HISTORICAL
ELIZABETH LANE
THE COUNTESS AND THE COWBOY

Elizabeth Lane

The Countess and the Cowboy

«HarperCollins»

Lane E.

The Countess and the Cowboy / E. Lane — «HarperCollins»,

A new life in Wyoming! Newly widowed, Eve Townsend is left with a grand title and not a penny to her name. She doesn't know what future she can build in the Wild West…but she's ready to learn, and to reunite with her family.When she arrives in Wyoming, she discovers her beloved sister's death and sets about caring for her niece and nephew. But burly Clint Lonigan is everywhere she turns! Even though he's Eve's opposite in every way, maybe a rough-mannered cowboy is just what this genteel countess needs…

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“Nice to see you again, Countess.”

For an instant she froze. After what she’d told Clint Lonigan last night, the first response that came to her mind was, *How dare you?* But people were watching. The last thing she wanted was to make a scene.

“It’s Mrs. Townsend,” she said in a chilly voice. “And it’s nice to see you too, Mr. Lonigan. Now, if you don’t mind, I have some purchases to pay for.” She turned toward the clerk. “I’ll have two peppermint sticks for the children, please.”

“Coming right up, Countess.”

She frowned. “As I just told the gentleman, it’s Mrs. Townsend. This isn’t England and I’m certainly not royalty.”

“But still a very proper lady.” Clint Lonigan’s voice had taken on a teasing tone.

Ignoring him, Eve signed for her purchases, gave each of the children a peppermint stick and reached for her basket. “I’ll be taking my leave of you now, Mr. Lonigan. Good day.”

AUTHOR NOTE

As a little girl I loved playing cowgirls and cowboys. My cousins and I would cut willows from the canal bank and ride them like horses, whooping and chasing all over the neighbourhood. In the small mountain town where I grew up we couldn’t get a TV signal until I was in high school. But we didn’t need TV. We had our imaginations—and the movies we looked forward to every weekend.

My favourite movies were Westerns, with great stars like John Wayne, Alan Ladd, Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, and wonderful Maureen O’Hara. And I loved Western books, too. By the time I was thirteen I’d read every Zane Grey book on the shelf at the town library. No wonder that when I became a published author I turned to writing Western romance. For me, writing a Western is like going home.

The Countess and the Cowboy is an old-fashioned, rip-roaring Western with a little spice thrown in. Clint is all cowboy and all man, fighting for the rights of small ranchers against the evil cattle baron who burned his ranch and killed his wife and unborn child. Eve is everything Clint isn’t—a gently reared English lady who wants nothing more than to raise her sister’s children in peace. Instead she finds herself in the middle of a range war, torn between her beloved children on the one side and her irresistible cowboy on the other.

I love hearing from my readers. You can contact me through my website elizabethlaneauthor.com

The Countess and the Cowboy

Elizabeth Lane

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ELIZABETH LANE has lived and travelled in many parts of the world, including Europe, Latin America and the Far East, but her heart remains in the American West, where she was born and raised. Her idea of heaven is hiking a mountain trail on a clear autumn day. She also enjoys music, animals and dancing. You can learn more about Elizabeth by visiting her website at elizabethlaneauthor.com

For Walter and Sadie, who wake me up laughing.

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Chapter One

Northern Wyoming, August 1888

The stagecoach, a canvas-covered mud wagon that had seen better days, rattled over the washboard road. The final leg of the run from Casper to Lodgepole was blessedly short, but the horses were already lathered from the afternoon heat. Dust billowed from under the wheels to settle like fine brown velvet on the driver, the guard and the three passengers inside—two women and a man.

Clint Lonigan sat directly across from the veiled woman. Pretending to doze, he studied her through slitted eyes. He'd already guessed who—and what—she was. Ten days ago, when he'd left Lodgepole to sit with a dying friend, the town had been abuzz with the news that an honest-to-God countess, the widow of an English earl, was coming to live with her sister, Margaret Hanford.

Clint had paid scant attention to the gossip. Mrs. Hanford seemed like a nice enough woman, but her husband, Roderick, was the most arrogant, pretentious piece of cow manure in the whole county. Clint wouldn't have been impressed to hear that Queen Victoria herself planned on dropping by the Hanford ranch for a damned spot of tea.

But here was the countess in the flesh. And now that he'd seen her, damned if he wasn't intrigued. The Dowager Countess of Manderfield—Hanford had made sure folks knew her full title. No question that this woman was the real thing. Who but an upper-class foreigner would travel on a sweltering day dressed head to toe in widow's weeds? She had to be sweating like a mule under that heavy black silk.

If the woman's costume left any question of her status, the engraved signet ring on her left hand erased all doubt. It was heavy gold with a ruby the size of a black-eyed pea. He couldn't help but marvel that some plug-ugly hadn't hacked off her finger to steal it.

A widow's bonnet, black with a dusty silk veil, concealed her hair and face. Apart from her slender frame, Clint couldn't tell whether she was young or old, plain or pretty. Even her lace-mitted

hands gave no clue. The "Dowager" in her title suggested a woman past middle age. But that didn't make a bean's worth of difference, because there was one thing Clint knew for sure.

If the countess was planning to move in with Roderick Hanford, she was already one of the enemy.

* * *

Eve Townsend, Dowager Countess of Manderfield, braced her boots against the floor of the coach, shifting on the seat in an attempt to ease her tortured buttocks. She'd lowered her veil against the dust, but there was nothing to be done for the constant jarring.

Or the heat. Eve felt as if her body was being baked in treacle. She'd worn her mourning clothes to prompt some deference on the journey and discourage any strange men who might otherwise accost her. To that extent the costume had worked. But she was not at all certain that the benefits outweighed the unending discomfort. Traveling in black silk bombazine was like sitting in a Turkish bath.

But enough complaints! This was the American West, and Margaret had warned her to expect some rough conditions. The stormy, sickness-fraught ocean voyage, followed by the jostling train ride from New York to the railhead at Casper, had drained Eve in body and spirit. But this was the last leg of a journey that would soon be over. With Margaret and her children she would have a roof over her head and family around her. She could hardly wait to hold Margaret's baby, due to be born this very month.

"Will your sister's family be meeting the stage, Countess?" Plump, middle-aged and chatty, Mrs. Etta Simpkins had already introduced herself. She ran a bakery in Lodgepole and appeared to know the business of everyone in town.

"I certainly hope so," Eve answered politely. "And you needn't call me Countess. This is America, after all. Mrs. Townsend will do."

"Very well." The woman sounded a trifle disappointed. "But don't count on Margaret being there when you arrive. When I saw her two weeks ago, she was as big around the waist as a fifty-pound pumpkin. I'd wager she's had that baby by now. From the look of her, it could even be twins."

"Twins! Goodness, wouldn't that be wonderful? That's why I've come, you know, to help Margaret with the children."

It was enough truth for now, Eve reasoned. There was no need to spread the word that, upon her husband's death, her grown stepson, Albert, had burned his father's updated will—which would have left her generously provided for—and booted her off the Manderfield estate with little more than her title and her wedding ring. If not for her sister's invitation, she could be languishing in the poorhouse.

Eve brushed a blowfly off her skirt, its movement drawing her eye to the man who sat on the opposite bench, his knees almost touching hers. At the moment, he appeared to be sleeping. But the glimmer beneath his lowered eyelids told her he was fully alert, like a dozing panther.

He'd muttered an introduction before taking his seat. Lonigan—that was the surname, she remembered. Irish, of course, having the name and the look of that wretched race, though his speech sounded American. She'd acknowledged him with an icy nod. He'd seemed not to care or even to notice her disdain. Perversely, his utter indifference piqued her interest.

She studied him through her veil—a lanky frame, long denim-covered legs, dusty Mexican-style riding boots, a faded shirt and a well-worn leather vest. His sun-burnished hands were callused—a workingman's hands. His proud bearing suggested he might be a landholder. But he didn't appear to be wealthy like Margaret's husband, Roderick, who, according to her letters, owned more than twenty thousand head of cattle and a house as big as an English manor.

Eve's eyes lingered on the man's face. He had features like chiseled granite, framed by unruly chestnut hair that curled over the tops of his ears. The scar that slashed across his cleft chin lent him a subtle aura of danger. He struck her as the sort of man no proper lady should have anything to do with.

Still, she caught herself trying to imagine the color of his mostly closed eyes.

A sudden pistol shot whanged from behind the coach. The bullet pierced the canvas cover, splintering the wooden framework overhead. Eve jerked upright, paralyzed by disbelief. Why would anybody be shooting at them?

"Damn it, get down!" Lonigan was out of his seat in an instant, shoving both women onto the floor and flattening himself on top of them. Eve struggled under his weight, eating dust as the coach lurched and picked up speed. He refused to move, his solid chest pressing down on her back. Beneath his leather vest, she could feel the distinct outline of a small, holstered pistol.

The coach swayed crazily as it thundered along the rutted road. Bullets sang overhead like angry wasps. Mrs. Simpkins was shrieking in terror.

A hump in the road launched the coach into an instant's flight, then dropped it with a sickening crunch. The vehicle careened to one side, shuddered and came to rest on one broken wheel. Eve bit back a whimper. Clearly, they'd been run down by highwaymen and their lives were in grave danger. But her late father, who'd served his country during the great Indian mutiny, had schooled her to hide her fear.

"Everybody outside!" The male voice sounded young and nervous. "Do as you're told and nobody gets hurt."

Lonigan muttered a string of curses. Eve gulped dusty air as his rock-hard weight eased off her. "Give me your ring!" he growled in her ear.

"And why, pray tell, should I do that?"

"They'll take it if they see it. Might even cut your finger off to get at it if you don't cooperate. Give me the damned ring!" Without waiting for a reply, he seized Eve's hand and yanked the ring off her finger. It vanished into a vest pocket as he rose to his knees and unlatched the door of the coach.

"We're coming out," he shouted. "But mind your manners. There are ladies in here."

Eve scrambled onto the seat as he opened the door and stepped out. Mrs. Simpkins appeared to have fainted. Eve found her smelling salts in her reticule and waved the vial under the woman's nose. She flinched, snorted and opened her eyes. "What's happened?" she gasped.

"We're being robbed. They want us to get out."

"Oh, dear!" She looked as if she were going to faint again.

"Come on—and keep still. The less we say the better." Eve helped the woman rise. Passing her ahead to Lonigan, Eve took a breath to collect herself and then climbed out of the coach and into the sunbaked air. Her legs felt as unsteady as a newborn lamb's, but she straightened her spine to hide her nerves and anxiety.

Through the haze of settling dust she surveyed the chaos—the lathered horses and the coach sagging onto its shattered wheel. The grizzled driver's hands were in the air. The guard clutched his bleeding arm but didn't appear badly hurt. Eve saw no sign of the double-barreled shotgun he'd carried.

There were just two robbers, their hats pulled low and their faces masked with bandannas. Slim and erect on their mounts, they could've been schoolboys. But there was nothing childish about their weapons—heavy pistols, cocked and aimed.

"Is everybody out?" Eve recognized the nervous voice of the robber who'd ordered them from the coach.

"We are." Lonigan faced him boldly. Eve remembered the gun under his vest. Did he plan to use it? "As you see, boys, it's just me and these two good widow ladies. None of us has anything worth stealing. So pack your pistols and go home before somebody else gets hurt." His eyes flickered toward the wounded guard. "Damned lucky you didn't kill that man. You could end up swinging by your fool necks."

Eve glanced at him from beneath her veil. Something didn't seem right, and suddenly she knew what it was. Lonigan didn't seem the least bit afraid. He was lecturing the robbers like a stern uncle.

He knew them!

* * *

Lonigan swore silently. He'd told the Potter brothers to lie low and keep things quiet while he was away. What in Sam Hill were they doing holding up the stage, especially in broad daylight? The bandannas couldn't hide their builds and it sounded as if they hadn't even tried to disguise their voices. Didn't the young fools understand what could happen if they were recognized?

When he got them alone, he'd give them the tongue-lashing of their lives. Meanwhile, he needed to get them out of this mess before things went from bad to worse.

"It's the strongbox we come for," Newt, the older of the brothers, said. "Throw it down, and we'll go."

The driver shook his shaggy head. "Man, there's no strongbox on this stage."

"That ain't what we was told." This time it was Gideon who spoke. "A box of cash from the Cattlemen's Association in Cheyenne. They was sendin' it to hire gunfighters."

Lonigan suppressed a groan. He'd been in Cheyenne with his ears open, but he'd heard nothing about any cash, nor had he seen any signs of a strongbox when they'd loaded the coach. It had to be a mistake or, more likely, a trap.

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face. The Potter boys had become part of his secret operation two years ago, after their father was framed and hanged for cattle rustling. They'd long since proved their courage, but they were young and reckless. If someone had planted the rumor about the cash to draw them out, the sheriff's men could already be on their way to arrest them.

He had to get the boys away from here. But how could he do it without showing his own hand?

The driver shrugged. "There's no cash on this stage. Look for yourself."

Newt nodded toward his younger brother. "Go on. I'll keep 'em covered."

Gideon dismounted and checked the front boot, where the strongbox was usually kept. He shook his head and moved on to search the rest of the stage. Clint glanced at the two women beside him. Mrs. Simpkins seemed ready to collapse. The countess stood ramrod straight, supporting the terrified woman with one arm.

Looking over, Clint noticed that Newt was staring at the countess, as well. He was the volatile one of the brothers, with a nervous tic and a jumpy trigger finger. Anything could set him off. "I don't like it when I can't see folks' faces," he snapped. "Lift that veil, lady."

Hesitating, she glanced toward Clint.

"Do it," he growled.

Her free hand caught the veil's lace edge and swept it back.

Clint had resolved not to gape at the woman, but he couldn't help himself. He'd expected a grim widow approaching middle age. But the countess couldn't have been much past thirty. Raven hair framed a porcelain face with classic features. Her full, almost sensual mouth was accented by a tiny mole at one corner. When she glanced toward him, the eyes that met his were a startling shade of blue, framed by dark-winged brows and lush black lashes.

Clint bit back a curse. The countess was, without doubt, the most stunning woman he'd ever seen.

Not that her beauty mattered to him either way. He wasn't looking for a woman, especially not one going to live in the enemy camp. Everything she saw and heard today would go straight back to her brother-in-law, Roderick Hanford. And Hanford was no fool. If he managed to piece things together and realized that Clint recognized the men responsible for nearly shooting up the man's sister-in-law, they'd all be in trouble.

"The strongbox ain't here," Gideon announced. "I looked everyplace, even underneath."

"Damnation!" Newt spat a stream of tobacco into the dust.

"I'd say you've been fooled, boys." Clint spoke calmly. "If you know what's good for you, you'll swing those ponies around and head for the tall timber."

Gideon was back in the saddle. Half turning his horse, he glanced at his brother. “Let’s go,” he said.

But Newt was building to an explosion. Clint knew the signs—the twitching eyes, the shaking hands. The boy could be unpredictable when he was out of control, and the law could be here any minute.

Newt’s pistol quivered in his hand. “We come this far. We ain’t leavin’ empty-handed.”

Clint struggled to curb his anxiety. There was only one thing left to do, and the countess wasn’t going to like it. He fished in his pocket and came up with the ruby ring. “This will make it worth your trouble. Take it and get the hell out of here.”

The countess gasped as Newt leaned down and snatched the ring. Clint exhaled as the two would-be stage robbers wheeled their mounts, spurred them to a gallop and thundered over the crest of a nearby hill. They were safe for now. But those young hooligans had put his whole operation at risk. When he saw them again, he was going to give them Jesse, and he wouldn’t let up till he had some solid answers about who had told them such a damn fool story, and why they’d been thick enough to believe it.

Right now he had other problems—not the least of them a riled woman who wanted a piece of his hide.

“How *could* you?” The countess’s eyes blazed blue fire. She looked as if she wanted to fly at him and claw his face to bloody ribbons. “First you take my ring so it won’t get stolen! Then you give it to the thieves! That ring was in my late husband’s family for generations. It was all I had left of him! Now it’s gone!”

As she glared up at him, Clint saw tears brimming in her azure eyes. He forced himself to turn aside. Pity for Hanford’s sister-in-law, who probably had more money than all the county’s poor ranch families combined, was an emotion he could ill afford.

“Look at me!” She caught his sleeve. “Don’t you have anything to say for yourself?”

Clint hardened his gaze. “I did what I had to, lady. Would you rather have been shot, or maybe raped? Would you rather they’d hurt someone else?”

“Of course not. But if you think I’m going to let those robbers ride off with my most precious possession you’re sorely mistaken. I’m holding you responsible, Mr. Lonigan. And if I don’t get that ring back, my brother-in-law, Mr. Hanford, has the power to make you pay!”

The mention of Roderick Hanford triggered a surge of bitter fury. Clint fought it back. “Fine,” he snapped, “but that will have to wait. For now, stop caterwauling and make yourself useful. You can look after Mrs. Simpkins while I check the guard and help the driver replace that broken wheel.”

Without waiting for her response, he turned his back on her and strode toward the front of the stage.

* * *

Seething, Eve watched him walk away. It wasn’t so much his argument that had offended her—on the contrary, it made sense that something had been needed to mollify the robbers. But his manner was insufferable. She was the widow of a nobleman, but he’d spoken to her as if she were a backward child. In England, no commoner would have dared address her with such insolence.

True, she was no longer in England. Everyone was a commoner here. But some were more common than others, and rudeness was rudeness. Mr. Lonigan was clearly no gentleman. For all she knew, he could be in league with the pair who’d held up the coach. He’d certainly appeared to know them. Perhaps he’d planned all along to give them her ring.

The ring was a devastating loss. But for the time being, there was nothing she could do to recover it, so Eve tried not to think about it. Instead, she guided Mrs. Simpkins to a nearby flat boulder, then hurried back to the stage for parasols, her reticule and a canteen of water. The sun was blistering, and there was no shade to be found.

“Are you all right?” Eve raised the woman’s parasol and pressed the canteen to her lips.

"I will be." Mrs. Simpkins took several dainty swallows and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "My stars, what a fright! I'm so sorry about your ring, my dear."

The familiar term was oddly comforting, even coming from a stranger. Eve let it pass. "Did you recognize those two robbers, Mrs. Simpkins?" she asked.

The woman shook her graying head. "One of the voices might have sounded familiar, but I can't be certain. Given the state I was in, I wouldn't have recognized my own children."

"And do you know that wretched Mr. Lonigan?" Eve glanced toward the stage, where Lonigan was wrapping the guard's wounded arm with a red bandanna.

"I know him, but not well. He's got a small ranch north of Lodgepole. Paid cash for the land, I hear tell. He was widowed two years ago, but I never did meet his wife. They kept to themselves and she didn't come into town. Not even for church. I've heard rumors of a scandalous past, but nothing I can tell you for sure. Mercy, but it's hot!"

"Here, this should help." Eve reached into her reticule, withdrew a black lace fan and snapped it open. Mrs. Simpkins accepted it with a grateful sigh.

"My, but this is lovely!" she exclaimed.

"Then it's yours. Keep it as a remembrance." Eve would have no need for it soon. She had long since resolved to set her mourning aside at the journey's end. She'd agreed to marry Arthur Townsend, Sixth Earl of Manderfield, after he'd offered to pay off her father's debts. Arthur had been a kindly man, and he'd treated her like a queen; but he'd been more than twice her age. She'd liked and respected him, but they certainly had not been in love. Three years prior to his death a stroke had left him an invalid. Eve had cared for him faithfully until the end—when his son, Albert, had stepped in, taken over the estate and cast her out like a common strumpet. But never mind. The past was behind her now. She was ready to make a new start.

And in such a wild place! Her gaze swept upward to the mountains, so tall and rugged that they seemed to pierce the sky. Even under the August sun, their rocky peaks bore glistening patches of snow. Below the timberline, forests of dark green pine carpeted the slopes, giving way to the green-gold of aspens and the grassy hills that fed thousands of white-faced Hereford cattle, the wealth of this untamed land.

From the train Eve had seen buffalo herds and wide-eyed pronghorn antelope that could outrace the wind. And she'd heard tales of the predators that prowled the forest shadows—wolves, bears and the fierce golden cat of many names: puma, cougar, catamount, panther, mountain lion.

But she'd come to believe that the most savage creatures in the untamed frontier of this country were the men. It was as if the fight for survival had beaten all the civility out of them. They were like snarling beasts, jumpy and alert, ready to reach for a weapon at the slightest provocation. When they met they sized each other up like bristling hounds, measuring size and speed, testing their power.

Foolish posturing, that's all it was.

Her gaze returned to Lonigan. He'd finished tending to the wounded guard and was helping lift the stage off its broken wheel, raising the axle inch by inch while the aging driver braced it up with rocks. It was hard work. His leather vest and holstered pistol lay in the grass at the roadside. His shirt was dripping with sweat. The faded fabric clung like a second skin to his muscular body—not an unpleasant sight, Eve conceded. His eyes, she now recalled, were like sharp gray flint, deepening in hue around their black centers. If he were to submit to a bath, a barber and a suit of decent clothes, he could be quite attractive. Yet maybe it was better that he stayed as he was. His appearance now made no effort to hide the harshness of his true nature.

Lonigan was no different from other men she'd observed. At best, he was arrogant and ill-mannered. Short of that, he could be a thief or at least a friend of thieves. Worse, if anything, he was Irish. She would do nothing to rile him for now. Until their journey ended, she was uncomfortably at his mercy. However, once the stage reached Lodgepole and she was safely ensconced with her sister's family, she would turn the matter of the ring over to Roderick and have nothing more to do with him.

* * *

With the spare wheel in place, the stage lumbered the last few miles toward Lodgepole. Clint had given the wounded guard his seat inside. Riding shotgun with the driver, he scanned the brushy hills. At any minute, he'd expected to see Sheriff Harv Womack and his deputies come galloping into sight, but it hadn't happened. Maybe the rumor about the cash shipment hadn't been a trap, after all. Or maybe Clint was just jumping at shadows. The truth might have to wait till he caught up with Newt and Gideon.

"Did you have any plans to carry cash?" he asked the driver. "I'm just wondering where those two galoots got the idea there'd be a strongbox."

The driver spat a stream of tobacco off the side of the stage. "Not from me. If I'd been carryin' a strongbox, I would've had a second guard up here. Lucky for us nobody got hurt worse'n that hen scratch on Zeke's arm."

"Are you planning to report the holdup?"

He shook his head. "I'll let the sheriff know if I see him—or you can tell him yourself if you want to. But it's not worth takin' time to file a report. We're runnin' late as it is. And them two kids didn't strike me as hardened criminals. I don't expect they'll bother us again."

Clint's fears eased some, but Newt and Gideon weren't out of the woods yet. Damn it, he should've asked somebody to ride herd on those boys. They'd earned the right to be part of his operation—a handful of small ranchers who'd banded together to protect each other and their neighbors from the cattle barons who wanted their land. But the brothers were always pushing the limits. If they got themselves caught thieving and were scared enough to name names to avoid a noose, all hell could break loose.

The young fools were well-known and easy to recognize. Now four people besides Clint had seen them holding up the stage. The driver and guard were from Casper. They could describe the robbers but didn't likely know them. Mrs. Simpkins knew the brothers, but she'd been frightened out of her wits. Clint could only hope she hadn't guessed who they were. At least she hadn't shown any signs of recognizing them. As for the countess...

The image of that Madonna-like face glimmered like a phantom in his mind. Yes, she was the dangerous one. She'd lost a priceless heirloom and she was determined to get it back at any cost. Worse, she'd have the ear of Roderick Hanford, the most powerful and ruthless rancher in the county.

Clint cursed his own shortsightedness. He'd only wanted to get Newt and Gideon out of harm's way. But he'd stepped in it this time, up to his well-meaning chin.

This couldn't wait. He had to find the boys and get that damned ring back.

* * *

The driver had let Lonigan off at the livery stable on the edge of town. As the coach rolled into Lodgepole, Eve raised the edge of the canvas cover for a look at her new home.

She stifled a groan.

Lodgepole's main street was a long strip of dirt. Ugly clapboard buildings, most of them wanting paint, lined both sides, fronted by a sagging boardwalk. Eve recognized a saloon, a general store, a bank of sorts and a gaudy-looking structure that might have been a brothel. A farm wagon, drawn by a plodding, mismatched team, rolled down the opposite side of the street. A horse tied outside the saloon raised its tail and dropped a steaming pile of manure in the dust.

Tucked between the general store and the bank was a neat little shop with a Closed sign in the window. That would be Mrs. Simpkins's bakery. At least it had curtains and a flowerpot on the sill. As for the rest of the town...

But never mind, Eve lectured herself. Soon she would be with Margaret and the children. That was the only thing that mattered.

Though they'd been apart for nearly eleven years, the two sisters had remained close. They'd written to each other every few weeks, sharing secrets, sorrows and small victories. Anyplace with

Margaret would be home. And Eve would so enjoy the children—Thomas, who was eight, Rose, who was six, and the new baby. It would be almost as good as having children of her own.

True, she'd never cared for Margaret's husband, Roderick, whom she'd known since childhood. The second son of a neighboring farmer, he'd always been something of a braggart and a bully. But that hadn't kept Margaret from marrying him and following him to the wilds of America. Eve had never tried to mask her dislike for her brother-in-law. But at least he'd agreed to take her in. For her sister's sake, and for harmony in the household, she would make every effort to tolerate the man.

The stage was slowing down. Eve's pulse raced with anticipation as it pulled up to the covered porch of a two-story building that appeared to be a hotel. She glimpsed three figures on the porch—a tall man and two children.

It had to be Roderick. Eve hadn't seen him in more than a decade, but she'd know that gaunt scarecrow figure anywhere. There was no sign of his wife. Did that mean Margaret had already given birth? Was she home with the baby?

Mrs. Simpkins motioned her toward the door. "Go ahead and get out first, my dear. You've come such a long way. You must be exhausted."

With a murmur of thanks, Eve swept back her veil, unlatched the door and stepped out onto the boardwalk.

It was indeed Roderick on the porch with the children—such beautiful children. Thomas was dark and solemn like his maternal grandfather. And Rose was like her name, a dainty little fair-haired flower. Wondering what she should say first, Eve hurried toward them.

Their stricken faces stopped her cold.

Eve's hand crept to her throat. Even before she heard it, she guessed the truth.

Roderick broke the silence. "It's good you've come, Eve. Margaret died in childbirth ten days ago."

"And the baby?" Her question emerged as a choked whisper.

Roderick shook his head. "The baby, too."

Chapter Two

"You mule-headed bunglers! Don't you know what could've happened if you'd been caught?" Clint had found the Potter brothers hiding in his barn. He could only hope his tongue-lashing would scare some sense into them. "What in hell's name did you think you were doing, holding up that stage?"

"We heard tell there was money on it." Newt cringed against the side of the milking stall. "Money for hired guns, to drive us off our land. Don't be mad, Clint. We'd've told you but you wasn't here. We had to do somethin'."

"Where did you hear about the money? Who told you?"

"Smitty passed it on," Gideon replied. "Said some of Hanford's men was talkin' about it at the bar."

Clint scowled, weighing what he'd heard. Smitty, the one-legged bartender at the Red Dog Saloon, had always been a reliable source. If he said he'd heard about the money, it was likely true.

Had the cattlemen discovered that Smitty was passing information to the small ranchers? Could they have fed him a lie to set a trap?

The failure of the sheriff's men to appear and spring that trap would argue against it.

So what if the information about the money had been true? What if the cash had been on board the stage, after all—not in a strongbox, but hidden on one of the passengers?

Which one? He could probably rule out Etta Simpkins, who was little more than a harmless chatterbox. That left the mysterious beauty draped from head to toe in sweltering black silk.

What had the countess been wearing under those widow's weeds? He'd bet the farm it wasn't just lace-trimmed petticoats and silk drawers—unless she'd hidden the stash in her trunk.

"That ring you took—where is it?" he demanded.

Newt fished the ruby ring out of his pocket, spat on the stone and rubbed it on his shirt. “Purty thing. Looks like it might be worth a piece. How much d’you reckon we could get for it?”

“Here in Lodgepole, all you’d get is a necktie party from Roderick Hanford. That widow on the stage was Hanford’s sister-in-law. The ring’s hers.”

“The countess?” Apparently Gideon had heard the rumors. “Didn’t count on her bein’ such a looker. What were you doin’ with her ring?”

Clint hooked the ring with his forefinger and dropped it into his vest pocket. “I took it for safekeeping after the shooting started. When I gave it up to get rid of you boys, she was madder than a wet wildcat. If she doesn’t get it back, she’ll have our hides nailed to Hanford’s barn.”

“So how d’you figure on gettin’ it to her? It’s not like you can just march up Hanford’s front steps and knock on the door.”

“That’s my problem. Your problem is staying out of jail. Lie low while I scout around and rustle you up some supplies so you can go hide out until this blows over. As soon as it’s dark you can head up to that old herder’s cabin below the peaks. You’re not to show your faces around here till I send word that it’s safe, hear?”

“What about our place?” Newt whined. “What about our stock?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll see to things.” At that, the brothers subsided, looking like nothing so much as scolded schoolboys. Clint abandoned the rest of his lecture. Newt and Gideon weren’t young enough to be his sons, but most of the time he felt like their father.

Warning them once more to stay hidden and quiet, Clint left the barn and made a slow circuit of his property. There was no sign of trouble, but a man couldn’t be too careful. The countess, or even Etta Simpkins, could have described the stage robbers to Sheriff Womack in enough detail to identify the boys. The sheriff, or maybe some of Hanford’s rowdies, could be watching on the chance that the Potter brothers might show up. Clint would need to behave as if nothing was amiss.

A neighbor’s boy had been minding his place while he was in Cheyenne. Everything appeared fine, including the Herefords he grazed in an upper pasture; but Clint went through the motions of checking the hen coop, and the paddock where the milk cow and the horses grazed. His eyes swept the scrub-dotted foothills that rose behind the ranch, alert for the slightest movement or the flicker of reflected light on a gun barrel. Nothing. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t being watched.

He passed through the apple orchard he’d planted the year his wife died. The trees were still too young to bear fruit, but they were tall enough to shelter her grave. Maybe next spring they would shower the sad little mound of earth with soft white petals.

Clint paused, gazing down at the hand-chiseled marker. Corrie had died defending her home from the band of raiders that had raped her and burned the house and barn. At the time, she’d been seven months pregnant with his child.

Clint had been in town that night, summoned there by Roderick Hanford for a supposed meeting between the small ranchers and the members of the Cattlemen’s Association. He’d arrived to find the meeting canceled and Hanford playing faro in the Three-legged Dog. When Hanford looked up at him, something in the man’s cold eyes had chilled Clint to the marrow. Wild with dread, he’d galloped home to find his ranch ablaze and his wife’s naked, bloodied body sprawled in the yard.

Despite the solid alibi, Clint had never stopped believing that Hanford was behind the raid. He’d buried Corrie and planted the trees as a promise that he would stay here, rebuild the ranch and seek justice for her murder. The second part of that promise had yet to be kept. But he hadn’t given up.

Now there was a new player in the game—the mysterious beauty who’d be sharing Roderick Hanford’s household. How much did the countess know about her brother-in-law’s activities? How strong were her loyalties? Could she be swayed, even turned?

If she was already carrying money from the Cattlemen’s Association, Clint would have to bet against the odds of winning her over to his side. But desperate times called for desperate measures. If the opportunity presented itself, he would use the woman any way he could.

Walking back toward the house, Clint felt the weight of the ring in his vest pocket. The setting sun cast his lengthening shadow across the ground—still his own ground, despite the cattlemen's attempts to drive him away.

He paused to watch the sky fade from flame to the deep indigo hue of the countess's eyes. Soon it would be dark. He would see Newt and Gideon safely on the trail to the mountain hideout. Then, once things had settled down for the night, he'd drop by the Three-legged Dog to have a drink and catch up on the news. After that it might be time for a visit to the Hanford ranch.

* * *

Dinner that evening was a dismal affair. Alice, the aging cook, had gone to the trouble of making a nice meal. But the children had barely picked at their roast beef and potatoes. Eve had made an effort to eat, but could get only a few morsels down a throat swollen with unshed tears.

Margaret, her gentle, loving sister, was dead and the baby with her. The shock was too much for Eve to grasp.

Only Roderick seemed to have much appetite. He ate with relish, sopping his bread in the gravy and stuffing it into his mouth. Back in England, his lack of a gentleman's manners had been a handicap that had kept him from gaining acceptance in high society. Here, in the wild American West, the rules were different and Roderick was in his element.

Eve's gaze roamed the cavernous dining room with its high, beamed ceiling and deer-antler chandelier. Built of massive rough-hewn logs, the house was large enough to be impressive but looked as if it had been hastily thrown together with no regard for design or taste. She'd expected a welcoming warmth from her sister's home, not decorations that seemed designed to frighten or intimidate guests. The walls around the long table were adorned with mounted animal heads—buffalo, elk, deer, pronghorn antelope, a half-grown black bear and a snarling cougar with yellowed fangs as long as Eve's little finger. Its glass eyes stared down at her, a strange sadness in their empty depths. Or maybe the sadness she sensed was her own.

"I see you're admiring my trophy collection." Roderick had cleaned his plate and was watching her from under his thick, black brows. He was handsome in a long-jawed sort of way, but Eve had never found her brother-in-law attractive. "I treed that cat with the pack of hounds I keep out back," he said. "Got him with one shot straight through the heart."

"He must've been a beautiful animal in life." Eve, who was fond of cats, had no desire to hear about Roderick's hunting exploits and quickly changed the subject. "Who's looking after the children?" she asked.

"Alice has been seeing to their needs," Roderick answered. "But she's getting old and has all she can do with the cooking and cleaning. So I'm hoping you'll make yourself useful, Eve."

"Of course. That's why I've come. To help." She glanced across the table at her sister's children. The two sat in silence, their eyes downcast. This was far from the happy welcome she'd expected. But Thomas and Rose would need a great deal of mothering, and she was here to give it to them as well as she was able.

Roderick was leaning back in his chair, openly studying her. Not that she was any treat for the eye tonight. The news of Margaret's death had left her too stunned to deal with changing her dusty clothes or brushing out her sweat-dampened hair. As far as she was concerned, the last thing that mattered tonight was the way she looked.

"How was your trip, Eve?" he asked. "You haven't told us much about it."

The very question wearied her. She should probably tell him about the holdup and the loss of her ring, but her sister's death had shrunk those events to trivialities. Maybe tomorrow she would have the strength and patience to deal with them. But not tonight.

Eve rose from her chair. "The trip was long, and I'm exhausted. If you'll excuse me, Roderick, I'll take the children upstairs and help them to bed. Then I intend to get some rest myself. Please thank Alice for the lovely dinner."

He rose with her. “I was hoping we could talk.”

“Tomorrow.” Her smile was forced. “We’ll talk then. Come and show me to your rooms, children.”

Rose and Thomas took her outstretched hands and led her up the stairs. They shared adjoining nurseries down the hall from the room where Eve’s luggage had been taken. Eve had felt nothing of her sister’s presence downstairs, where the decor was dark, heavy and oppressively masculine. But the children’s rooms spoke of Margaret—the bright chintz coverlets and curtains, the braided rugs, the fairy-tale pictures on the walls. It was as if here, with her little ones, Margaret’s true nature had been allowed to blossom. But the rest of the house had clearly been ruled by Roderick.

Margaret’s letters had never held a word of complaint against her husband. But how could a woman as sweet and gentle as her sister be happy in this house, and with such a man?

He’d probably read and approved every word she wrote.

Tonight the children were meek and quiet—too quiet. By the light of a flickering candle, Eve got them into their nightclothes, washed their faces and saw that they brushed their teeth. After mumbled prayers, they crawled into their beds and lay still. Poor, wounded little things, their stoicism made her want to weep. She already loved them.

Eve’s own spacious room bore Margaret’s touch, as well—the soft, flowered coverlet on the bed, the scattered cushions, the pretty little folding secretary against one wall and the upholstered bench by one window. Tears welled in Eve’s eyes as she realized her sister had prepared this room just for her, likely within weeks of her death.

Eve used the candle to light the bedside lamp. Her trunk and her other bags sat in the middle of the floor where Roderick’s hired men had left them. Back in England she’d have had a lady’s maid to unpack her clothes and help ready her for bed. But that life was behind her now, and she was quite capable of doing for herself.

The room was stifling from the day’s trapped heat. By the time she’d unpacked half her trunk, her face was damp with sweat. Crossing to the windows, she pulled back the drapes, unlatched the sashes and opened them wide. A draft of coolness swept over her face.

She closed her eyes, filling her lungs with the fresh Wyoming air—as cool in its way as English mist, but drier and sharper, with a light bouquet of pine needles, sagebrush, wood smoke and cattle. Her fingers plucked the pins from her tight bun, letting her hair fall loose as she leaned over the sill.

Heaven.

Savoring the soft breeze, she unbuttoned the high collar of her dress, opening it all the way down to her corset. She’d been miserable all day, so hot... What a blessed relief to feel cool air against her skin!

The moon was rising over the plain, waxing but not yet full. A distant speck of light glowed through the high window of the bunkhouse. Horses stirred and snorted in the corral. None of it was what she was used to—but it was all beautiful, in its way.

She would make the best of what she’d found here, Eve vowed. It wouldn’t be easy, but somehow she would learn to tolerate Roderick, nurture her sister’s motherless children and find her own small pleasures. Maybe one day she would even come to think of this strange, wild place as home.

But tonight she felt as lost and alone as a wanderer among the stars.

* * *

Clint swore under his breath as the countess leaned over the upstairs windowsill. Backlit by the lamp, with her bodice open and her hair streaming like ebony silk, she was a sight to heat the blood of any man—and Roderick Hanford’s blood could be simmering already. Clint had heard in the saloon that Hanford’s wife had died. No doubt the man would be looking for a replacement to warm his bed. Who better than the beautiful, widowed sister-in-law who’d come to look after his children? The fact that she was damn near royalty wouldn’t hurt her chances of becoming the next

Mrs. Roderick Hanford, either. If the bastard married her, Clint wouldn't put it past the pretentious ass to take on her title.

But he hadn't risked danger to ogle the woman or make guesses about her relationship with her brother-in-law, he reminded himself. He hadn't even come to return her ring, though that was the reason he'd give, if she asked. In truth, he'd come to take stock of her situation, maybe even to warn her if he got the chance. He could always put the ring in the mail or wrap it in his bandanna and toss it onto the porch. But then he'd have no excuse to contact the countess—a contact that, if luck was in the cards, might prove useful.

Not that luck had ever shown him much favor.

Checking the shadows, he slipped around the side of the house. The ranch was a perilous place for a man like him. A hundred yards beyond the house, Roderick Hanford kept a kennel of hunting dogs, trained to be as vicious as possible. The scent of a stranger would set off a hellish baying. At a signal from the house, their handler—the master of hounds, Hanford called him—would turn the beasts loose to run down the intruder and tear him to pieces. That very thing had happened to a young cousin of the Potter brothers who'd been caught on Hanford's property. The next morning they'd found his mauled body, or what was left of it, where a night rider had flung it on their porch.

Tonight Clint was downwind from the dogs. But the wind could change, and he was hair-trigger wary. His pistol was loaded, his horse tethered within sprinting distance. He was ready to leave at a moment's notice...but he hated the thought of going without doing what he'd come for—speaking with the countess.

So what now? The countess had left the window, but he glimpsed signs of her moving about in the lamp-lit room. The other windows in the house had gone dark. She appeared to be the only one still up and stirring. Should he toss a pebble at her pane on the chance that she'd hear? If he showed himself and held up the ring, would she come down to the porch and get it? Would she listen to what he had to say? Or would loyalty to her sister's family compel her to raise an alarm?

Clint forced himself to exhale, feeling the tension in every nerve. He would allow a little more time for the household to settle down, he resolved. Then he could decide whether to act or to leave.

Ever mindful of the wind and the dogs, he slipped into the shadows to wait.

* * *

Eve had finished unpacking. Her dresses and cloak hung in the wardrobe. Her brushes and toiletries lay on the mirrored dresser. Her underthings were folded into drawers. She still yearned for the books she'd been forced to leave behind at Manderfield—the volumes of poetry, science, history and literature that had sustained her through the years of Arthur's illness. They'd been hers, an inheritance from her father, who'd died two years after her marriage. But now, by law, in the absence of a will, they belonged to her late husband's estate. Her stepson's family had allowed her to take only a bible and a few precious volumes of Shakespeare's plays. They would have to do.

Eve was tired beyond exhaustion. Common sense told her she should finish undressing and get ready for bed. But something was tugging at her, some deep urge crying to be satisfied. And suddenly she knew what it was.

She had yet to say goodbye to her sister.

Earlier Roderick had mentioned that Margaret and the baby were laid to rest under a large cottonwood that grew a short distance from the house. He'd offered to show her the grave, but Eve had wanted to visit the spot alone. She'd put him off with an excuse and the evening had passed without another chance.

It wasn't too late to go. The moon was bright, and the tree would make the mound of earth simple enough to find. Maybe some solitude beside her sister's grave would help her accept the news that still seemed no more than a terrible dream.

She took a moment to button her bodice. Then, leaving the lamp in her room, Eve moved out into the hall. Once her eyes became accustomed to the dark it wasn't too difficult to make her way

down the stairs. Her senses prickled as she stepped out onto the front porch and closed the door behind her. A warning of danger lurking in the darkness? No, she told herself, it was just the strangeness of being in a new place at night. It would pass.

The wind lifted her hair as she descended the front steps and walked out into the yard. There was no lawn, only dry, gravelly earth that crunched beneath her shoes. Margaret had always loved flowers. Had she tried to plant them here, in this inhospitable place?

Eve could see the big cottonwood now, a stone's throw from the corner of the house. Its trunk was thick and twisted, with upward-reaching limbs as thick as a man's leg. Clouds of silvery leaves glimmered in the moonlight.

As she neared the tree, Eve felt the prickling sensation again, like cold fingers brushing the back of her neck. She hesitated—but no, she was being silly. And now she was close enough that she could see the narrow mound of fresh earth below the tree. Bracing herself against a rush of emotions, she walked toward it.

* * *

The countess glided like a queen across the yard, hair and skirts fluttering behind her. Clint watched from the shadows, transfixed and puzzled. What the hell was she doing out here alone in the dark?

Hadn't she been warned about Hanford's dogs? She was new here. Her scent could set them off just as easily as his.

Whatever her silly reason for coming out alone at night, he couldn't deny that it suited his needs nicely. Now would be the perfect time to speak to her, without fear of drawing attention from the rest of the house. But caution and curiosity held him back. Where was she going?

He followed her at a short distance, keeping out of sight. On the far side of the big cottonwood, she dropped to her knees. Only as he moved forward did Clint notice the patch of heaped earth littered with the dried remains of flowers.

He was about to step into view when she spoke.

"Forgive me, Margaret, for arriving too late." Her voice was a choked whisper. "I should have been here for you, at least to hold you in my arms and say goodbye..."

Still in the shadows, Clint hesitated. He was wasting precious time, but this was a private moment and an emotional one. Discretion held him in check.

"I promise you, here on your grave, that I'll look after your children," the countess continued. "I'll care for them as my own, and they'll never want for love..." A sob cut off the rest of her words. Her shoulders shook as she pressed her hands to her face.

Clint took the ring from his pocket and stepped into sight. "I'm sorry about your sister, Countess," he said softly.

Her hands dropped from her face. She stared up at him with startled eyes. "You!" she whispered. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to return this." He held out the ring to her. "I'm hoping you'll accept it without asking too many questions."

"I'll certainly accept it." She rose, snatched the ring away from him and thrust it onto her middle finger. "But I have the right to ask as many questions as I choose, and you'd bloody well be prepared to answer them."

Clint found her mild profanity oddly sensual. She might be an elevated lady, but she was clearly a passionate woman. Though he'd prefer to see that passion directed at something other than ordering him around. It shouldn't surprise him that the lady was accustomed to giving orders, he reminded himself. Back in England, she'd probably had the servants quaking in their brogans. But she was about to learn that he wasn't one of her subjects.

"Listen here, Countess—" he began.

"This is America. I'm Mrs. Townsend. Eve."

The silkiness of the name, emerging between ripe lips, triggered a fleeting fantasy about being Adam. But Clint had come here for a far different reason.

"Well, as I was saying, *Eve*, you're new here and you need to understand a few things. First, since I know you're wondering, the answer is yes, I did know those young stage robbers. They're just a couple of fool boys. I gave them your ring to get them out of harm's way. When I caught up with them I demanded it back."

"Fine." Her eyes blazed up at him, moonlight reflecting in their azure depths. "So why did you have to sneak up in the night to return it? Why couldn't you have called at the house during the day like a proper gentleman?"

"Because your brother-in-law would've set the dogs on me. He's my enemy, and the enemy of every decent, honest rancher in this valley."

It was a bold statement, meant to shock her. And he could see by the startled widening of her eyes that it had. Before she could reply he continued.

"Hanford and his cronies in the Cattlemen's Association want to drive the farmers and small ranchers off their land and leave the valleys open to graze their cattle. Their hirelings have burned houses and barns, ripped out fences, killed men, women, even children. Their favorite trick is to frame a man for cattle rustling, then string him up on the spot." He took a step closer, his face inches above hers. "You've landed in the middle of a range war, lady. And I've heard rumors it's about to get worse."

Clint paused for breath. He'd taken a dangerous plunge, revealing himself to a woman in his enemy's household. But even if she went running to Hanford to share everything later, he hadn't told her anything Hanford wouldn't already know. He'd only informed her that she was living with an evil man.

She drew herself up, meeting his gaze with her own steel. "So what's all this got to do with me?"

"You can close your eyes to what's happening or you can try to make a difference."

"Make a difference how? What are you suggesting?" she challenged him.

"In Hanford's house, you're bound to see things, hear things. If you're willing to pass on what you learn, you'll be helping to save innocent lives."

"You're asking me to be a spy."

"If that's what you want to call it, yes."

He heard the sharp intake of her breath before she spoke. "Listen to me, then, Mr. Lonigan. I know Roderick's no angel. But he's the father of my sister's children. Those precious little ones are in my care now. As long as they're under Roderick's roof, I'll do nothing—*nothing*—that might compromise my ability to protect them. Do I make myself clear?"

There was a note of ferocity in her voice, like the snarl of a tigress defending her cubs. Her stunning eyes glinted with defiance.

"I understand that the children are your priority and you don't want to get involved," Clint said. "But if you change your mind—"

"I have no intention of changing my mind. Now please get off this property and leave me alone. You won't be welcome again."

"Fine." Time to back off, Clint told himself. He'd planted a seed. That would have to be enough for now. But there was one more thing he had to know. "Before I leave I'm going to ask you a question," he said. "And I want an honest answer."

"Ask it," she said coldly. "I have nothing to hide."

"The boys who held up the stage were expecting to find money from the Cattlemen's Association in Cheyenne. They assumed it would be in a strongbox, but they didn't find it."

"Yes, I remember that. Go on."

"Were you carrying that money—either in your baggage or on your person?"

Her eyes widened. A gasp of indignation lifted her breasts. “Absolutely not,” she snapped. “I don’t know anything about the Cattlemen’s Association or their money, nor do I wish to. My only concern is my sister’s children. Are you satisfied, Mr. Lonigan? Do you believe me?”

“I have no reason not to—” Clint broke off, sensing a sudden change. It was the breeze, he realized, finally identifying the feeling. It had shifted. “Lord, the wind...”

“What?” She stared up at him. “What is it?”

As if in answer, a sudden clamor rose from the kennel beyond the house—a burst of yelps and snarls that rose to a hideous, howling chorus.

Chapter Three

“Take your hands off me!” Eve sputtered as Clint Lonigan seized her shoulders. His grip was rough enough to hurt as he spun her in the direction of the front porch.

“Run!” he growled. “Get in the house!”

“Why should I? What is it?” She struggled, resisting.

“Hanford’s dogs. They’ve scented us, and they’re sounding the alarm. If he orders them set loose, they’ll tear any stranger apart, including you. Now *run*, damn it!” He pushed her forward.

A light had flickered on in Roderick’s window. It was moving back and forth, as if signaling. Suddenly the hellish baying grew louder, coming from around the far side of the house.

Eve broke into a sprint. For her, the safety of the front door was mere seconds away. She could no longer see or hear Lonigan, but the dogs would be after him, too. And, unlike her, he’d have no safe place to go.

Tripping over her long skirts, she plunged up the front steps and raced across the porch to the door. Her fingers fumbled with the latch. It held fast. Had it somehow locked behind her when she’d left the house?

As she shrank into the doorway, a half dozen sleek forms came flying around the corner, baying and snarling as they plunged ahead.

Brindled coats flashed in the moonlight as the pack swung away from the house. She wasn’t the one they were after. They were going for Lonigan. He might not be her friend, but that didn’t mean she wanted him mauled to death. She had to stop what was about to happen.

Frantic, she flung herself against the door. “Roderick!” she screamed, shaking the latch and pounding on the heavy oak slab. “Roderick, it’s me! Call them off! Call them off!”

With a sudden give, the latch released and the door swung open. Eve stumbled into the entry, then changed her mind and raced back onto the porch. She couldn’t see Lonigan or the dogs, but the pack’s chilling cry echoed across the moonlit yard.

“Roderick!” she screamed again. “For the love of heaven, call them back!”

For an instant time seemed to stop. Then three blasts of a steel whistle shattered the night. The baying dropped to a subdued chorus of yelps as the dogs wheeled and came loping back into sight. Eve shrank into the doorway as they skirted the corner of the house and vanished in the direction of the kennel.

There was no sign of Clint Lonigan. She could only hope he’d made a clean escape. Friend or enemy—whichever he might be—no man deserved to be ripped apart by those nightmarish creatures.

Knees sagging, she closed the door and slid the bolt into place. Roderick loomed at the top of the stairs, wearing a maroon velvet dressing gown and holding a lantern.

“Eve!” He addressed her as one might lecture a naughty child. “What were you doing outside after dark? Those hounds are trained to guard the property. They could’ve torn you to pieces.”

She willed herself to speak calmly. “I wanted to visit my sister’s grave. I didn’t know about the dogs. You should’ve warned me.”

He didn’t even have the grace to look guilty, though her answer did seem to mollify him to an extent. “I would have, if I’d known you were going to wander around after dark.” He glided down the stairs, pausing two steps short of the landing. “Were you alone out there? I thought I heard voices.”

"I spoke a few fitting words over Margaret's grave. You may have heard me. I'm guessing the dogs did, too." It was a half-truth. A flicker of caution kept her from mentioning Clint Lonigan.

"Tomorrow I'll take you out and introduce you to the pack, let them get to know you. If you can spare an article of clothing, something that carries your scent, bring it along to leave with them."

"Can I assume the children will be safe around them?"

"Those hounds are like puppies with the children, as they were with Margaret. You might even want to wear one of her dresses when you visit the kennel for the first time. No need to wear mourning in this country. To be sure, there's plenty of cause for it, but with the dirt and the weather, women say black's too impractical here."

"I'm glad of that. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going up to bed."

She started for the stairs, expecting him to move aside and give her room to pass, but he stood fast, offering her the barest space against the wall. "I was hoping—" He broke off, staring down at her hand. "I didn't see that ring earlier."

Eve's pulse skittered. "It was my late husband's, one of the few things of his I was able to keep."

"But you weren't wearing it at supper. It's very impressive. What's a bauble like that worth?"

"It's late, Roderick," Eve said, cutting him off. "I've just had a fright, and I'm exhausted. All I want is to go upstairs and sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

"Very well. I'll bid you good-night then, Eve." He finally moved back against the railing, allowing her room to get by, but barely. His hand brushed the small of her back as she hurried past him.

By the time she reached the landing, Eve felt vaguely ill. She hadn't counted on this. With the earth barely settled on his wife's grave, Roderick was already acting as if he owned her. If it weren't for Margaret's children, she would pack up and leave on the next stage. But her promise to look after Thomas and Rose would bind her to this house, perhaps for years to come. And anyway, she had nowhere else to go, Eve reminded herself, shoulders slumping. So here she would stay, for better or for worse. She would just have to prepare for a reckoning with the man.

She took a moment to look in on the children. Both were slumbering, but Thomas's young face was streaked with salt where his tears had dried, and Rose was whimpering in her sleep. Eve adjusted their blankets and brushed a finger kiss across each silken head. These precious little ones would be a long time healing. She would be there for them every step of the way, Eve vowed—regardless of their father's behavior.

In her room, she bolted the door. Unsteady hands unbuttoned her black dress and let it fall to the rug. As she strained to unfasten her corset, she felt the burn where Clint Lonigan's strong hands had gripped her shoulders. A glance confirmed that he hadn't left bruises on her skin. But he'd shoved her toward the house with an urgent force that lingered, if only in her memory. What if he hadn't been there? What if she'd been caught off guard by Roderick's killer dogs?

The ruby ring felt cold and heavy on her finger. For now she would put it away in a safe place. Wearing it would only tempt possible thieves and set her apart from her neighbors. But she couldn't deny she was glad to have it back. Lonigan had risked his life to return it. But that was only half true, Eve reminded herself. The ring had masked the rascal's real intent—to recruit her as a spy.

She'd been right to refuse Lonigan's request, of course. Nothing he'd said about Roderick had surprised her. But this range war was neither her doing nor her business. Her only concern was for her sister's children.

Clint Lonigan had her answer—her final answer. The wise course now would be to turn her back and never speak to him again.

Still, as she walked to the open window to shut out the night chill, her eyes scanned the moonlit yard. Deny it though she might, the question haunted her.

Was he safe?

* * *

Out of the ranch's earshot, Clint spurred his tall buckskin to a gallop. The night wind cooled the sweat that had beaded on his face. It had been a damned narrow escape. Hanford's hounds had been so close on his heels that he could smell their foul breath. He'd been about to wheel and draw his pistol when their keeper's whistle had called them off.

It was the countess's screams that had saved his life. Since the dogs were chasing him, not her, he could only surmise she'd cried out to save *him*. It was a comforting thought. She may have refused to spy for him, but at least she'd been sympathetic enough to help him get away.

Or maybe she just couldn't stand the sight of blood. But no, he doubted she was the missish type. She had too much steel in her for that.

When she'd denied carrying money from the Cattlemen's Association, those azure eyes of hers could've melted stone. But how could he believe her, when logic told him that if anyone on that stage was hiding cash, it would've been the bewitching countess?

Eve. Her name was like a whisper of wind. He remembered how she'd looked leaning out the upstairs window, her loose black hair framing her face, her breasts pale half-moons above the lace edging of her camisole. The sight of her had stirred yearnings he hadn't felt since...

With a muttered curse, Clint forced her image from his mind. He was fighting a war, damn it; and if the countess wasn't with him, she was against him. As long as Eve lived under Roderick Hanford's roof and cared for his children, there could be no trusting her.

Right now Clint had other urgent concerns to deal with. One of his neighbors had lost half a dozen spring calves. A Dutch farmer, Yost had spotted the calves with a herd belonging to cattleman and county judge Seth McCutcheon. Yost was determined to get them back, even if he had to steal them.

Clint had seen this tactic too many times not to be wise to what would happen next. His neighbor would take his animals back—and McCutcheon's men would make no move to stop him. But once they were back in his possession, Yost would be accused of cattle rustling and strung up without a trial. His widow and children would be run off their farm and the cattle barons would move in like vultures to seize the land.

It was up to Clint to find the man and talk some sense into him—tonight, before it was too late. After that, assuming he was successful in talking Yost down, Clint might manage to grab a few hours sleep before his own morning chores and a visit to check on the Potter ranch. Blasted fool boys. Just when things were heating up, and he needed their guns and sharp eyes, they had to go and get in trouble.

Tomorrow, once the chores were done, he'd ride into town and nose around into the investigation on the stagecoach holdup. With luck, he'd be able to learn whether Sheriff Womack was looking for Newt and Gideon. If the coast was clear, it might be safe to bring the boys home.

Clint also needed to look into the rumors of money from the Cattlemen's Association. If they were true, and hired gun sharks were coming to Lodgepole, he would need to spread the word and come up with a plan.

But what plan? What could immigrant farmers and small ranchers do to protect themselves against seasoned killers? What chance would they have? He needed a way to learn more—how many, where and when they planned to strike.

Smitty in the Three-legged Dog and Etta Simpkins in the bakery might be good for passing on a bit of gossip. But gossip couldn't take the place of solid information.

For that he needed the countess on his side—and the chance of winning her over was about as good as tying up a wildcat with a piece of string.

* * *

Eve sat at the dining room table helping Thomas with his multiplication tables. Rose sat across from them, practicing lines of alphabet letters in her notebook. The one-room school in Lodgepole

was too far for a daily drive, especially in winter, so Margaret had schooled her children at home. She'd done an admirable job, which Eve hoped to continue.

It was only her second day here, but Eve had already made a number of discoveries. One was that Roderick had little interest in his children's upbringing or the running of his household. Those matters had been left to Margaret—and had now fallen to her. Another discovery was that Alice, the elderly housekeeper, was suffering from rheumatism. She could manage in the kitchen, but tasks like doing laundry and trudging up and down the stairs with mop buckets and chamber pots were becoming too much for the poor woman. Eve had resolved to find her some younger, stronger help, the sooner the better.

After the children's lessons she would take the buggy into Lodgepole for some needed supplies. And while she was there, she would pay a visit to Etta Simpkins at the bakery. Surely a woman who knew the town so well could recommend a sturdy, trustworthy girl who needed work.

Eve glanced at the children as they labored over their lessons. She would ask Roderick to let her take them into town. Maybe some peppermint sticks from the general store or a couple of small toys would bring a smile to their sad little faces. The three of them might even stop for a picnic on the way home.

As if the very thought of him could summon the man, Roderick strolled into the dining room. He was dressed like the country gentleman he'd never been in England, in jodhpurs, a tweed riding jacket and knee-high calfskin boots polished to a gloss.

"Are you ready, Eve?" he asked. "I wanted to take you out back to meet my hounds this morning."

A knot tightened in the pit of her stomach. After last night she had no desire to meet Roderick's baying, snarling dogs face-to-face.

"The children," she protested. "They're still doing their lessons."

He did not spare Rose and Thomas even a glance. "They can finish alone. Bring something that has your scent on it."

Eve thought of the black silk bombazine she'd worn so long that it was stiff with sweat and dust. She'd had a mind to burn it on arrival, but literally throwing it to the dogs would work just as well. It was too far gone to survive washing, but maybe she could salvage a strip of it as a mourning band to wear for Margaret.

As she hurried upstairs to fetch the gown, the shock of her sister's death swept over her afresh. Dear, gentle, faithful Margaret. How Eve longed to hear her voice and see her patient smile again. Older by three years, Margaret had always been the solid, sensible sister. Growing up, it was Eve, the impulsive one, who was always finding ways to get into mischief. Yet it was Margaret who'd married a rough-edged adventurer bound for America, and Eve who, to save their father from financial ruin, had dutifully wed the middle-aged Earl of Manderfield.

While he lived, the earl had been the soul of kindness and generosity. Eve had never been in love with him, but he'd earned her gratitude and her lasting devotion, even in the latter years of his life, when her role toward him had been more nursemaid than wife. Margaret, who'd been so giddy with love for Roderick that she'd ignored warnings from friends and family, had paid dearly for following her heart. The thought of her sister enduring this uncivilized country and that pompous brute of a husband for eleven long years was enough to make Eve weep. If only she could have been here to give Margaret some love and support. Now she could only try to do as much for her sister's children.

In her room, she gathered up her mourning dress and tore out a strip from the inner seam of the skirt for an armband. Rolling the rest of the gown into a wad, she carried it back downstairs. Today she was dressed in sky-blue cotton voile with a dainty white lace collar. The frock was airy and cool. In England, it would have been considered plain and practical, but she sensed that even this might be too fine for Lodgepole. Most of the women she'd seen in town had been clad in faded calicos and

sunbonnets. Eve had even seen one woman in overalls. But then, she supposed, her own style of dress would adapt over time until she fit right in.

Roderick was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. “Let’s go and meet my pets,” he said, offering his arm. Pretending not to see the gesture, Eve swept past him. Maybe he’d only meant to be polite, but if she didn’t set boundaries now she could come to regret it later.

“You look right fetching today,” he said. “Much better than in those widow’s weeds. I hope that means you’re done with mourning your husband and are ready to get on with your life.”

She shot him a stern look over her shoulder. “I’m mourning my sister,” she said. “I saved a strip of black from the skirt to make an armband. I’ll make one for you, too, if you’d like.”

“That would be very kind of you, Eve.” His hand brushed her corseted waist as he ushered her around to the backyard.

The kennel, surrounded by a high wall of rough-sawn logs, was far enough from the house to keep odors from carrying, but close enough for the dogs to scent any strange presence. A grove of scraggly elms provided some shade. The creatures took up a hideous baying as Eve approached with Roderick. At a shrill blast on a whistle, like the one she’d heard last night, the baying subsided to whimpers.

Roderick opened the high wooden gate. Eve shrank back, expecting the dogs to rush out at her, but then saw they were inside a wire enclosure that formed part of the compound. There was also a closed storage shed and what looked to be a crude log cabin.

Standing outside the cabin was a shaggy giant of a man dressed in shapeless brown clothing and wearing a heavy silver police whistle on a leather thong around his neck.

“This is Hans, my master of hounds,” Roderick said. “He hears well enough, but he doesn’t speak. The dogs are trained to respond to the whistle.”

“Hans, I’m pleased to meet you.” Eve gave him a smile, which he returned with a shy nod. Half hidden by locks of matted gray-brown hair, his blue eyes were curiously gentle. Stepping aside, he gave Eve a full view of the dogs.

A shiver passed through her as she remembered the terror of seeing them run loose in the moonlight. There were six of them, all of a kind—huge, brindle-coated creatures with sleek, muscular bodies, long legs and heavy, drooling jaws, but of no definable breed. At the sight of Eve, they began snarling and lunging at the stout wire fence.

Roderick paid no heed. “I crossbred them myself,” he boasted. “The speed of a coursing hound, the strength of a mastiff and the tenacity of a pit bull. They have it all—best game dogs in the country. They’ll take on bear, cougar, wolf, buffalo, any creature you can name, except maybe a skunk.” He chuckled at his own joke. “I’ve been offered a small fortune for them. Seth McCutcheon, for one, would take them off my hands in a minute. But I wouldn’t part with them, or with Hans. They’re much too useful—especially with so much common riffraff moving in on our open range.”

Eve shuddered again, remembering last night. Roderick had bragged that his dogs would take on any prey. Evidently that included humans.

Taking the black silk dress from her, he passed it to Hans, who tossed it over the wire fence into the midst of the pack. There was a flurry of snarling, growling and tearing. Then they began snuffling at the fabric, filling their noses with the unfamiliar scent.

“We can go now.” Roderick guided her toward the gate. “After they’ve spent a day or two with that dress, they’ll be accustomed to your scent. Next time you won’t smell like a stranger to them.”

Next time.

Eve walked beside him in silence, struggling to forget the sight of those drooling jaws. She liked most dogs, even large hounds. But she’d never seen any as terrifying as these. Was their ferocity bred into them or had they been raised with the kind of brutality that drove them to attack?

And what was Hans’s role as Roderick’s “master of hounds”? Evidently he’d been there last night to set the dogs loose and blow a triple blast on his whistle to call them back. Did that odd giant

of a man live right there in the compound with the dogs? It seemed that every hour spent here raised new questions—and a string of unpleasant answers.

Eve had been here less than a day and the dark miasma that hung over this place was already seeping into her bones. But never mind that, she was here for Margaret's children, and here she would stay, doing everything she could to give them love and brighten their lives.

"Alice needs a few things from the store," she said to Roderick. "I was hoping I could drive the buggy into town and take the children along for a treat."

"That's fine. I'll get one of the hands to drive you."

"I know how drive a buggy," Eve said, holding firm. "All I need is someone to hitch up the horse. The road's good, and it's not much more than an hour to town. Surely I can manage that."

Roderick frowned. "This isn't England, Eve. Wyoming's a dangerous place. You'll need a man with a gun along to protect you."

"My father taught me how to handle a rifle—and a team of horses. Just give me a weapon. I'll be fine. And so will the children."

His frown deepened. "Actually I have business in town today. I was planning to ride, but I can take you and the children in the buggy. We'll go after lunch."

Eve sighed in acquiescence. For now she would let him have his way. But she was not Margaret. She was not about to let this man control her life.

* * *

Clint had spent much of the morning looking for Anders Yost, the Dutch immigrant farmer who'd lost his calves to rancher Seth McCutcheon. Yost's wife, Berta, a tired looking woman with a swollen belly and two small children hanging on to her apron, told him that Yost had gone into town to speak to the sheriff. The expression on her weary face revealed that she knew her husband was wasting his time.

Clint agreed. But since he'd planned on heading into town anyway, and since he needed to dissuade Yost from going after the stolen calves, he swung his horse toward Lodgepole and nudged the leggy buckskin to a gallop.

Leaving the horse at the livery stable, he walked the two blocks to the sheriff's office. Yost wasn't there, but Sheriff Harv Womack, gruff and paunchy, admitted he had been earlier.

"I advised him that losing a few calves was better than getting strung up from a tree." Womack professed a neutral position between cattlemen and sodbusters, and generally avoided any involvement in their quarrels. But Clint suspected where his real loyalties lay, and had never quite trusted the man.

"I meant to tell him the same thing," Clint said. "Do you think he listened?"

The sheriff shook his balding head. "I'm hoping he thought it over. But he left here swearing he'd get those calves back with or without my help. Maybe he'll listen to you."

"If I can find him before he does something stupid." Clint turned toward the door, then remembered the other reason he'd stopped by. "Any luck tracking down those stage robbers?"

"Nope. Couple of fool kids, from what the driver told me. Apart from winging the guard and running the stage off the road, they didn't do much harm—but you were there, weren't you?"

"I was. Like the driver said, a couple of fool kids up to no good. They were more nervous than the passengers. I can't imagine they'll try it again."

"Well, I've got better things to do than chase down those young galoots and slap their hands," the sheriff said. "But if you happen to see them in town and recognize them, let me know."

"I'll do that." Clint turned toward the door again, but the sheriff wasn't finished.

"Hear tell the countess was on that stage. The driver said she was a looker."

"She was pretty enough," Clint hedged. "But not too friendly with us common folk. She didn't say much."

"Don't suppose she'd have anything new to tell me about the robbery."

"Not unless you just want to get her in here for a look. Sorry, but I need to find Yost." Clint walked out before Womack could ask him anything else. He was just stepping onto the boardwalk when a black buggy passed him, going up the street. Roderick Hanford held the reins, his expression as smug as a self-satisfied cat's. Seated beside him, looking fresh as a lily in a blue dress and chic little straw bonnet, was the countess.

Eve.

Hanford pulled up long enough to let an elderly man with a cane hobble across the street in front of the horses. By chance, the countess glanced to her right and caught sight of Clint. For an instant their gazes locked. Her sky-colored eyes widened, holding his. Ignoring the electric jolt that ripped through his body, Clint raised his hand to the brim of his Stetson, tipped his hat and turned away. But as the buggy moved on up the street, with Hanford's children in the rear, Clint's gaze lingered on her rigid back and elegant head.

Had she told Hanford about last night's encounter? Clint hadn't been able to read anything in the look she gave him, but the only safe assumption was that she had. If the countess wasn't with him in his battle with the big ranchers—and she'd made that much clear last night—then she was against him. One of the enemy.

But right now he had other problems on his mind—like finding Anders Yost and checking out the alleged money shipment from the Cattlemen's Association. Etta Simpkins at the bakery was always good for a bit of town gossip. Maybe she had something to pass on.

The buggy had pulled up in front of the hotel. Hanford climbed out, helped the countess to the boardwalk and boosted his children out of the back. Walking away, they looked like any happy, prosperous family—a snappily attired man, a stunning woman and two pretty youngsters dressed for an outing.

If Corrie and our baby had lived... But this was no time for thoughts of what might have been. Tearing his gaze away, Clint turned and headed for the saloon. He had to find Yost before the man made a fatal mistake.

Chapter Four

"You said you had business in town," Eve reminded Roderick. Not that she cared a fig about his business, but she wanted to be free of his overpowering presence so she could enjoy the children.

"Yes, so I did." Roderick glanced at his gold pocket watch. "I'm meeting with some of the other ranchers in the hotel, at two o'clock. Looks like it's about time. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not in the least. We'll stroll around and pick up the odds and ends for Alice," Eve said. "How long do you expect to be?"

"Not more than an hour. If you and the children get tired you can wait on the bench in the hotel lobby."

"Fine, take your time." Eve made a quick dash to retrieve the shopping basket from the buggy. At Manderfield, the servants had always done the shopping. This would be a brand-new experience. She was looking forward to it with mixed emotions.

"Have you got any money?" Roderick paused outside the hotel entrance and fished for his wallet. "We have an account at the general store, but for other shops, like the bakery, you'll need cash."

"Oh. Sorry, I'd quite forgotten." Color flooded Eve's face as she realized how close she'd come to making a fool of herself. She disliked the idea of accepting money from Roderick, but if she wanted to buy things she had little choice. Besides, most of what she'd be purchasing would be for the children. It was only proper that their father provide for them. With a mutter of thanks, she took the bills from his hand.

"You're very pretty when you blush, Eve," he said.

She turned away, pretending she hadn't heard. Tonight she would ask him to set up a household account so she wouldn't have to come begging to him every time she needed something. But maybe having her beg was what Roderick wanted.

The children were waiting, their little faces still pale and sad-looking. They walked on either side of her, Rose clasping her hand and Thomas carrying the empty basket.

Alice had given Eve a list of a half dozen small items she needed—salt, pepper, baking soda, cinnamon, sewing thread and a jar of the miniature pickles Roderick liked. There was nothing that couldn't be easily carried. "Just give the list and the basket to the clerk at the general store," Alice had instructed. "He'll fill the order for you."

That was easy enough to do. But as Eve waited with the children, her gaze roaming the well-stocked shelves, racks and barrels, she became conscious of eyes watching her—the women in faded calicos eyeing her fine clothes and stylish bonnet, the men casting her sidelong glances that skimmed over her figure. At least she'd decided not to wear her ruby ring. That would have drawn even more attention.

The store seemed inordinately busy—but after a few minutes she noticed that few of the customers were buying. It appeared that most of them had wandered in to look at *her*.

Eve fought the urge to flee out the door, where more curious looks would surely be awaiting her. How long would it take before she stopped feeling like a circus freak in this town?

Painfully self-conscious, she kept her gaze forward and her attention on the children, who were eyeing the glass candy jars on the counter. She didn't feel the tall, intensely masculine presence behind her until she heard his voice.

"Nice to see you again, Countess."

For an instant she froze. After what she'd told Clint Lonigan last night, the first response that came to mind was, *How dare you?* But people were watching. The last thing she wanted was to make a scene.

"It's Mrs. Townsend," she said in a chilly voice. "And it's nice to see you, too, Mr. Lonigan. Now if you don't mind, I have some purchases to pay for." She turned toward the clerk. "I'll have two peppermint sticks for the children, please."

"Coming right up, Countess."

She frowned. "As I just told the gentleman, it's Mrs. Townsend. This isn't England and I'm certainly not royalty."

"But still a very proper lady." Clint Lonigan's voice had taken on a teasing tone.

Ignoring him, Eve signed for her purchases, gave each of the children a peppermint stick and reached for her basket. "I'll be taking my leave of you now, Mr. Lonigan. Good day."

"I'll walk you to the street." He picked up the basket, giving her no choice except to stay with him. The children, sucking on their candy, paid little heed to their conversation.

"What in heaven's name do you think you're doing?" she hissed as they stepped onto the boardwalk.

"I'm taking the only chance I may get to ask you if you've changed your mind."

"I told you, I have no intention of becoming involved in your little war." She moved away from the store entrance and started down the boardwalk toward the bakery.

"Little war, is it?" His voice had taken on an edge. "You came into town with Hanford. Where is he now?"

"In the hotel. He said he had a meeting with some other ranchers."

"Did he tell you what the meeting was about?"

"I didn't ask. Just business, I suppose."

"Their so-called business is burning property and murdering every farmer and small rancher that won't leave the county."

His words triggered a clench in Eve's stomach. How could anything as awful as what Lonigan was suggesting be true? "I don't believe you," she said.

"Ask your precious brother-in-law on the way home. Not that he'll tell you the truth."

"And what is the truth, as you see it? That my brother-in-law goes skulking about in the night like a thief, personally eliminating anyone who gets in his way?"

"Of course not. Men like him don't get their hands dirty. They pay hired thugs to do their killing. But they're just as guilty as if they'd lit the torches, fired the guns and strung the nooses. If you could do something to stop it and you won't, you're guilty, too."

"No more of this!" Eve kept her voice low, aware of the curious looks from passersby, not to mention Thomas and Rose just a few steps away. "I told you, I'm here for my sister's children. My only concern is their welfare. They've had enough distress in their lives without my plotting against their father under his very roof. So go away and leave us alone!"

Clint Lonigan's mouth hardened into a grim line. After handing her the basket, he took a step away and touched the brim of his hat. "I understand. Have a pleasant day, *Countess*." The title sizzled of his tongue, rife with unmistakable contempt. She watched him cross the street to the saloon and go inside without looking back at her. Shrugging off the unsettling encounter, she herded the children on down the street to the bakery.

Etta Simpkins greeted her with a warm smile. "What a pleasure to see you, Countess! And with those two sweet lambs! What can I do for you?"

"As I said, just Mrs. Townsend will do." How would she ever fit in here if people insisted on using that pompous-sounding title? "You have a lovely shop. It's the only place on the street that looks inviting."

"Call it a woman's touch." Mrs. Simpkins laughed. "I have some lovely cinnamon buns just out of the oven. And those oatmeal raisin cookies behind the glass were just made last night."

"I'll take a half dozen of each," Eve said. "Maybe I can persuade Mr. Hanford to stop for a little picnic on the way home. The children would enjoy that."

"What a dandy idea. I've got some cheese in the cool room out back. Would you like me to make you some sandwiches to take along?"

"Thank you. Just a few. The children can share." Eve had initially abandoned the picnic idea when Roderick had insisted on driving them to town. But maybe she could persuade him to take the time. He was the children's father, after all, and he seemed to have so little interaction with them.

Mrs. Simpkins bustled out the back, returned with a wedge of cheddar and began cutting off thin slices. Rose and Thomas had finished their candy and were looking at some iced sugar cookies. Eve curbed the impulse to buy them. It wouldn't do to spoil the children with too many sweets.

"So how are you getting on with Mr. Hanford?" Mrs. Simpson reached for a loaf of bread and began cutting it for sandwiches.

"Fine so far." The question struck Eve as too familiar, but she supposed it was the way of people in this frontier town. Gossip was, if nothing else, a way to combat loneliness.

"Treating you like a gentleman, is he?"

"Of course." Scrambling for a way to change the subject, Eve remembered her other reason for coming here. "Perhaps you can help me out with a suggestion. I'm looking for a strong young girl to help with the heavy work in the house. Alice is good in the kitchen, but with her rheumatism..."

"Oh, I know what you mean, dearie. The poor old soul can barely get around as it is. I do have a girl in mind. The family she worked for moved away, so she's looking for employment. Very willing and reliable. Her name is Beth Ann."

Dearie?

Eve drew in a startled breath. She disapproved of the formality of everyone calling her by her title, yet this seemed to go too far in the other direction. But this wasn't England, she reminded herself. If she wanted to belong, she would have to get used to Americans and their easygoing manners.

"I'm not sure what kind of salary I should offer her," she said. "Back in England, servants were tied to the family for generations."

"Room, board and three dollars a week should be plenty. If she's interested, can I just send her out to the ranch?"

"Certainly. On approval, of course—mine and Mr. Hanford's. Since she'll be around the children her language and behavior must be suitable."

"She'll do you fine." While Eve counted out change, Mrs. Simpkins put the sandwiches, buns and cookies in a paper bag with a napkin. "Have a lovely picnic, dearie!" She waved them out the door.

Dearie. Eve bit back her instinctive frown and forced herself to smile and wave as she led her charges to the boardwalk.

By the time they'd walked up the other side of the street, peering in a few shop windows, the children were getting tired. They'd been far too quiet on this outing, Eve thought. If only she could lift their sadness and get them to laugh and play. But that, it seemed, would take some time.

Rose tugged at Eve's skirt. "My shoes hurt, Aunt Eve," she whined. "I want to go home now."

Thomas kicked a clod of mud off the boardwalk into the street. "Where's Papa? Why is he taking so long?"

Eve sighed. "Let's go into the hotel and find out. He said we could wait for him in there."

The Lodgepole Hotel was nothing like the fine places Eve had visited in England. The lobby was the size of a small parlor, with a wooden bench, two straight-backed chairs and a potbellied stove, unlit on this warm summer day. A badly mounted grizzly bear head, the mouth open in a snarl, hung above the desk. At the sight of it, Rose shrank against Eve's skirts.

"I'm not scared of it. It's dead, just like the ones in our house." Thomas pretended to shoot the beast with a make-believe rifle.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" The clerk, scarcely more than a boy, moved with a limp. A battle wound, perhaps, or just an accident?

"Yes, thank you," Eve said. "We're waiting for Mr. Roderick Hanford to drive us home. I don't suppose you know when his meeting will be finished."

"They're in the back room. Don't know when they'll be done, but I can check for you."

"Please don't disturb them. We can wait." Eve settled herself on the hard bench and pulled the children down on either side of her. But it soon became plain that the little ones were too restless to wait patiently. Rose was squirming, and Thomas kept finding excuses to jump up and race around the lobby. Unaccustomed to such behavior, Eve could feel her patience wearing thin. More than an hour had passed. What was taking Roderick so long?

Another ten minutes crawled by. Eve had given each of the children a cookie to quiet them, but it wasn't enough. Rose had begun to whine. Thomas was scuffing his heels against the end of the bench with maddening repetition.

Eve caught the young clerk's attention. "Perhaps you can just look in on that meeting. See if they're about to finish."

"Sure." He disappeared down a back hallway, returning a moment later. "I'm sorry, ma'am, it looks like they're still talking and...uh...playing cards."

With an impatient huff, Eve picked up her basket and reticule and rose from the bench. She could drive a buggy as well as any man, and she was tired of waiting here with these bored, cranky children while Roderick played cards. "When Mr. Hanford gets out of his meeting tell him we were here, but that we could not wait for him any longer. He can jolly well find his own way home."

The buggy was waiting where they'd left it, hitched to the rail in front of the hotel. Boosting the children into the back, Eve freed the reins, climbed onto the seat and clucked to the drowsing horse. As a girl, she'd learned to handle a buggy on outings with her father. Now she could put the lessons to good use.

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