbor's lands, away from the flames." He thought for a moment, and then asked, "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "My head hurts. Other than that, I'm fine." She coughed, looking over at him as he sat up. "How about you?"

He nodded as he propped himself up on his arms. "I'm fine."

They sat in silence as they watched the barn burn down, making sure the fire stayed contained.

As the sun rose over the snow-covered mountains, the last of the flames turned into embers. In the morning sunlight, she could see some of the animals in the distance, but she wouldn't be there to help catch them. As they watched the barn burn down, Caleb had said nothing.

She let out a deep breath as she rose to her feet, exhausted. But she would have plenty of time to sleep on the train. Mia looked over her shoulder as she walked toward the house, but Caleb just sat on the snow, watching what was left of the barn burn down... as the snow melted into the ground.

Caleb

As Caleb watched the embers burning over the ground where the barn once stood, his thoughts went to Mia trapped inside. He let out a deep breath. What would he have done if she had died? When he looked around and she didn't come out of the barn, he remembered thinking that he couldn't lose her, too... not the way he had lost Jessica.

When she didn't come out of the barn, he thought that she might have died, he didn't know what he would have ever done without her.

Maybe now she wouldn't leave. Maybe now they could have a second chance.

As he looked out over what was left of the barn, he realized there wasn't much more that he could do out here, and he was exhausted. So, he headed up the slight incline toward the house. When he opened the back door, Mia wasn't making breakfast, and the house was quiet.

He walked through the kitchen and into the living room, headed toward the bedroom where the children were sleeping, but stopped. When he looked over toward the door, his heart fell. Mia was standing in the living room, packed and ready to go, looking beautiful in a purple dress and matching hat.

"What's this?" After what had happened during the night, he was sure that she would change her mind, that she would stay.

"I'm taking the buckboard over to Colton and Ella's house," she said, fidgeting with the reticule in her hand. "Colton can bring it over when he comes back from

Laramie.”

Caleb’s heart sank as he noticed the curve of her jaw and slender neck, her perfect body, the golden hue of her hair, committing it all to memory. He turned away to hide the tears forming in his eyes.

“I’ll help you round up the horses,” he said, and then walked into the bedroom where the children were still sleeping, unaware that their world was going to change yet again.

It hadn’t taken much to gather the horses. They were grazing nearby, eating the soft grass exposed from the melting snow. And it didn’t take long to harness the horses to the team. But it took everything he had to watch her drive away with her bags loaded in the back. Before she drove away, the only thing she had said was a simple goodbye.

Caleb watched until she vanished into the trees, and he couldn’t see her anymore. Then, the memory of thinking her dead rushed through his mind, coupled with her driving away for good, and love washed over him.

Caleb walked over to the family cemetery and found Jessica’s grave. He dropped to his knees in the fading patches of snow. “Jess, you know I’ll always love you, but I love Mia, too. The children need a mother, and I need a wife. She will never replace you, but she has become a part of our family. I loved you and you know I was faithful to you, but a love for Mia has crept in to my heart and has consumed me. As you probably know, I almost lost her last night. I could handle her leaving me a thousand times over, but I could never lose her through death, the way I lost you. And now, she’s gone. But I want you to know that if she’ll have me, I’d like to be her husband now. I don’t just need her for the children and the house. I need her for me, too. I love her, Jessica. Although I loved you with a fierceness unlike any I’ve known before, the love I have for her is different, but unmatched as well. It has come to consume me,

and I never even realized it. Jessica, if you can hear me, please give us your blessing and help me to get her back. I don't know when I'll speak to you again, but know that I love you, darling, and I always will."

With his mind made up, he rushed into the bedroom where the children were still sleeping and quickly dressed. If he hurried, he might just be able to catch her, but he needed to make sure the children were cared for first.

He hurried to slip into his jacket and rushed out the door. He caught his white stallion and didn't even bother to saddle him. With no time to waste, he put on his bridle and slid on bareback. "Help me, Trapper," he said as a smile spread across his face. "Yah!"

Trapper lunged into a full run as he headed toward Mrs. Jenkins's boardinghouse. He just prayed that she would be able to keep the children for him while he was gone. He didn't know for how long it would be. A few moments later, he stopped in front of the boardinghouse on the edge of town.

Caleb pulled Trapper to a stop and wrapped the reins around the hitching post out front. Then, he skipped up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and beat on her door.

"Coming!" Mrs. Jenkins said from inside the house. A moment later, the door opened. "Preacher Henley! What a surprise!"

"Mrs. Jenkins, I hate to barge in on you so abruptly," Caleb said, breathless. "But would you mind coming over to watch the children now? It's an emergency."

"Yes, of course." She grabbed her reticule and quickly pinned her hat into place. She slipped on her coat and pulled the door closed behind her. "Caleb, what's the matter?" she asked, looking around.

“I’m going after Mia.”

“Well then, what are you waiting for?” Mrs. Jenkins asked. “Go get her! You’d be a fool if you let her get away. I’ll have my man George hitch up my team and I’ll head straight over to your house. So, don’t worry about the children. Now, go! Catch her before it’s too late!”

A broad grin spread across his face as he slid onto Trapper’s back and headed toward Colton and Ella’s farm as quickly as he could. He just hoped that he wasn’t too late.

Mia

Mia cried all the way to Ella and Colton's house. She had hoped that Caleb would ask her to stay, but he didn't. He just stood there, watching as she left. Images of the children passed through her mind as the horses plodded through the melting snow. She hated having to leave them, but they weren't her children... not really... although she would love it if they were. Tears rolled down her cheeks as images of them playing in their room ran through her mind... images of them laughing at breakfast, the closest they had ever come to being a family... images of Shane yelling at her, then coming to love her... images of Hailey calling her Ma.

Then, she remembered Caleb's broad, bare, muscular chest the first morning after she came to live with them... the curve of his mouth when he was amused... the sound of his laughter... Caleb greeting his parishioners happily and then preaching from the pulpit. She committed it all to memory, for she knew she would never come to love anyone else the way she loved them.

A few minutes later, she pulled down the long driveway leading to Ella and Colton's farmhouse. As she pulled to a stop, Colton stepped out on to the porch, smiling. "Over again so soon?" he asked as he dried his hands on a dish towel. "Come on in! Ella will be delighted." But when he saw her tear-stained face, his smile faded. "What's wrong?"

Mia squared her shoulders as she quickly swiped her hand across her cheeks. "Will you be so kind as to take me to Laramie? I intend to catch the train, and I need to get there early before it departs. I don't want to be caught there overnight."

Colton's eyebrows pulled together in concern, and then nodded. "Come on in and say goodbye to Ella while I get ready."

She nodded. Then, she wrapped the reins around the bar of the buckboard and stood. Colton offered her his hand to help her down, when a rumble of horses' hooves pounding along the drive filled the air. Mia thought she was dreaming when she saw that it was Caleb, riding up on his white stallion.

He pulled to a stop in front of her as the horse snorted loudly, pawing at the ground. Caleb jumped off and hurried over to her. "Mia, don't go."

Colton suppressed a smile. "I'll be right over here... if you need me," he said in a low voice as he walked casually onto the porch.

Caleb never took his eyes from Mia. "Mia, I've been a fool. Please, don't go."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she shook her head. "Caleb, I can't keep going on this way... the way we have. I can't be just a caregiver for the children and a maid."

Caleb nodded. "And I don't want you to." He reached out for her and helped her down from the buckboard. "Mia, I've been such a fool. I love you and I want you to be my wife... my real wife. I'll move the children into the spare room this afternoon."

Mia's eyebrows pulled together in concern. "But what about... Jessica?" She hated herself for asking, but she had to know. She meant what she said. She couldn't go back to the way that it was... the way it had been between them.

He took her hands into his own. "Yes, I love her, and I always will."

Mia's face fell as her heart shattered into a million pieces at his feet. She knew that he

would never get over the death of his first wife.

“But I love you, too.”

Mia’s eyes snapped up.

Caleb let out a deep breath. “I said goodbye to her. Yes, I will always love her, but I love you, too. Wasn’t it you that said that you can love more than one person?”

She nodded.

“Mia, when you ran into the burning barn last night and didn’t come out....”

Colton gasped from the porch.

“I thought that I’d lost you... forever.” Caleb bit his lower lip as he looked away and then back into her eyes. “I don’t know what I would have done if I had lost you like that. Please, I beg you....” Caleb got down on one knee as he held her hand. “Please, be my wife... my real wife this time. I promise to put no other woman before you, and to love you for all the days of my life.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks as a smile spread across her face. “Yes. A thousand times, yes. And I promise to honor, cherish, and love you... for as long as we both shall live.”

Colton chuckled. “You may now kiss the bride.”

Caleb laughed as Mia blushed. Then, Caleb’s lips descended upon hers, overwhelming her with love. Passion filled them both as she wrapped her arms around his muscular back. When he pulled back, his eyes never left hers as he spoke to Colton. “Colton, I’ll be over to speak with you later. Sorry to disturb you.”

Colton raised his hands in surrender. “Hey! I saw nothing.”

Mia chuckled. “Caleb, when I was a little girl, I had always dreamed of my knight in shining armor riding up on his white stallion to rescue me. I never thought he would already be my husband.”

Caleb shook his head. “No, I haven’t been... until now. But I promise to honor and cherish you for as long as we both shall live,” he said, repeating their wedding vows, just as she had. “And I promise to honor my vow to you as your husband, and to give you my whole heart... from this day on... forever.”

Although they were already married, she felt that now they were truly married as he helped her into the buckboard and tied his white stallion to the back. A moment later, they headed toward their new life... together.

Mia

Mia snuggled onto Caleb's side as they drove back to the house. But, for the first time, Mia felt that they were actually going back to their home. Caleb leaned his head against hers as she curled her arm around his.

When they reached the house, he wrapped his arms around her and his lips descended upon hers again, a silent promise of his love. Then, he hopped down and helped her down from the buckboard. She linked her arm with his, ready to go in with her new husband.

"Wait, my wife." Caleb smiled, pulling her to a stop as she giggled. "There's something I haven't done yet." Then, he scooped her into his arms and carried her up the stairs and into the house. "I hadn't carried you over the threshold."

Mia laughed as she wrapped her arms around his neck, enjoying the feel of his broad shoulders under her fingertips.

"Well, I'm so glad to see you back again! Congratulations!" Mrs. Jenkins said as they closed the door behind them. Then, she lowered her voice conspiratorially. "A word of warning, the townsfolk heard about your barn and are out back, cleaning up and assessing the damage now."

Mia's mouth opened wide as her eyebrows shot up. "Really?"

Caleb smiled, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. "We all pull together in times of need." Then he glanced over at Mrs. Jenkins, arching an eyebrow. "I'm just surprised

that they heard about it so quickly.”

“Well....” Mrs. Jenkins smiled sheepishly. “After we arrived and I saw that the children were okay, George and I saw the barn. I stayed here with the children, and he went around to the farms, letting everyone know.” She nodded toward the back. “They’ve been coming steadily, offering their help all morning.”

“Pa!” Shane yelled as he ran into the room, followed by Hailey. Caleb swept him into his arms and nuzzled his neck while Mia picked up Hailey and gave her a big hug.

“Ma!” Hailey laid her head on Mia’s shoulder, warming her heart.

Caleb smiled at Mrs. Jenkins as he set his son on his feet. “Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins. I could never repay your kindness.”

“Oh, think nothing of it.” She waved her hand dismissively. “Now, I’ll keep the children if you’d both like to go out back and assess the damage.”

Mia nodded and smiled. “Yes, we would.” She pulled her in for a one-armed hug, not letting go of her husband’s hand. “Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins.”

“Please,” she said with kind eyes. “Call me Abigail.”

A smile lit Mia’s lips. “That might be hard to do. Old habits die hard.”

Mrs. Jenkins smiled. “Yes, they do.” She glanced over at Caleb. “But people can change and form new habits, too.”

Caleb nodded, his lips curling into a smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Jenkins.” Then, he looked down at his wife. “Well, are you ready?”

Mia let out a deep breath. “We can do anything... together.”

He pulled her to his side for a one-armed hug. “Yes, we can.”

When they walked outside, there was nothing left of the barn but ash. All the embers had died out, leaving a charred mess in its wake.

“Well, at least it didn’t get to the house, and everyone is safe.” Caleb smiled as he pulled her close.

“We can rebuild it... together.” Mia gazed into his eyes, meaning every word.

“Yes we can.”

“Wyatt! Thanks for coming,” Caleb said as he turned around and shook his hand.

Wyatt motioned toward the men that were standing around. Mia remembered meeting him at the church. “We’ve talked about it, and we came to a decision.” He smiled mischievously. “What are you doing this Sunday after church?”

One side of Caleb’s lips curled into a smile. “What do you have in mind?”

Wyatt shrugged. “We thought that instead of having our usual get together after church, we’d like to come here and have a barn raising. We can go to church for the service, and then we’ll all come over here.” Wyatt arched an eyebrow. “That is, if it’s okay with you.”

Caleb let out a deep breath. “Wyatt, everyone, we appreciate the gesture. But we can’t afford to pay you back right away.”

Harrison stepped in. “Did we say anything about money?”

“I can’t ask you to do that,” Caleb said, shaking his head.

Wyatt laughed. “You didn’t ask. We volunteered.”

Harrison shook his hand. “Here in Whiskey River, we all pull together in times of need. Besides, we could never repay you for everything you’ve done for this community. It’s the least we could do.”

“And we can always use an excuse for a dance,” Wyatt teased.

Mia’s eyebrows pulled together, confused as a smile lit her lips.

Eying her confusion, Wyatt added, “After the barn raising, we’ll have a dance.”

Mia’s smile broadened. “I’m surprised that you’ll be able to raise the barn that fast.”

Harrison burst out laughing. “This isn’t our first rodeo, little missy.” Then he glanced over at Caleb. “So, what do you say?”

Caleb shook his hand and gave him a manly hug. “I say thank you! We really appreciate this.”

Harrison smiled. “Hey, we’re a community.” He shrugged as he looked over at Wyatt. “We pull together when we’re needed.”

True to his word, Caleb moved the children out of the main bedroom and into the spare room that night. They spent the rest of the week settling in as a family and getting ready for Sunday.

“Caleb, I’d like to go to the General Store today,” Mia said after breakfast one morning when the dishes were put away. “I’d like to get some more fabric. The

children and you need some more clothes.”

Caleb smiled and gave her a quick peck as he walked by. “Only if we can get some for you, too. Get whatever you want.”

She reached up on her tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Thank you! I’ll get the children ready.” Then, a thought occurred to her. “Did you have anything else planned for today?”

He shook his head. “No, I was just going to spend the day with my lovely wife and family.”

Mia laughed, glad for the change. The past few days had been wonderful. The marriage that she had dreamed of with a doting husband and wonderful children had finally come to fruition. Since the day he professed his love to her, everything had changed, and they became a real family. True to his word, Caleb had become the best husband that Mia could have ever wanted. When he gave his heart, he gave it all.

A few minutes later, the family was on their way to town. Soon, Caleb pulled up in front of the Whiskey River General Store and wrapped the reins around the front bar.

“Yippee!” Shane yelled, jumping out of the buckboard.

“Don’t touch anything!” Caleb called after his son as he darted into the store.

It wasn’t every day that they made a trip to town, especially not to a place that had candy.

“Oh, Caleb,” Mia said as he helped her out of the front. “He’s just excited.”

“Yes, but if he eats too much candy, then he’ll be up all night,” Caleb replied, taking

Hailey from her.

“You mean you’ll be up with him all night,” she teased.

Caleb laughed. “Yes, I’ll be up with him all night.” Caleb offered his wife his arm, and Mia took it, unable to help but notice the bulging tight muscles beneath his shirt. “Listen, when we go in, go ahead and get whatever you want.”

Mia smiled, hugging his arm. “Thanks, hon, but I’ll only get what I need, which consists of thread, buttons—”

“Okay, okay!” Caleb chuckled as he opened the door for her. “I surrender!”

“Well, hello!” Mrs. Carson greeted them as they walked in.

“The store windows look great!” Caleb said, and then turned to Mia. “They were robbed a few months ago. Just before Christmas.”

“No!” Mia’s mouth opened in concern. “Were you hurt?”

Mrs. Carson shook her head. “No, not bad. Mr. Carson was hurt a little, but as you can see, he’s doing fine now.” She pointed to her husband, stocking a shelf behind the counter.

“Is it okay if they have a candy stick?” Mr. Carson asked, smiling with the children at his feet.

“Please, oh please?” Shane and Hailey chimed, jumping up and down.

Mia glanced over at Caleb, arching an eyebrow.

“It’s up to your ma,” he said, ignoring Mrs. Carson when her mouth flew open.

“Please, oh please?” Shane and Hailey begged Mia.

She let out a deep breath. “Go ahead. But just one each. Don’t eat too much. I don’t want you to get stomach aches.”

Mr. Carson beamed. “Here you go!” he said as he handed each of them a candy stick.

“Now, what do you say?” Mia asked.

“Thank you!” the children chimed together, and then ran over to Mia and gave her a hug.

Hailey reached up, wiggling her fingers, and Mia swept her into her arms. “What’s wrong, baby girl?”

Hailey wrapped her arms around her neck. “Thank you, Ma.”

Mia smiled as she kissed her new daughter on the cheek. “You’re welcome, but Mr. Carson is the one you should be thanking.”

Mr. Carson laughed. “They did.”

But Hailey didn’t remove her arms as she looked into Mia’s eyes. “I love you, Ma.”

“I love you, too, little one,” Mia said, and then kissed her cheek. “Now, go play with your brother for a minute. I’m going to make us all something special.”

Mrs. Carson dabbed at her eyes as she watched. “I’m so glad to see that you’re all adjusting so well.”

“Thank you.” Mia walked over to a shelf containing bolts of fabric in many different colors.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” Mrs. Carson asked.

Mia let out a deep breath. “Just some fabric to make the family some outfits. Since spring is around the corner, I’d like something light. Do you have anything new?”

“How about this?” asked a woman behind her. Her voice was a cross between an Irish brogue and a British accent. Her strawberry blonde hair was pulled up under her hat. She was smartly dressed and wore a friendly smile as she pointed to a bolt of fabric.

“That’s lovely!” Mia exclaimed, crossing the room to her.

The lady held out her hand. “The name’s Kenzie, and you must be Mia.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “It’s a pleasure to meet you… officially.”

Mia’s eyebrows pulled together as a smile lit her lips. “You aren’t Kenzie Baker of The Lady’s Dress Emporium, are you?”

She gave a slight curtsy. “The one and only.”

Mia smiled. “I’ve heard about you. It’s nice to officially meet you.”

“I’ve been going to the church on Sundays but haven’t officially met you yet.”

“Well, I’m glad to ‘officially meet you’ now,” Mia chirped. “I look forward to seeing you at church on Sunday, too.”

Kenzie smiled. “Yes, and we must have tea sometime soon, too.”

“Actually, you should come to the barn raising this Sunday,” Mia replied, happy to have made a friend. “There will be a dance afterward. All the eligible bachelors in Whiskey River will be there.”

Kenzie chuckled. “Then I’ll definitely be there,” she joked as they both laughed. “Where is it?”

“At our farm.” Mia filled her in briefly on the details. “We look forward to seeing you there.”

“Now, let’s get down to business,” Kenzie began examining the fabric.

They spent the next half hour comparing fabrics, and before they left, Mia had picked out enough for three outfits for each member of her family, and Kenzie had enough to make several dresses.

Mrs. Carson smiled. “You’ve both made excellent choices.” Then, she asked the ladies how much fabric they wanted, and she measured it off. Mia also picked up some matching thread and some dainty buttons that she needed, along with men’s buttons, too.

“Well, it’s been lovely chatting,” Mia said, looking around for Caleb, who was speaking with Mr. Carson and entertaining the children.

Kenzie extended her hand daintily, and Mia gave it a gentle squeeze. “It truly was a pleasure. I’ll see you Sunday.”

After the women said their goodbyes, Kenzie gave Mrs. Carson one last wave over her shoulder, carrying her packages with her.

“Thank you, Miss Baker,” Mrs. Carson called after her. “Please, come again.”

Kenzie smiled. “Oh, you can count on it! Have a good day!”

Mia spent the next few nights making outfits for them after the children went to bed.

Saturday night, Caleb entered the room and leaned against the door facing, smiling as he watched her sew. “Coming to bed?”

Mia smiled, enjoying herself. “Not just yet. I’m almost finished.”

Caleb chuckled. “May I see?”

She shook her head. “No, not yet. I want it to be a surprise.”

Caleb tapped the door facing, clearly enjoying watching her. “Have fun, but don’t stay up too late.”

Mia nodded. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

As she watched Caleb walk away, she knew that she was finally home.

Mia

Mia got up and walked out of the bedroom and into the living room early Sunday morning. It was a bit chilly, so she put a few pieces of wood on the fire. Within minutes, flames flared up and filled the house with warmth. Then, she went out to the kitchen and put on some coffee. While it was brewing, she tiptoed to the rocking chair in the living room and checked the clothes she had made for everyone. Today was the day of the barn raising and dance, and she wanted her family to look wonderful.

“Good morning,” Caleb said as he walked out of the bedroom, shirtless. “You look wonderful this morning.”

“And so do you.” She smiled as she pulled him in for a hug.

He patted her back, and then whispered into her hair. “Do I smell coffee?”

“You do. I’ll pour us some.”

He nodded. “So, how late were you up last night?”

“I’m not sure.” She shrugged. “But I finished everything for today.”

“Mia, thank you for all the hard work you’ve been doing.” Caleb smiled as he took the coffee she offered him. “But be sure to get some rest and take care of yourself, too.”

“I will.”

“So, French toast?”

She chuckled. “I think we have enough time.”

Together, they fixed French toast and then they got the children up. The children came out, rubbing their sleepy eyes. They were delighted when they heard that their parents had made French toast and scampered quickly to their seats at the table.

After their family breakfast, which had become a ritual once again, they cleaned up the children and dressed them in their new clothes. Hailey and Mia’s dresses were pale pink with little blue buds, and Caleb and Shane’s clothes matched in crisp white shirts and dark gray vests and matching trousers. Mia then combed Hailey’s hair into a high ponytail and tied it off with a matching pink ribbon. She had enough material left over to make herself a matching reticule and gloves. Then, she pulled her hair up and pinned the curls in place, and added a hat that matched the outfit perfectly.

“Well! You look wonderful!” Caleb beamed, taking in his family. The children giggled, and then he gave Mia a kiss on the cheek. “You look beautiful.”

She blushed. “Thank you.” Then, she raised an eyebrow mischievously. “And you look very handsome.”

He pulled down on his vest. “You like it? My lovely wife made it for me.”

She laughed, and they all slipped on their coats, piled into the buckboard, and headed off to church.

When they arrived, she walked with the children to the pew in the front row and Caleb greeted the parishioners, as usual. She looked around, and Kenzie was shaking Caleb’s hand. Then, she spotted Mia and walked over to her.

“Good morning!” Kenzie greeted Mia happily as she gave her an air kiss over her cheek.

“Good morning! It’s so good to see you!” Mia chirped, pulling her in for a hug.

Kenzie smiled. “I wouldn’t miss it.” Then she looked at hers and the children’s clothes. “Well, well! Don’t you look nice! I love the new clothes!” Then she leaned in conspiratorially. “If you ever decide that you’d like to make clothes for a living, I’d love for you to come work for me.”

Mia grinned as a sense of pride filled her chest. “Thank you, but I think I have my work cut out for me at present, just making clothes for my family.”

Kenzie shrugged. “Well, it was worth a try! But if you ever change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Mia laughed. “I’ll keep it in mind.” Although she had only known Kenzie for a short time, she liked her very much. “So, are you coming to our house after church for the barn raising today?”

“Of course!” Kenzie smiled as she leaned in conspiratorially. “Do you think I would miss the chance to dance with such handsome men?”

Mia laughed. “I’ll see you after church.”

Kenzie nodded, and then walked over to talk to Gabriella.

Mia went on to greet Mrs. Jenkins, Madison and Wyatt, and more. This Sunday morning, the church was packed full. Caleb gave a wonderful sermon, thanking God for all the blessings in their lives.

And Mia knew that he was right. Even though their barn had burned down, it didn’t

matter. What mattered most was that they had each other. She had a lot to be thankful for, the top one being... a family.

After the service was over, they headed to their farm in a long caravan. When they arrived, the men got right to work raising the barn, while the women set up the food. Before long, the kitchen counters and the dining table were filled with food.

Later that night, there was a brand-new barn where the old one stood, much bigger than the one before. When everything was finished, the band started playing and couples started swirling expertly around the floor.

Then Ella and Colton walked around the corner of the house, carrying the babies. Mia saw them right away and hurried over.

“Ella, you look great!” Mia beamed as she kissed her cheek. “Come here! You both can sit over here.”

The men had brought the chairs from the church, along with some tables. Ella looked fully recovered. The ladies of the church all crowded around the babies and told Ella how wonderful she looked.

Everyone was there—Gabriella and Dirk, Madison and Wyatt, Kenzie, Mrs. Jenkins, and so many other people. Mia didn’t know them all but was looking forward to getting to know them. Whiskey River really was a place of community and family, where everyone pulled together when needed, and Mia felt very lucky to be a part of it.

“Would you like to dance?”

Mia looked up, and Caleb was smiling. “I’d love to.”

“What were you thinking about just then?” Caleb asked as he led her out onto the

new barn floor.

Mia smiled as she let her husband lead her around the floor. “I was just thinking of how lucky I am to be a part of this community here in Whiskey River.”

“I’m the lucky one.” A smile lit his lips. “I’m very lucky to have you as my wife.”

Mrs. Jenkins let the children go, and they ran out onto the dance floor to them. Mia and Caleb scooped them into their arms as they continue dancing.

Shane struggled to get down, and Caleb set him on his feet. But instead of running away, he tugged on Mia’s skirt to attract her attention. She bent down and looked into his eyes.

“May I have this dance?” he asked, wise beyond his years.

“I’d love to.” Mia was momentarily taken aback, but then handed Hailey to her father and took her new son’s hands. As they swayed to the music, Caleb and Hailey swayed beside them. Then, Shane looked up at her and smiled. “I love you, Ma.”

Tears came to her eyes as she replied, “I love you, too, son.” She looked in Caleb’s eyes, misty with tears. “I’m lucky to have this family,” Mia added as the four of them danced together.

“We both are,” Caleb agreed as he spun her and his children around.

The night was magical as the stars began to make their appearance in the darkening sky. And Mia knew it was true. They were lucky to have each other, and to be a part of the wonderful community of Whiskey River.