

HOLIDAY
MAIL
ORDER
BRIDES
BOOK 1

*The last thing
he expected
to get for
Christmas
was a mail
order bride!*

THE
Christmas
MAIL ORDER BRIDE

KIT
MORGAN

ANGEL CREEK PRESS

The Christmas Mail Order Bride
(Holiday Mail Order Brides, Book One)
by Kit Morgan

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About the Author

Dedication

To Mary Tackett, whom I affectionately referred to as Gran Ma Mere, and whom I kept knee deep in romance novels for the last two years of her glorious ninety three year old life. Unfortunately, Gran Ma Mere Mary could read them faster than I could supply them! Her daughter Gayle and I had to stay on our toes to keep up with her voracious reading habit! I had the pleasure of creating a small token book for Mary (OK, so it started out as a birthday card Gayle and I were making and turned into a book!) that told the tale of her life as a young wife and mother raising her nine children on an apple

farm in the Lake Chelan area of Washington state. Within its pages one quickly learns the Tacketts are a fun-loving, life-loving bunch. They have been a great source of joy since the day I met them and I am honored by their friendship. So here's to the hard working Tacketts who by simply breathing the air in apple country can tell you what apple is growing in what orchard and then some! Love you guys!

Kit

One

New Orleans, October, 1870

Summer James sat outside Mrs. Ridgley's office and listened in horror to the conversation going in inside. Though the door was closed, she could still make out the bulk of the argument going on as Mrs. Ridgley and someone called

Slade battled it out. Summer had no idea why they would be arguing about her but she'd caught enough of the conversation to come to the conclusion that that's exactly what they were doing.

She'd arrived with a letter of recommendation written by Mrs. Teeters herself, the head of the Winslow Orphanage. Once she reached eighteen Summer had been given a choice. Find respectable work in New Orleans, or find it elsewhere. Elsewhere being in the guise of becoming a mail order bride to some far off settler or farmer thousands of miles away. As she hadn't found any sort of respectable work in New Orleans, she was forced to seek what opportunities lay in the

“elsewhere” category.

Summer jumped as the man called Slade slammed a fist down on Mrs. Ridgley’s desk. Would he harm the woman? What could he possibly be so upset about? Just as Summer made up her mind to enter unannounced and interrupt the heated argument for Mrs. Ridgley’s sake, two huge negro men came storming up the stairs from the first floor of the building and did the interrupting for her.

“Get this vile man out of my sight!” Mrs. Ridgley ordered as they burst into the room.

“You haven’t seen the last of me, Eugina! You can’t keep putting me off forever!” The man called Slade spat.

Summer shrank a little in her chair. He was tall and lean and had an ugly scar running down the left side of his face. He turned to the two men who had planted themselves one on each side of Mrs. Ridgley's desk, and snarled at them. One of the men raised an amused brow as if to say, "*oh really?*" then pointed to the door and took a threatening step forward.

"Jethro, will you please see Mr. Slade out? *All* the way, out." Mrs. Ridgley stated firmly to him.

"With pleasure, ma'am!" said Jethro who now headed toward Mr. Slade.

Summer quickly glanced toward the stairs and fought the urge to bolt in their direction as Mr. Slade stormed out of the

office ahead of the bigger man. He stopped right in front of her and glared, his eyes narrowed to slits. Summer didn't deem herself a beauty. She was underweight, her blue eyes had dark circles under them from lack of sleep, and her long blonde hair needed a good washing. Yet the man looked her over like she was some prized piece of expensive horseflesh before he licked his upper lip and smiled.

He then quickly bent to her and whispered, "I'll see you later, sweet."

But before she could so much as blink an eye he was yanked upright by Jethro whom hauled him to the stairs and then none too gently began to shove him down the stairwell. Summer gulped back

her fear and chanced a peek at Mrs. Ridgley who now stood behind her desk, a firm look of resolve on her face, and motioned the other man to bend down so she could whisper in his ear.

When she was done giving him instructions he smiled and strolled out of the office to Summer. “Mrs. Ridgley will see you now, miss,” he told her in a deep pleasant voice.

“Th ... thank you,” Summer said as she gripped her reticule and stiffly stood. A chill went up her spine at the odd snippets she remembered of Mrs. Ridgley and Mr. Slade’s heated argument. Did she dare ask Mrs. Ridgley what it was all about? From what she could make out from the other

side of the door during their dispute, it almost sounded like Mr. Slade was trying to *buy* her from Mrs. Ridgley!

“Please sit down, dear. Solomon, stay outside the office until Miss James is ready to leave will you? Then I want you to escort her back to Winslow.”

“It would be my pleasure, Mrs. Ridgley.” He smiled, a wonderful warm smile before he turned to Summer.

“When ever you’re ready to leave, Miss James, I’ll be right outside.”

Summer could only stare at him and give a solitary nod in return as he backed out of the office and closed the door behind him.

“Please, sit down,” Mrs. Ridgley told her.

Summer sent her a weak smile and sat in a old chair placed on the other side of an equally old desk. In fact, the desk and chairs weren't the only thing in Mrs. Ridgley's office that looked worn out. The rest of the furniture had also seen better days and she noticed how the wallpaper was peeling in several places about the room. But the office as a whole was clean and orderly, the windows and their curtains also clean, though frayed. Summer briefly wondered if being there was such a good idea and sent up a quick prayer that the state of Mrs. Ridgley's office wasn't an indication of the people who utilized her mail order bride service. But then, wasn't she exactly that? Poor looking,

feeling worn out, frayed, and with no place left to go? At least she was clean! Well, most of her anyway.

“I’ve searched my files and picked which applicant I think most suits you.”

“Applicant? I thought I would get to choose between several?”

Mrs. Ridgley clasped her hands in front of her on the desk. “The truth is Miss James, I’m afraid we only had one gentlemen answer our advertisement so far. Of course you’re welcome to wait until we receive more, but I wouldn’t advise it.”

Disappointment sunk hard and fast into Summer’s belly, so hard and fast her insides knotted up with pain. “But ... but what if ... what if I don’t care for the

gentleman?”

Mrs. Ridgley sighed heavily. “Miss James, the alternative you face is nothing I would wish upon anyone. I strongly advise you to take what we have to offer.”

Summer felt her feet go suddenly cold, as if all her blood had ceased to flow through her veins, her very heart stopped by Mrs. Ridgley’s words.

“Alternative?”

“Miss James,” Mrs. Ridgley began, her voice stern. “Take this offer of marriage from...” she quickly looked at the papers in front of her, “this Mr. Clayton Riley. He sounds like a wonderful man and look, he even sent his picture.” She shoved a small photograph toward her.

It was cracked and faded. Summer picked it up to get a better look. She could hardly tell what the man looked like! She turned it over to see if anything had been written on the back. Good Heavens! Was that *blood*?

“He has already sent train and stage fare...”

“What!”

“It’s something we ask for right up front so we can get a bride out of ... out to their prospective groom right away, anxious as most gentleman are to get married.”

Mrs. Ridgley sent her an imploring look at that point.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Summer began to put it all together. “What did that man

want with me?" she asked softly.

Mrs. Ridgley closed her eyes a brief moment. "Mr. Slade is a very bad man, Miss James. He's been a thorn in my side ever since the war ended and I started this business."

"But, what did he want with me?"

The woman swallowed hard and looked at her. "We were business associates at one time, but I left after the war to do other things, more worthwhile things, such as help young ladies as yourself find a better life than the one offered here."

Summer gripped her reticule and stared Mrs. Ridgley down. "What sort of business were you in?"

"That is a part of my past I do not wish

to discuss. Now, if you would read over the gentleman's application, we can proceed."

A tear came to Summer's eye. She now guessed what this was all about. She understood what would happen if she turned down the one applicant Mrs. Ridgley's mail order bride service managed to get. No wonder there was only the one.

Mrs. Ridgley was catering to the unwanted. The women no other mail order bride service would touch. Who wanted a dirty little orphan like herself with no idea of how to be a lady? Or a starving widow left alone because of the brutality of war? Or perhaps even a soiled dove wanting a better life?

Of course, men like Mr. Slade did. Summer heard rumors of how they preyed upon them night and day, went hunting for them in fact. Like a spider seeking its next meal, when a woman came within range, they grabbed her up and imprisoned her in their web of deceit and lies, indebting the victim to them so deeply there was no escape.

So, Mr. Slade *had* been trying to buy her! Well, perhaps *buy* wasn't the right word. *Claim* might be better.

If Summer didn't take Mr. Riley's offer of marriage, what was she to do? Continue to wander the streets until she found a job? In two days she had to be out of Winslow and had nowhere else to go. People had already complained to

the law about Winslow's over crowded walls. No wonder Mr. Slade told her he'd see her later! He fully intended to snatch her up as soon as she left them!

"Oh no ... " Summer barely managed to breath. "What am I to do?"

Mrs. Ridgley shoved the papers across the desk, took a pen, dipped it in an inkwell, and held it out to her. "Sign this, and I guarantee you'll survive. If you don't, I know what awaits you. He'll make a slave of you Miss James, and there's nowhere you can run from a man like that. And if not him, then another will come."

Tears began to stream down Summer's cheeks as she put forth a shaky hand and took the pen. Her lower lip trembling,

she scrawled her signature across several pages then set the pen down.

Mrs. Ridgley breathed a sigh of relief. “I’ll have Solomon escort you back to Winslow. He’ll return in two days to fetch you to the train station. Do not leave the orphanage until he comes, do you understand?”

Summer nodded, took a handkerchief from her reticule and wiped her tears away. “What ... what sort of man is this Mr. Riley?” she sputtered then blew her nose.

Mrs. Ridgley picked up the papers and leafed through them. He sounds like a kind, gentle, man. He was a captain in the union army and is now a Sheriff in a small town out west.

“Out west? How far out west? Where are you sending me?” Summer asked, her eyes wide.

Mrs. Ridgley leafed through the papers once again before she looked at her across the desk. “I’m sending you to Nowhere.”

“Nowhere?”

“Nowhere, it’s in the Washington territory. You’ll take the train as far as Salt Lake, then you’ll have to ride the stage for the remainder of the journey.”

Summer’s mouth dropped open in shock. How utterly fitting! She could just imagine introducing herself a couple of months from now. *Hello, I’m Summer Riley, and I’m from Nowhere.*

She wanted to bury her face in her

hands but didn't for Mrs. Ridgley's sake. The woman was trying to save her from a horrible fate. Mr. Slade was obviously seeking women for his *business* and had no qualms about stealing one such as herself right off the streets! Mrs. Ridgley was right, it was only a matter of time before he got his hands on her.

Summer straightened in her chair. "Thank you."

Mrs. Ridgley smiled. "If I can help you or any other girl get a chance to make a better life, then I've done my job. No matter if you're an orphan, widow, or any thing else."

Summer managed a smile. "Thank you. There are others coming of age at

Winslow. They'll need a chance too if unable to make it by themselves."

"I already know. Mrs. Teeters has given me a list of names."

"She has?"

Mrs. Ridgley smiled. "My dear sweet girl, your name was at the top of the list."

Summer smiled and nodded. "Mrs. Teeters. I'll miss her terribly. She knows where I'm going then?"

"Yes, dear. She knows. And I've also told her that the man who awaits you is a kind man, a gentle man, just as his letter here states."

Summer stood and prepared to leave. "It's a relief to know." She took a deep breath and turned to the door. She stared

at it a brief moment before she squared her shoulders and closed her eyes in resignation. In a matter of weeks she would start a new life as Mrs. Clayton Riley from Nowhere. She just hoped this Mr. Riley was as gentle and kind as Mrs. Ridgley said.

***Nowhere, in the Washington
Territory, November 1870***

Clayton Riley quickly pulled back his fist, “You did *what?*”

His brother Spencer reeled from the blow Clayton delivered, landed on the desk behind him, and rolled off it onto the floor. He quickly scrambled to his

feet and held up both hands in front of him. “I thought it would do you good!” He argued.

“How could you do such a thing?” Clayton yelled. “Are you plumb out of your mind? Get your sorry hide over here so I can hit you again!”

Spencer was smart enough to keep his distance at this point, especially when he unexpectedly laughed which wasn’t going to help the situation. But, the situation in question *was* funny!

“I can’t believe you would do this to me! Of all the low down, idiotic ...” Clayton lamented as he began to chase his younger brother around the only desk in the Sheriff’s office.

Their one prisoner watched from his

cell and chuckled as the two brothers, one on either side of the desk, bobbed and weaved to dodge each other's fists.

"This is getting you no where Clayton, you might as well face the music and get hitched!"

Clayton's eyes narrowed to two dark, green slits. He loved his brother, really he did, but right now, he wanted to kill him. "Get hitched? Get *hitched*? "I'm not the one that sent away for a mail order bride! *You* did!"

"With your best interest in mind and because I love you! What else am I supposed to do? Ma thinks you ought to be the one to get married first, not me! And you wouldn't want to break our mother's lil ol heart now would ya?

Besides, I thought it would make the perfect Christmas present!”

“Christmas present? It’s not even Thanksgiving yet! Besides, when you asked me what I wanted for Christmas, I told you I needed a new pair of boots!”

“But isn’t a bride so much better?”

Clayton’s eyes narrowed further as he slowly reached across the desk. “I’m going to kill you now,” he said evenly.

“But Clayton! You can’t!” Spencer all but chortled as he jumped out of range.

“And why not?” Clayton said through clenched teeth.

“Because the stage is pulling up at this very moment and she’s on it!”

Clayton’s mouth dropped open in shock. Their prisoner took one look at

him and burst into riotous laughter. Clayton, his mouth still hanging open, slowly turned and glared at him. The drunken cowboy laughed even louder.

With lightening speed Clayton drew his gun and pointed it at the cell.

The cowboy immediately pressed his lips together and raised both hands in the air. It was all he could do to stop the several snorts of amusement that still managed to escape.

Clayton sneered, turned, and aimed his gun at Spencer instead as the sound of the stage reached his ears.

Spencer casually looked at the door behind him, then to the gun in Clayton's hand. "I bet she's pretty."

"I don't care what she looks like! Get

out there and fix this!”

“She’s expecting to meet and marry one Clayton Riley, not his poor, nothing of a little brother Spencer! You can’t disappoint her!”

“Watch me!”

“But Clayton! Think of ma! She’ll be so upset!”

“How can she be upset? Don’t tell me she knows about this too?”

Spencer flashed a brilliant smile.

Clayton groaned and hit his forehead with the butt of his gun.

The cowboy in the cell, unable to hold it together any longer, fell into complete and utter hysterics once again.

Clayton glared at him but it didn’t do a lick of good, the man was now doubled

over and gulped air as tears formed in his eyes. Clayton growled low in his throat and again faced his brother. “Fix this Spencer or I’m sending you to Uncle Harlan’s in Clear Creek! You can be *his deputy* and I’ll tell ma she’s just going to have to get along without her baby boy.”

Spencer’s amused face suddenly sobered. “Clear Creek? Oh no! I’m not dealing with that bunch of loons! They’re plumb loco in that town! I don’t know how Uncle Harlan puts up with it. No, I’m afraid you’ll just have to get hitched and then everyone will be happy!”

Clayton began to suck air through his nose. His face red, he took a deep

breath and yelled, "Get out there now!"

Spencer's brow puckered. "So pushy. All right, I'll take care of it. Just don't be so angry. I really did have your best interest in mind. You're the one that's been sulking around town since last winter like a lonely coyote."

"I have *not* been sulking!"

"You've been beyond cranky too..."

"Spencer!"

"They say lonely people die young..."

"*Spencer...*" Clayton warned.

Spencer inched his way to the door, put his hand on the knob and began to open it. "All right, but if she's pretty I bet you have a hard time sending her back!"

"Highly unlike ..."

Clayton never finished his sentence.

His mouth dropped open like a falling brick, his eyes grew round as saucers, and for the first time in his miserable lawman's life, he dropped his gun.

It fired.

The young woman in the doorway screamed in pain and shot to the floor like a stone.

“Good God!” Clayton heard himself cry. He scrambled around the desk and ran to the woman as she writhed in pain on the threshold and clutched her foot.

“Ma’am! Ma’am are you all right?”

“Of course she’s not all right!”

Spencer snapped. “You just *shot* her!”

“Spencer!” Clayton barked.

“Well I was just pointing out the obvious!”

“Spencer, for God’s sake get out of here and fetch Doc!”

“All right, all right!” He said then quickly bent to the pretty little thing in the doorway. “I’m Spencer Riley, I’m going to be your new brother in law!” he blurted before he jumped up, hurried past her, and ran down the street.

A crowd began to gather on the boardwalk outside. Clayton ignored them as he quickly scooped the woman into his arms, slammed the door shut with his foot, and carried her to the desk where he very gently set her down. “I’m so sorry this happened. Here, let me take a look at it.”

Tears streamed down her face as she gritted her teeth against the pain. “I ... I

...” she stammered just before her eyes rolled back in her head and she completely toppled over.

Clayton grabbed her before she fell off the desk and held her to him.

“She done fainted,” the cowboy stated matter of fact from the cell.

“I can see that! Now shut up while I take care of her!”

“She sure is pretty!”

“Enough!”

But when Clayton looked down at the woman cradled in his arms, he could see it was true. She *was* pretty, beautiful in fact. So much so she took his breath away. Of course, knowing he’d just accidentally shot her did too, and as he stared at her unconscious form he heard

his brother's words echo in his mind. *If she's pretty I bet you have a hard time sending her back.*

A brutal blast of loneliness came from out of nowhere. The empty state of his heart screamed for recognition as he held the woman and waited for her to regain consciousness. Or for doc to get there, which ever came first, just so long as one or the other happened soon. Like, that very instant!

He looked furtively to the door. "C'mon, doc. Don't leave me here like this." For if he held her any longer, he was going to start listening to the loud screaming of his heart. Something he didn't want to hear ever again.

Two

Summer forced her eyes to open. She'd lost consciousness of that she was sure and now fought to keep her wits about her. How could this happen? What would Mr. Riley think of her now? Injured no sooner than she got off the stage! But who shot her? The man who carried her into the Sheriff's office? Was *he* Clayton Riley?

Oh good Lord!

If he was then they certainly hadn't got off on the right foot! *Oh dear ...*

Make that the left, as that's the foot he shot.

He had her crushed against his broad chest and she managed to look up at him just as someone yelled out, “Got it!”

She tried to turn her head but he held her so firmly against him she couldn’t move. She weakly flayed an arm about to get his attention.

“Jumpin’ Jonnys Clayton! She’s lucky it’s just a flesh wound!” A voice cried.

The man who’d plastered her against his chest pushed himself away a few inches, just enough for her to look up at him. A small whimper slipped out at what she saw.

His hair was thick and dark, his jaw square and strong. He gazed at her with two dark green eyes that could have been emeralds. She whimpered again,

but not at the man's striking looks, but at the horrible pain in her left foot. "It's okay, ma'am. Doc here just got the bullet out and is gonna fix you up. Hang on now, can ya do that for me?"

Tears began to fill her eyes as excruciating pain assailed her. Did she have a choice? Apparently she did, for she fainted dead away once again.

* * *

"Doc!" Clayton cried. "Isn't there something ya can do for the pain, she's fainted again!"

"Settle down now, son. There's nothing outside of a good faint to help her while I clean this up. I'd be more concerned about how she's gonna take to

her future husband up and shootin' his intended the moment he set eyes on her!"

Clayton sent a dagger of a glare to Spencer who stood watching over Doc Brown's shoulder as he now cleaned the wound in the woman's foot. Just as he said, the bullet had caused a flesh wound and thankfully doc had been able to cut her boot off and remove the bullet as soon as he got there.

"Will it heal properly?" Clayton asked concerned as he held the woman tightly to him once again. She was in a sitting position on the desk, her upper body slightly turned and held against his belly and chest. Clayton held her at the one end while doc sat at the desk and worked at the other.

“I’ve done plenty of these during the war. This isn’t the worst I’ve seen, but any type of wound can turn bad. I’ll fix it up with a carbonic acid dressing and that should do the trick. She’ll be off it for a time. Hope you weren’t planning on marrying her right away cause I’m afraid your wedding will have to be postponed for a while. Unless of course she don’t mind getting married while she’s convalescing in one of my patient rooms back at the house.”

Clayton shook his head. “Don’t worry about any of sort of marrying right now. Will she be okay?”

“I just done told ya she would! Now settle down, son! This should heal fine. In fact, you two outta be able to get

hitched come Christmas.”

Clayton ran a hand over his weary face. Christmas? That meant the woman would be in Nowhere for weeks! So much for sending her back to where ever it was she came from! He again glared at his brother who stood innocently behind Doc Brown with an all too silly grin on his face. How many other folks in town knew of his so called *intended's* arrival in town that day? Sheriff Clayton Riley was about to find out.

* * *

Summer opened her eyes slowly, awakened by the throbbing pain in her foot. She grimaced and squinted against

the sunlight that streamed in through a nearby window.

“Ma’am?” a deep voice said, heavily laced with concern.

She turned her head toward the sound. Sitting in a chair in front of the window sat the dark haired man with the incredible green eyes. He was silhouetted against the winter sun, but not so much so that she couldn’t make out his features. She could tell he was tall even sitting and his shoulders were broad, his arms strong as his biceps strained against the shirt he wore. He looked like some giant guardian angel only without the wings, and if she wasn’t in so much pain, she might consider a good swoon. In fact she’d also welcome

one if it meant she didn't have to put up with the pain in her foot any longer. So far swooning was the only thing that worked.

“Ah, come around have you?” An elderly looking man asked. He stood on the other side of the bed and held a glass of something in his hand. “Now be a good girl and drink this down. It'll help you sleep.”

“Where am I?” she managed through gritted teeth.

“Nowhere,” the green eyed man said. Something between a whimper and a chuckle escaped her and she looked to him. “That explains a lot. Who names a town Nowhere?”

“Well it's a long story. You see, back

in forty-five ..." the elderly gentleman began.

"Doc, not now," the other man said.

She looked at the green-eyed man just as he turned to her. He was magnificent! Never had she seen anyone so handsome. In fact, she briefly wondered if he really *was* some sort of guardian angel and her intended was instead the elderly man who now tried to sit her up. Once he got her there, he motioned for her to drink whatever was in the glass.

She barely managed it, and with a cough and a sputter, turned once again to the guardian angel sitting on the other side of the bed. "I came here to get married," she told him.

His expression changed from concern to ... was that *guilt*? “I know.”

“Where is Mr. Riley? I have to speak with Mr. Riley ...”

“Now you just rest and someone will be in later with your supper,” the elderly man said.

“But ...”

Her guardian angel stood. “Quiet now, do as Doc says and get your rest ma’am. I’ll see to Mr. Riley.” His eyes narrowed slightly at the name and she came to the conclusion she had yet to meet the infamous Sheriff Riley her intended. But where was he? Why hadn’t he met the stage when it pulled up one door down from the Sheriff’s office? After debarking she took a moment to

look for a man with a badge. As there was no sight of him she'd taken up her satchel and headed toward his office. After all, a Sheriff was a busy man and perhaps he'd been detained. Just as she was about to open the door, a man from the inside swung it wide and BANG!

She remembered holding her eyes tightly shut against the pain as large hands grabbed her, lifted her up into strong arms and carried her inside, and then ...

“Oh ... you ... are you...”

The big man's back was to her as he headed for the door. He looked bigger and broader now that he stood. He turned his head over his shoulder toward her, but didn't look at her. “Sleep now.

We'll sort this out later when you're feeling better."

He left, his spurs jangling across the wood floor and down the hall. The elderly gentleman tucked the blankets around her, put a hand to her forehead and looked down at her with a smile.

"The wife will be home soon. Took a basket out to the Colson farm. Mrs. Colson hasn't been feelin' too good lately and she's expectin' a baby. As soon as she gets back she'll start supper. You rest until then, ya hear?"

"But Mr. Riley ..."

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about Mr. Riley. He'll be around." He winked at her then quietly left the room, closing the door behind

him.

Summer tried to relax and let herself sink more deeply into the pillows. Her body had a floating sensation and she closed her eyes to let it take her where it would. He must have given her some laudanum and she was grateful. If she were to fall asleep her foot wouldn't pain her so.

But what did pain her was the elusive Sheriff Riley. Where was he? Why hadn't he come for her? What was she to do if he wasn't there? But he had to be. The elderly gentleman said he was.

Summer's mind and heart gripped the thought and hung on. He had to be there, he just had to! He was her only hope.

“What are you gonna tell that little gal when she wakes up, Clayton? Don’t tell me you’re gonna load her up on a stage and send her packing?”

Milly Brown’s eyes were like fire. She glared at him like she used to when he was ten years old. She could be mighty scary when she wanted to be and the middle-aged matron gave him a look sure to scare the pants off of any misbehaved boy. Clayton wasn’t ten, but sure as he could spit the woman *knew* he was misbehaving!

“Spencer answered the ad, not me!” Clayton said in his defense. “What am I supposed to do? Let *him* marry her!”

“Keep your voice down, you sidewinder! She’ll hear you!”

“I hope she does!”

“No you don’t! Now think about what you’re doing! I’ve got a shot up woman in there, no thanks to you, who thinks she’s here to marry one Clayton Riley! What are you gonna tell her?”

Clayton tried to swallow but his mouth had gone dry. He couldn’t get the girl’s pain-filled face out of his mind. It was his fault she suffered so, his fault he was about to send her whole world crashing down, his fault the entire town was now up in arms and gave him the ‘eye’ when he’d left Doc Brown’s place after getting the woman settled and headed back to the Sheriff’s office. He absently

rubbed his jaw a few times as he tried to figure a way out of the mess Spencer had gotten him into. Did the whole stinking town know? From the looks he got earlier, he was sure they did. But then how on God's green earth did *he* not know until the last minute?

Clayton was just going to have to face it. He would hang for the murder of his own brother ...

“Are you gonna answer me or you just gonna sit there wool gathering?” Milly pressed.

Clayton let go a long sigh as he belatedly remembered something. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out his badge.

“Oh, you didn't!” Milly scolded.

“Don’t tell me you took that star off while you were in with that pretty little thing!”

Guilt’s fist struck hard and fast as he pinned the badge on. “Milly... I...”

“Don’t you Milly me! You’re gonna take this soup in there and face her like a man! In fact, you’re gonna feed it to her!”

Clayton audibly gulped. He didn’t know how the woman managed it, but he suddenly felt like his ten-year-old-self that was about to be given a good whipping. Like the time Milly caught him stealing pears from Doc’s prized tree behind the house. Only the woman down the hall wasn’t a pear he stole, and her life couldn’t be so easily discarded

like one. No, Milly was right, he had to talk with this Miss James and get things straightened out. The sooner the better.

“Give me the tray,” he said like a man about to have his last meal.

“Clayton Riley, look at you! What are you thinking? She’s beautiful son, and she traveled all this way to marry you! If I were a man I wouldn’t be thinking about packing her up and sending her on her way! I’d be thanking my brother for the blessing he done give me!”

Clayton rubbed a hand over his tired face a few times before he again held out his hands. “Give me the tray Milly, and let me get this over with.”

“Fine!” She huffed and picked up the dinner tray she’d prepared for their

patient. “But I think you’d be the biggest fool in the world if you sent her back! Just because you got your heart broken once, don’t mean it’s gonna happen again!”

Clayton froze and fought the scathing retort he had at the ready. It was none of Milly’s business! But ... he reminded himself, *it was*. Sarah had been Doc and Milly’s daughter after all, and therefore she was their loss too. When Sarah died they all mourned. His pain and heartbreak wasn’t any different than theirs had been. They’d lost a child while he lost a wife. It was the reason he’d quite apple farming and became the Sheriff. Sarah had fallen out of one of the trees at harvest time and broke her

neck. Clayton could have cared less if he ever saw another apple again. Unfortunately, the town was surrounded by them, acres and acres in fact. The entire area was some of the best apple producing country around and his family had been in the apple farming business ever since they settled there twenty years ago.

Clayton remembered how he'd dragged Spencer into upholding the law with him and made him his deputy. They then leased out part of the land to old man Johnson to keep the farm going. Their mother hadn't been too happy about it but they figured they could take better care of her by leasing half the farm out. Besides, it was easier for their mother to

manage this way and being as how their pa died not a year before Sarah did it gave her something to do. Leona Riley loved her farm, loved her apples, and the land they owned. She wasn't about to give it up.

Not like her eldest son had. Now here he was, lonely, bitter, and the undisputed center of everyone's attention concerning the woman down the hall.

Clayton took the tray from Milly, turned on his boot heel, and headed for her room. He balanced the tray with one hand and knocked on the door. It swung open a few inches and he peeked inside. The sun was setting and filled the room with a soft orange glow. It was beautiful to behold and he almost dreaded it when

he turned and looked at the woman lying on the bed.

He stifled a gasp as the sight that greeted him sent his toes to tingling.

She was beautiful.

No, incredible!

Why had he not seen her like this before? Probably because he was too busy feeling guilty for accidentally shooting her! But he didn't feel so guilty now. The mere sight of her slumbering form chased the unwanted emotion away only to replace it with one even more deadly.

Compassion.

He couldn't help himself. Like an injured little lamb she lay in perfect stillness upon the bed, the orange glow

of the setting sun causing her complexion to look down right peachy. Her dark lashes were long and in stark contrast to the creamy smoothness of her skin. Her blonde hair had come loose from its pins and long tendrils had fanned out on either side of her head upon the pillows.

Clayton closed his eyes against the unwanted emotions that welled up from deep within. He tried to steel himself against them and failed miserably. Loneliness wrapped its ugly fingers around his heart and began to squeeze ...

He drew in a deep breath and set the tray down upon a nearby table. The practical side of him said he should wake her and see to it she got something to eat before the soup got cold. The other

side, (what side *that* was he had no idea) said he should stand there and drink her in, every last beautiful inch. From the top of her head to the tip of her ...

Practicality was quick to interrupt and remind him he'd shot her.

Clayton sighed, reached over, and gave the pretty little thing's shoulder a gentle shake.

Three

Summer's eyes opened slowly. She heard someone moan and hazily realized the sound had come from her. Another sound caught her attention and she turned her head to find a man, a *very large* man, standing over the bed bathed in a beautiful golden light. Her angel ...

She smiled at him. Had she died then? No, no she couldn't have. For one, she smelled chicken soup, and for another noticed the dull throbbing pain in her foot. This man had to be the one she woke up to earlier, the man who came to her rescue at the Sheriff's office, and therefore, not an angel. "Hello," she said

softly and decided she'd think of him as her guardian angel anyway.

He took a nearby chair and carefully sat. He then looked at her and swallowed hard, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Was something else wrong with her and they hadn't told her about it? She looked worriedly up at the ceiling before letting her gaze once again drift in his direction.

"Are you all right?" he asked concerned. "Are you in much pain?"

She looked up at him. "It hurts, but not like before," she said then tried to swallow. Her throat was incredibly dry and she licked at dry lips.

He quickly glanced about. "Let me help you," he said as he got up from the chair

and went to a water pitcher and glass sitting atop a dresser. He poured her a drink and came back to the bed. He then gently helped her to sit up and held the glass to her lips. She took a few small sips then drank greedily. She hadn't realized how thirsty she was. But her thirst wasn't only for water, but for something else entirely.

What Summer James really thirsted for was freedom. Freedom from her life at the orphanage, freedom from back breaking work to help Mrs. Teeters keep the impoverished establishment open. And though she loved the woman and her fellow orphans, her time there by law had come to an end and she was forced to leave. She'd tried to find a job before

the appointed time, but every place she looked resulted in a door being slammed in her face. It was as if the stars had aligned against her and she began to wonder on the long train ride to Utah if the law wasn't in cahoots with the likes of Mr. Slade, ensuring the man would have plenty of women to fill the many beds of his patrons. The thought turned her stomach and she grimaced.

“Are you okay? I can get the doctor if you want.” The big man said concerned.

“I'll live,” she said and turned to look at him. His eyes were darker, almost stormy in their depths as they suddenly caught hers in a heated gaze. She stopped breathing at the look of concern on his face and let go a tiny gasp.

With his eyes still glued to hers, he scooted off the bed and into the chair. “I have your dinner,” he pushed out suddenly. “You’d best eat something.”

She slowly nodded. She *was* hungry and remembered she’d not eaten anything since the night before. She’d been so nervous she couldn’t think about food when it came time for breakfast that morning at the stage’s stop-over station. She pushed the thought aside as she tried to sit up only to moan in pain, the movement causing her foot to throb terribly.

“Whoa there, let me get a hold of ya now,” he said and lifted her so she sat up straight. She looked at him then, the heat of his hands burning through her

blouse to the skin beneath. His hands were large, his fingers spread against her ribcage. They stared at one another a moment before he slowly pulled away from her and finally released her altogether.

Did he feel it too? The bolt of sensation that traveled through her entire body to settle in the pit of her stomach and chase any thoughts of Slade and his evil lot away? She certainly hoped so!

He turned to the tray and picked up a bowl of soup. He started to hand it to her then stopped, his hand stilled by some hidden thought. She could tell his mind was at work, could see it in his eyes. He instead slowly reached for the spoon on the tray, picked it up, and set it

in the bowl.

He smiled then as his eyes took on a look she'd never seen before. A look that sent her insides to melting as he scooped up a spoonful of soup and very carefully offered it to her.

She swallowed hard as her breathing stopped. Good Heavens! He was going to feed her! Surely she could manage a bowl of soup on her own! Or could she? The slightest movement sent her foot to throbbing.

“Take a bite, I know you’ll like it. Milly’s a great cook,” he told her, his voice soft and low.

Her mouth began to water, but was it from the soup he offered or the look on his face? He’d taken on a confident air,

one that told her he held all the control. Well, in this case he *did* hold the spoon, so she supposed that gave him some control...

“C’mon, try it,” he coaxed, his voice dropped another notch.

Its deep rolling sound sent a delicious tingle up her spine. She leaned forward a few inches and opened her mouth. He then ever so carefully fed her the first taste of the most wonderful chicken soup she’d ever had.

She licked her lips, breathed, and opened her mouth again.

He stiffened slightly and she noticed how the muscles in his arms tightened. He scooped up another spoonful, and repeated the process. It was the best

bowl of soup Summer could remember.
In more ways than one!

* * *

Good Lord! Who ever thought chicken soup could undo a man so effortlessly! Every time he gave her a spoonful his body tightened with every unsatisfied fiber of his being. But it wasn't lust. No, this went deeper than that. *Much* deeper. This was a soul searing need to be with a woman, to meld into one with her, to be a part of something bigger and better than himself. He'd forgotten what it felt like to *want* to love someone, to make a life together, to battle all of life's storms as partners. In a flash he saw

himself married to the woman sitting on the bed before him, so helpless and vulnerable. The thought she'd traveled all this way to do just that was like a fist to his gut. He didn't deserve her. He'd been all too ready to load her up like some parcel and send her back to where ever his conniving brother had found her. Speaking of Spencer, where *was* he? Clayton hadn't seen him since he carried the woman to Doc's house that afternoon.

He turned to her and realized his mouth hung open like some love-sick dote. He snapped it shut and tried to scoop up another spoonful of soup but it was all gone. She looked longingly at the spoon, then at him. Her blue eyes were wide

and he fought against a smile. Did she think he was handsome? Of course, the Riley brothers were probably the best looking things in this part of the territory and they both well knew it. But this was the first woman since Sarah whom he *wanted* to think he was handsome. In fact, he suddenly realized he felt a little nervous at the thought she might not.

He fidgeted in the chair and set down the bowl. He then looked back to her.

“I ... I suppose you’re to thank for taking care of me?” She asked.

Her voice came out a beautiful soft lilt. He began to have visions of the stage pulling out, her weeping from having been forced upon it by his own hand. He unconsciously balled one hand into a

fist. Good Lord! What was he going to do? Punch *himself* for being an idiot?

“I reckon that’s so,” he said as his heart beat a little faster. She was small, smaller than Sarah and more delicately built. He fought the urge to move a stray lock of hair away from her face.

“I have to thank you then. I don’t know what I would have done had you not acted so quickly and fetched the doctor.”

He smiled. Her gratitude was genuine, her eyes full of it. Against his better judgment, he reached out and brushed the stray lock away from her face. It was his undoing.

The moment his finger touched her skin her eyes closed and her head tilted slightly back. Heat filled him and he

thought he might shoot straight up into the air and right through the roof. His finger felt as if it had been seared by the sheer softness of her skin.

Her breathing slowed and she opened her eyes. “Who are you?” she asked on a breathy whisper.

He closed his own eyes as the battle for his heart waged a brutal war for several excruciating seconds. In reality he could say nothing, get up, leave the room and have Spencer take care of the whole business. Make *him* play nursemaid to the girl, see to it *he* took care of all the travel arrangements for her return to ... oh for Pete’s sake! He didn’t even know where she came from!

“Sir? Please ... who *are* you?”

Clayton opened his eyes. The look on her face was one of pure innocence and trust. It was all he could do not to moan as *finally*, one side of his soul won out. He sighed, smiled, and slowly said. "I'm Sheriff Clayton Riley, ma'am, and I'm to be your husband."

* * *

"*You're Clayton Riley?*" It was then her eyes flew to his chest and there it was. A silver star. How did she not notice it earlier? Where had it been? Surely she would have seen it? But she'd been in such pain, and then the doctor had given her the laudanum...

She stared at him in disbelief. *This* was Clayton Riley? Her very own

guardian angel? *He'd* sent for her? But what if now that he saw her, he didn't want her? She understood it could happen. Solomon had explained it to her the day he came to fetch her from Winslow's and escort her to the train station. Some men sent a bride back for whatever reason. If that were to happen she was to immediately let Mrs. Ridgley know so Solomon or Jethro could meet her at the train station. But Mrs. Ridgley was confident Summer would not be coming back to New Orleans.

There'd been no sign of that nasty old Mr. Slade as Solomon escorted her to the station and sent her on her way. She'd rested easier once she was on the train but Solomon warned her

nonetheless to keep a sharp eye out. At least as far as Colorado, then she should be safe.

Solomon's instructions frightened her. Would a man go that far to procure another slave for his establishment? But Jethro and Solomon knew well what a man like Slade would do, for they had been *his* slaves before the war broke out. They'd gained their freedom with the help of Mrs. Ridgley when she too broke away and cut all ties with the likes of Mr. Slade.

But enough of all that! She came here to get married and by Heaven, she was going to see it through, no matter what Mr. Riley thought of her. After all, she had to fulfill her end of the agreement.

But surely with the way he was looking at her, he must be pleased with what he saw. At least a little...

She swallowed hard then caught his gaze. "So Mr. Riley," she began. "When do we get married?"

* * *

Clayton's eyes widened as he froze. Did he hear her right? Did she just ask when they could get married? Oh good God!

Maybe you should lock yourself up for being an imbecile! Of course that's what she's asking! It's what she came out here for isn't it?

He offered her a sheepish grin. Yes, of course it was. And now that he'd told

her who he was, there was no backing out.

Don't these mail order bride contracts have a release clause?

“Mr. Riley? Is something wrong?”

He jumped at the sound of her voice.

“Yes,” he choked out. “I mean no! I mean, considering your injury, I think we should postpone it ... for a time...”

Her eyes misted and her lower lip trembled ever so slightly.

Oh no! Don't cry, PLEASE don't cry! I can't take tears! He smiled through clenched teeth as he stared down at her. “I just thought you might want to be able to stand when we ... *say it, c'mon, say it!* ... Get married.”

She sighed in relief. Did she think he

didn't want to marry her? Clayton rolled his eyes and slapped himself on the forehead. *Idiot! Of course that's what she thinks!*

"Mr. Riley?"

"Oh, ah, forgot to tell ma you're here. I'd best get out to the house and let her know. She'll be very excited to meet you I'm sure."

"Are you?"

Clayton swallowed, looked her in the eye, and took a deep breath. Her eyes misted again and her face paled. *Riley, you CAD! Man up! Listen to those around you! Who has a better head right now, you or someone like Milly? You've been lonely for months, MONTHS! Look at her, LOOK AT*

HER!

He swallowed again. “Lord but you’re beautiful.”

She blushed a bright pink.

The sight made him smile. “I’m sorry, but I haven’t been myself lately...”

Shame hit hard and fast as he stood and turned toward the window. Heaven forbid she if she saw how rotten he was. Didn’t he just make up his mind this marriage would be good for him? Yet here he was, already trying to figure a way out of it.

What are you afraid of Riley? Really, what is it?

“I’m sorry you haven’t been yourself. I know this arrangement isn’t the usual way it’s done,” she said then added,

“Why, we didn’t even get the chance to exchange any letters.”

He suddenly turned to her. “We didn’t?”

She shook her head. “No, at least I hadn’t been given any, the only thing I have is a copy of the marriage contract I signed.”

He tried to remain calm. What did Spencer get him into? He figured his mischievous brother had been writing to the girl for a few months at least. “May I see it?”

“Certainly. It’s in my satchel. If you could bring it here...”

Clayton glanced about the room and spied the satchel sitting on the floor near the dresser. He picked it up and brought

it too her.

She took it from him, opened it and dug through the contents. Clayton noticed it was nearly empty. Did she have a trunk somewhere that needed to be brought out to the farm? “Where are your other belongings?”

She stopped her digging and looked up at him. “This ... this is all I brought.”

His eyes widened slightly as he again took in the satchel in her lap. He could see a dress, a comb, and a small Bible, but that was all. She pulled out the marriage contract and handed it to him. Clayton noticed she didn’t look at him when she did so. She was embarrassed by her lack of possessions.

She doesn't even have a wedding

dress... poor little thing.

He took the contract from her and began to read. So, Miss Summer James was from New Orleans ... but no letters? Nothing? She just signed a contract, hopped on a train and now here she was? How could that be?

“Miss James, did I send a picture?”

She raised her brow at that. “You don’t remember?”

He shrugged. “It was ... awhile ago.” At least he guessed it had been awhile since Spencer sent a picture, if he sent one at all.

“Why yes, you did.” She dug about in her satchel again and pulled out the Bible. She opened it up and took out a small photograph from between the

pages.

Clayton shook himself. *Spencer is going to die!*

It was the photo his mother kept in a double frame atop her dresser in her room. Did she know it was missing? Good grief! Maybe she was the one that gave it to Spencer! “May I see that?”

She handed it to him. He took it and examined it. Yep, it was the one from his mother’s room all right. His own blood stained the back. He’d cut himself taking it out of an old frame to put it into the new one. “It’s a little old,” he began. “Sorry it’s not a very good representation.”

“That’s all right. You didn’t even get a picture of me. I ... I realize how great a

disappointment I could have been ... if ... if you didn't ...”

“Think you were pretty?”

She swallowed as her cheeks turned pink. But was she simply being humble, or was she truly ashamed of how she looked?

Clayton's heart dropped into his stomach at the thought. She was beautiful, the most beautiful woman he had ever seen! Oh what was he thinking? Who wouldn't be pleased with someone so lovely who traveled all this way without a lick of correspondence between them? Not only that, but still be willing to marry a man with nothing but an old photograph and the word of the mail order bride

service as to his character? He sure the Sam blazes wouldn't if *he* had been a bride!

Suddenly his lawman's instincts kicked in and he found himself once again sitting in the chair next to the bed, his body leaning toward her as his mind ran wild with questions. Clayton had to follow his gut on something.

“Miss James, might I be the first to say I think you are one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, so please don't think I'm disappointed in that regard. But I do have to ask, are you running from something?”

Four

Summer froze. No! She couldn't tell him! What if he decided to send her back? What would he do if he found out she'd spent most all her life in an orphanage? That she'd barely gotten out of New Orleans? That had she stayed she'd be good for nothing more than ...

She turned her face away as tears stung the back of her eyes. How could she tell him? Yes, she was running! Running from a life of slavery and servitude to men who would use her up in a matter of years then cast her aside like a piece of garbage. And she wasn't the only one. What of the others? The girls soon to

come of age who also faced the horrors of leaving the safe confines of the orphanage? Would Mrs. Ridgley be able to get them away in time as well?

Large fingers gently touched her chin and pulled her head around to face him. His own face was an expressionless mask, unreadable. But when her first tear finally fell, it was encompassed by a compassion she had never seen in any man's eyes. He let go her chin and gently brushed the tear away. "I guess this answers my question," he said as he then stood. He put the marriage contract into the satchel then placed it back on the floor by the dresser.

He slowly turned to her. "I'll make what arrangements I have to and as soon

as Doc says you're ready, come for you."

Summer could only stare. Her mouth then slowly opened as her entire body went numb. He was going to send her back. *Oh good God! No!*

He looked about then chuckled to himself. "Guess I done left my hat and coat out in the kitchen. I'll let Milly know what's going on. You rest now." He smiled and then left the room.

Summer shook her head. *Oh no! No, no, no, no!* She couldn't go back! She just couldn't! Slade would be on her quicker than flies on sugar! And when he got a hold of her he'd *never* let go! He'd make sure that once he had her entrenched into the life he planned for

her there would be no escape.

Summer stifled a sob as she heard muffled voices from down the hall and then listened to the front door as it opened and closed. She quickly looked to the window, the golden light of sunset nearly gone now, and watched as Clayton Riley strolled down the front walk, through the gate, and out of sight.

“Oh please Lord! I can’t leave! I can’t go back!” Summer’s tears fell in force as she prayed. What would she do? Where could she go? One thing was for certain, until her foot healed, she wasn’t going anywhere. Perhaps that was it! Maybe so long as her foot was injured he couldn’t send her back!

Summer’s shoulders slumped. Who

was she kidding? She couldn't fake her injury to stay. No, that wouldn't do at all. *Think Summer, think!*

She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths then suddenly smiled. Of course! She'd simply make plans to either stay on in Nowhere or go someplace close by where she could find a job and earn the money it cost Mr. Riley to get her out west in the first place! It was, after all, the logical thing to do!

Summer took one more deep breath to calm down before she smiled with relief. Surely Mr. Riley would understand her dilemma and cooperate, wouldn't he? But perhaps Mrs. Ridgley was to reimburse him based upon her

return to New Orleans. Good Lord! What if *that's* how it worked? Summer saw something in the marriage contract to that effect but her head was so fuzzy at the moment she couldn't remember the exact wording.

Her eyes suddenly fixated on the satchel next to the dresser. How was she going to get over there to check? She looked to her foot beneath the light blanket that covered her. To move meant pain and she didn't want to risk further injury. She then looked to the door. Wasn't there someone else in the house with her? Milly was it? Perhaps she could get it for her?

Summer let her body fall back against the pillows, suddenly too tired to think

about it any further. She'd call the woman in and have her fetch it for her yes, but first she wanted to close her eyes against the pain in her foot for a moment. After she rested she'd tackle the task at hand. But before Summer could so much as think about what she would do if the contract did indeed state she had to go back, sleep took her from all her troubles and pain once more. If Summer had her way, she'd stay hidden within sleep's peaceful folds. But such was not to be.

* * *

Five days passed with no sign of Clayton Riley or his brother for that

matter. Summer remembered the man who briefly introduced himself before rushing out of the Sheriff's office to get help the day she got shot. Milly the doctor's wife told her they had to hurry out of town to join a posse that was tracking a gang of outlaws that struck a settlement south of Nowhere. Summer's stomach had been in knots ever since. Would they catch them? Would the Riley brothers get hurt? What if Mr. Riley didn't come back at all? *Then* what would she do?

She silently chastised herself for thinking such morbid thoughts then tried her best to concentrate on how she was to carry out her plans, of which she had several. Firstly, the marriage contract

did state that should the groom not find his bride to his liking, he could send her back to New Orleans and all funds would be reimbursed to him. The Ridgley Mail Order Bride Service would then send him another, but it would cost him an additional fee on top of the train and stage fare he was to provide. Perhaps that was a fail safe should a man want to make a return. Maybe if he knew he had to pay an extra fee to get another bride, he'd be more apt to keep the one he originally got.

But that wasn't going to do Summer much good. She needed to avoid going back at all costs. So secondly, she discovered the local mercantile was in need of help and as soon as she was able

to walk, she'd go talk with Mr. Quinn the owner about a job. Surely with what skills she had she could be hired. Her only worry was her darn foot that kept her from inquiring about the position in the first place! By the time it was healed enough for her to go speak with Mr. Quinn, the position would already be filled! Thus thirdly, she also found out there were several smaller settlements within a fifty-mile radius of Nowhere. She could probably make it to one of them, but then what?

This of course brought Summer right back to square one. Again.

And again.

And again!

One more go around with it all and she

thought she might scream. She threw her face in her hands instead and moaned. Right when she thought she found a solution, something came to mind that told her it wouldn't work. If only she didn't feel so utterly trapped! The only good thing that happened in the last few days was her foot didn't pain her so much. That at least was encouraging, on the one hand. On the other hand, as soon as it was healed, Clayton Riley would toss her onto a stage the first chance he got.

As usual her mind strayed to a picture of Clayton Riley storming into her room, scooping her up into his arms, and carrying her straight to a waiting stage. He'd give her a "good bye and good

luck” before he waved at the driver and she’d be off. Back to a nightmare she’d been trying to avoid ever since she got old enough to realize the world was full of very bad men. “And so few good ones,” she whispered to herself.

Her eyes wandered about the room. “Clayton Riley, why? Why don’t you want me?”

But what could she expect? There had been no correspondence, no letters of warmth and happy words to let him get to know her. He got her not only sight unseen, but unread as well.

If only she could find a job, earn enough money to send to Mrs. Ridgley to cover the reimbursement money and make things work that way. But Clayton

Riley was a man of the law, and he would do things by the book, she was sure.

Summer sunk against the pillows as if to hide, and let the tears fall. There was no way out, no way around any of it. Her only hope was to seek refuge with Mrs. Ridgley for as long as she could.

What a shame, what a crying shame he didn't want her! The one decent man she'd met in years, *years!* And he has to go and be a lawman that doesn't want a woman with any sort of past. Well, everyone has a past. He just obviously didn't want one that wasn't to his standards. He didn't even bother to ask what she was running from! Once he figured it out he immediately came to the

conclusion she simply wouldn't do.

Summer wiped at her tears. Men! They could be such beasts! Such horrible, *horrible* beasts! What then, was a woman to do? Summer was at Clayton Riley's mercy and once back in New Orleans it would only be a matter of time before she would be at the mercy of one man or another. If not the vile Mr. Slade, then some other slave trader.

The war on slavery it seemed, still raged on. Only this slave trade had been going on for far longer than the war so recently fought by the north and the south.

Summer sniffed back more tears.

If only she'd been born a man ... *then* she'd show Clayton Riley what for!

Speaking of Clayton Riley! Was that him coming up the walk?

“Oh my God! No!” Summer said under her breath as she looked frantically about the room. But what could she do? Where could she go? She couldn’t even stand on her own two feet! She was indeed completely and utterly at the man’s mercy. He probably came to tell her he’d written or telegraphed Mrs. Ridgley to say he was sending her back.

Summer slumped against her pillows as her heart sank in utter defeat.

A knock sounded at the front door ...

All her life she’d been rejected, tossed aside or left behind. Why should this be any different? Who was she to think it wouldn’t be? No wonder Mr. Slade and

his kind preyed upon hers. What else was there?

She could hear Milly greet him, hear his spurs jangle as he came into the house ...

No. No! No! No matter *what* happened, she wasn't going to let someone like Mr. Slade tell her she was worth any less than anybody else! So what if Clayton Riley didn't want her! God wanted her! By golly yes He did and she would keep that hidden in her heart to see her through the long journey back.

“Miss James?”

Summer steeled herself one more time before she looked at him as he entered the room.

“OH!” she suddenly cried when he

pulled the blanket off her then scooped her up into his arms without warning.

“What are you *doing*?”

“I’m sorry about this Miss James, but I’ve got a schedule to keep and Doc needs the bed. Milly!”

Milly came into the room and quickly snatched up Summer’s satchel. She wasn’t the only patient occupying the doctor’s three patient rooms. Several men had been wounded hunting the outlaws and brought in not a day after the posse left! Milly had been busy with them ever since and hardly had time to say two words to her in the days that followed.

Summer suddenly realized what was happening. Why else would Milly be

holding her satchel and tagging along behind Mr. Riley as he carried her down the hall? Oh no! No it couldn't be! "Mr. Riley, please!"

"I'm sorry about this Miss James, but I don't see any help for it."

"But Mr. Riley!" She all but sobbed. No! She would *not* cry! After all she knew this was going to happen.

"Oh it's not as bad as all that!" Milly admonished as she followed them out the front door. "Lots of mail order brides have to do the same thing. You'll be fine once you get there."

"Once I get there?" Summer all but squeaked. "But my foot's not healed yet!"

"What has that got to do with

anything?" Milly scolded. "Stop your fussing child and be grateful Sheriff Riley was able to make arrangements so quickly!"

"But..."

"I'll not hear another word about it, Miss James," Mr. Riley told her in a stern voice. "It's all been arranged."

Summer couldn't help it. She began to cry. He was sending her off without a second thought, and she couldn't even walk yet! How cruel could the man be?

Too tired and down hearted to argue further, she turned her head into his shoulder and softly wept out her shame and heartache. Besides, people were watching them and she couldn't stand the humiliation of the ordeal. The whole

town would know he didn't want her!

His arms were incredibly strong, and he carried her down the street without effort. She finally glanced up and saw the stage and its driver waiting for them. Summer never thought she'd *ever* be one to beg, but she was highly considering it. Perhaps she could try a logical plea?

But even that was beyond her as they approached the stagecoach. The driver smiled and waved at them as they drew closer. Mr. Riley gave him a curt nod of acknowledgement. Summer could stand it no longer. "Oh please, Mr. Riley, please! I can't! I just can't! Please don't make me do it!"

He stopped. "What are you so upset about? A man's gotta do what a man's

gotta do! Doc, Milly and I all discussed it and felt this was the best thing to do all the way around.”

The sobbing came unbidden. It was humiliating. Perhaps it was the laudanum over the past few days. Maybe it was simply the fatigue at spending each waking moment trying to figure out a way to keep what was happening now from happening at all. Whatever it was that caused every pent up emotion she'd stuffed deep down inside herself over the last few days to suddenly erupt, Summer wished with all her might it would stop. But it didn't.

A horrible wail escaped her just as they reached the stage.

“For the love of God, woman!” Mr.

Riley exclaimed. “You’d think I was taking you to hang!”

Summer tried to speak but couldn’t, the sobbing was that bad...

“Whacha do, Sheriff?” The stagecoach driver asked. “Accidently shoot her again?”

“No! Now move aside so I can get her settled.”

Summer sucked big gulps of air, so much so she felt as if she might be sick. She did her best to wipe away her tears as the awful, beastly, *horrible* Mr. Riley made his way straight to the ...

“What?” Summer exclaimed as he stormed past the stagecoach to a wagon parked just behind it. She looked disbelievingly at the stagecoach driver

as he began to secure a trunk onto the back of the stage, ignoring them now.

“What are you doing?”

“What do you mean what am I doing? I told you I made arrangements! What are you so upset about? It’s not like its improper or anything!”

“Improper?” Summer echoed. “What’s improper?”

“For crying out loud woman, are you going to question every blasted thing I do?”

Summer blinked at him a few times in shock. “What ... what exactly is it you’re doing?”

He stopped at the back of the wagon. Spencer was there and watched them warily as he tossed some blankets into

the wagon bed then jumped up himself.

“Isn’t obvious you silly woman? I’m taking you home!”

Five

Summer stared numbly at him as Spencer quickly spread the blankets over some hay. Mr. Riley stared right back, his jaw set as he shook his head then gently handed her up to his brother's outstretched arms. Without saying a word Spencer settled her onto the waiting blankets, covered her with yet several more, then climbed over the wagon seat and sat. Mr. Riley took the satchel from Milly, tossed it into the wagon, then hopped up himself and sat beside her. He looked down at her briefly before he tucked the blankets in more tightly then put an arm around her and pulled her

against him.

“Let’s go,” he said, his jaw set as before.

Summer audibly gulped. “I... I thought...”

“You thought what? I’d really like to know because I’ve never seen someone make such a fuss over having to give up their room to a couple of wounded men. But they’re my men and I want them cared for proper.”

“Your men were hurt?” She asked on a whisper, still not over the shock he wasn’t sending her away.

“Shot unfortunately. Feel bad about it, but at least they’re not dead. Both are married.”

She stared at him, her mouth open in a

continual state of utter disbelief.

“You’re taking me to your house then?”

Mr. Riley looked at her, his face now a mask of concern mixed with something else. Was he about to laugh at her? He held her to him a bit tighter and yelled.

“Don’t bother sparing the horses, Spencer! Let’s get on home!”

* * *

Good grief! What did doc give her? She was acting plumb loco! Crying, sobbing, carrying on like he was ... oh no, it couldn’t be... He chanced a look at her and loosed his grip. He was trying to keep her warm, but earlier he feared she might try to jump out of the

wagon what with the crazy way she was going on, so he figured he best keep a tight hold on her. But what woman wouldn't if she thought he was going to load her up on the stage injured as she was and send her away?

Oh Lord! How could she think such a thing? Didn't I tell her I'd make all the arrangements?

But had he really? He'd spent the last five days getting shot at and trying to keep himself and his men in one piece. Making arrangements to transport Miss James to the farm hadn't exactly been at the forefront of his mind. When he got back that morning he'd hurried home, got cleaned up, spoke with his mother and brother then went into town to gather up

what he needed. Namely the woman sitting next to him who looked like she didn't know whether or not she was going to laugh or cry hysterically. Either one he decided, would be bad. If she laughed hysterically she might well *be* loco. If she cried, he'd have to climb up front with Spencer. If there was one thing Clayton Riley couldn't stand, it was a crying woman. Carrying her to the wagon had about done him in. To realize she was sobbing the way she was because she thought he was sending her away was harder to choke down now than when it was actually happening.

How on earth did he not explain it? But then, he'd been in such a hurry to find Spencer so he could send word to

the mail order bride company that Miss James had arrived and do a little detective work, he might not have explained a thing. He couldn't remember. What he did remember was she came to Nowhere because she was running from something. He was no Pinkerton, but he had a nose for finding things out nonetheless. He glanced at her again. Once he got her settled at the farm he'd find out a thing or two about his future bride.

Clayton pushed back his hat and allowed himself a moment to relax as Miss James was calm for the time being. She did look a fright though. Her eyes were puffy and red, her nose much the same. He wondered if they should

stop at the creek and clean her up before their mother saw her. But his mother would probably make a bigger fuss if she found out they did. It was getting down right cold out and would probably snow later. No, he'd have to carry Miss James into the house and face the music like a man. And then, of course, pray his mother and brother could keep their mouths shut that he'd had no idea Miss James had been sent to be his future bride in the first place. Seemed the whole town knew it. By a sheer miracle no one had said a word to the poor woman. Probably because it was a lot more fun to watch him squirm. Milly and Doc had kept everyone away for the most part, but then Milly and Doc were

also the worst! Especially Milly who threatened him the day he left with the posse from Northridge that she might accidentally spill the beans. But for a front seat at his wedding, she'd keep her mouth shut!

Clayton shook his head and smiled at the thought as Spencer drove on.

They reached the house without incident and Spencer pulled up to the front porch. Their mother came running out, her face lit with pure delight, and went straight for them. "At last! Land sakes I thought you'd never get here!"

Spencer set the brake and hopped down. "Actually, we made excellent time. Clayton couldn't wait to get home,

could you Clayton?"

Clayton unwrapped his arm from around the now trembling woman at his side and glared at his brother. He then looked to her. "You okay? You're shaking like a leaf."

Her teeth began to chatter. "I ... I'm ... It's just..."

He bent his head to hers, his voice low. "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding, Miss James. How could you think I would ..."

"Stop dawdling Clayton and let me see my new daughter in law!" His mother cried from the porch.

Clayton sighed. "She's not your daughter in law yet, ma. She's gotta heal up first."

“All the more reason to get her off that dusty old pile of hay and bring her inside. It’s freezing out here! Hurry up now!”

“I’m sorry to be so much trouble, Mr. Riley,” Miss James said in a soft voice.

“Stop. I’ll hear none of it. You thought I was sending you back and did ... well, I suppose you did what any woman would do. I guess if I was a woman I might wail like a coyote too.” Her eyes flashed at his words and for some reason he was glad he got a burr under her saddle. It sure beat seeing her all teary eyed and sniffing.

Before she could comment Spencer had climbed over the seat and into the wagon bed. Clayton scooted away from Miss

James and hopped out. Spencer then carefully picked her up, blankets and all, and handed her down to him.

“I am sorry for the misunderstanding. It was my fault, I should have made myself more clear.” He told her again in a low voice as he headed for the porch where his mother waited.

She said nothing, only stared at him with those big blue eyes of hers, her body spent from her earlier bout of sobbing. She was limp in his arms, her head against his shoulder as he went up the porch steps and it was entirely his fault.

“Oh my word! What’s happened to the poor girl? You boys didn’t drive that team too fast did you? Why, she looks

like someone beat her with a stick.”

Ouch! Their mother always did have a way with words, but did she have to put it that way?

“Bring her inside, Clayton! Hurry up now!” He followed his mother into the warm house, down the hall and into a small office they converted to a bedroom earlier that afternoon. Mrs. Charles Riley wasn’t about to risk further injury to her future daughter in law by having her stumble down the stairs with an injured foot!

“Set her on the bed, Clayton. That’s it, careful now...”

“She’s not going to break, ma.” Clayton told her in a tired voice. Now that he thought on it, he *was* tired. The

last three days had been long and hard. Topping it off with a frightened woman who thought him to be one of the lowliest scumbags in the territory didn't help. But he'd make it up to her, he just didn't know how. Maybe Spencer could help, but then, it was Spencer that got him into this mess in the first place! Worse, he found out it was his *mother's idea* to send away for a mail order bride!

“There now, that's better isn't it dear? You just stay right there while I go fix you a little snack before supper. I'm sure Doc and Milly didn't fill you up with anything but soup while you were at their place!”

His mother turned and happily left the

room. One would think Clayton had just given her a new toy! Perhaps after a day or two she'd calm down, but the more he thought on it, he didn't think so. Sarah had left a void in his mother's life too. She was the daughter his mother never had and suffered the loss when she died just as hard as everyone else.

But this wasn't Sarah on the bed staring up at him with her jaw set now in pure determination. In fact, the woman's look was so determined he began to worry what sort of thoughts she had going on in that pretty little head of hers.

"I'll go get your bag," he told her and turned.

"Mr. Riley." It was spoken as a definite statement, not an inquiry.

“Yes?” he asked without turning around.

“Thank you.”

Now he did turn. “For what?”

“For not sending me away. I promise I’ll make you a good wife.”

Her words were spoken in an even tone, void of emotion. Where was the wailing, sobbing, frightened little thing that threatened to tear his heart out? He once again turned to the doorway. “I’m sure you will.”

And with that, he left the room.

* * *

“Here you are, some nice molasses cookies! Made them this morning I did!

I hope you like them!” Mrs. Riley set a plate of cookies and a glass of milk down on a desk that was next to the small bed. “I hope you’ll be comfortable in here until you can sleep up in Clayton’s room. This used to be my husband’s office. The boys use it now of course but I thought it would serve you best for the time being.”

Summer couldn’t help the blush that crept into her cheeks when Mrs. Riley mentioned Clayton’s room. But where else would she be sleeping once they were married? She pushed the thought aside and took in the woman standing before her.

She had bright blue eyes that sparkled and possessed what must have once been

a glorious head of blonde hair. Now heavily streaked with grey, she wore it loosely piled on top of her head and Summer wondered how long it was. Mrs. Riley also had a generous build but wasn't fat, and there was a pleasant smell about her, as if she'd been baking cookies outside the house rather than inside.

Where as Summer had been given her name because she was born on the first day of said season and left on Winslow's doorstep, she thought Mrs. Riley could have been named for Spring. She had a pleasant lilt to her voice and her eyes lit up and sparkled like raindrops in sunshine. Everything about her said fresh and new and

Summer could tell by the animated way the woman talked that she was full of life.

Summer's eyes darted about the room. Who wouldn't be full of life and love in a house like this? Everything was neat and orderly - pristine was a good word - yet so homey and warm. She looked back to Mrs. Riley. "Thank you for allowing me to stay here."

Mrs. Riley looked at her in shock. "My dear sweet child, you're gong to live here! You don't have to thank me for it! If any one thank Spence ...oh, silly me, I'm forever getting those two boys mixed up. Thank *Clayton* for bringing you out here."

Summer blinked a few times. How

could she get her sons mixed up with something like marriage? Didn't she know which one of them sent away for a mail order bride?

“Oh but you must be tired! I'll leave you to rest then have Clayton bring you to the table when supper is ready.”

Summer smiled and nodded, her eyes heavy. The incident in town had drained all her strength and it was hitting her hard now that she knew she was to be alone for a time. “Thank you, Mrs. Riley. I think I will rest awhile.”

“You do that dear, I'll send Clayton just as soon as it's time to eat.” She backed out of the room and closed the door.

Summer let go a long, weary sigh.

What must her future husband think of her now what with the way she'd carried on? What indeed? As she recalled, he compared her to a wailing coyote! But she supposed they could have gotten off to a much rougher start ...

Rougher start my foot! Literally! The man shot you as soon as you got off the stage!

Oh, yes, there was that. But the alternative to having her future husband accidentally shoot her, fail to tell her of his plans not to send her away, and of course let her make a fool of herself in front of everyone (okay, so maybe she did that on her own) was to live as a slave in a world where men dominated and women were bought and sold like

cattle. New Orleans had been a den of slavery for decades and would probably continue to be unless someone put a stop to it. In the mean time people like Mrs. Ridgley and Mrs. Teeters did whatever they could to ensure at least some women got out before they were snatched up and put into the waiting chains of guilt and shame.

Summer closed her eyes and waited for the throbbing in her foot to subside before she tried to move into a more comfortable position to rest. She looked up at the decorative light hanging from the ceiling before examining the rest of the room. Her eyes finally landed on the cookies next to the bed. She reached for one, then the glass of milk. She took a

tiny bite and thought her mouth was going to explode with pleasure! It was delicious! The milk too was incredibly good! For one it wasn't sour as it often was by the time they got it at Winslow. Tears sprang to her eyes as she sat there on the tiny bed, a cookie and a glass of milk in her hands, and realized she'd never had such a simple pleasure in her entire life.

Summer again looked to the ceiling above her head and whispered, "Thank you, thank you for bringing me here. Please show me how to be a good wife to Mr. Riley because I don't know the first thing about it."

She lowered her eyes and stared at the cookie in her hand. "But I can learn. I

can learn everything I need to know to make a good wife. Please help me to do so!”

Summer didn't want to feel defeated. She'd made it this far and was now determined to be the best wife she could be for Clayton Riley. But would her best be good enough? She began to tick off a mental checklist of her gifts and talents. She could mend a little at least. The orphans at Winslow didn't have fancy clothes and were constantly tearing the threadbare clothes they did have. She'd noticed how threadbare Clayton's shirts were in places. Did he not have money enough to buy new ones? She made a mental note of it. She could of course keep a house clean, any

idiot could do that. She knew how to make a few things like oatmeal and soup. Winslow wasn't known for its fancy food that was for certain, so she hadn't learned to make much else other than sandwiches. Let's see, what else did a wife do?

Summer audibly gulped when she suddenly remembered *exactly* what else a wife did! *Oh, that!* Yes, well, she certainly didn't have any experience in that department! What if he was disappointed in her? She knew absolutely nothing of... of... oh drat! *That* was certainly something she wouldn't be able to learn before hand either!

Summer sighed, finished her cookie

and milk, then laid her head against the pillow. In moments she forgot all her worries and troubles for the time being as sleep quickly overcame her. She wanted to dream of being a good wife, she wanted to dream of being someone special in Clayton Riley's eyes. Instead, she had only nightmares.

Six

She screamed.

Clayton threw the silverware onto the table he was setting and ran for the study. He nearly knocked his mother off her feet as she came running from the kitchen. "I'll handle this," he told her before he burst into the room.

Miss James was sitting up in bed, her face bathed in sweat, her eyes wide as she shook with terror. Clayton didn't think at first, he only reacted. "Miss James!" He said as he went to the bed and took her into his arms. "What happened?" He instinctively scanned the room for anything amiss, but there was

nothing. “We heard you scream,” he said, his voice even, controlled. The lawman was back.

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes, then quickly turned her face away. Good Lord! What had she been dreaming? It was the only explanation. He certainly hoped whatever sort of nightmare she’d just had wasn’t because of him!

“It’s ... it’s nothing. I’m all right. I’m sorry if I disturbed you.”

He tucked a finger under her chin and made her look at him again. “Nothing? That scream wasn’t about nothing!” he told her firmly.

She tried to look away again but he held her fast. “Please,” she began. “Just leave me. I’ll be fine.”

He turned toward the door. His mother was still standing in it. “Ma, I’ll bring her to the supper table but give us a few moments, will you?”

Mrs. Riley looked them both over carefully before she nodded her agreement and left the room. As soon as she was gone, Clayton turned back to the woman in his arms. “You know if we’re going to be man and wife then you’re going to have to talk to me about things.”

Her eyes, which had been glued to the desk beside the bed, slowly found their way to his. She swallowed hard and he could not only see, but felt the tension in her jaw. “Things?” She said in a low voice.

“Yep, things. Like why you left New

Orleans in such a hurry. I may not be an expert at this mail order bride business, but even I know what you did had to have been done pretty quick like.”

She closed her eyes and he could tell by the sudden pink of her cheeks she was hiding something. “Well?” He began in a soft voice. “Are you gonna tell me why you’re so gosh darn scared right now?”

Her eyes opened and she looked straight into his. There was such vulnerability harbored in them, a hopelessness mixed with, of all things, hope. As if he were that hope. What could have possibly happened to her? “Whatever it is,” he began. “You don’t have to be ashamed of it.”

Her eyes widened.

“I understand that some women use a mail order bride service because they’re ... well they’re running from something. You ... you haven’t gone and broke the law now have ya? I’d hate to be the one to have to haul you in. How would that look to folks?”

Her face drained of color and her jaw was once again tight.

He’d better think of something fast. “Besides, no one want’s to eat wedding cake in a jail! I can hear the old biddies in town complaining already!”

A tiny smile curved her mouth. Clayton stared at it a moment ... her sweet, delicious, little mouth. Now *he* had to swallow and didn’t wonder if his face had drained of color. Good Lord

but she was beautiful! It seemed as though every time he looked at her he saw more and more of the beauty she possessed.

“It’s not what you think,” she said. “I haven’t broken any laws.”

“Well that’s good to hear!” And he had to admit, he was glad she said it. Though it wasn’t enough to satisfy him and he still planned to check a few things. For now he wouldn’t question her further. His mother was waiting for them and Spencer would be coming in from the barn at any moment. But later they would finish this conversation and he was going to find out what happened to her if it was the last thing he did. He wasn’t about to head into any sort of

marriage until he got to the bottom of it.
“You ready for supper, Miss James?”

She looked up at him and without saying a word, nodded.

“All right then, hang on to me.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and he picked her up from the bed and stood. He then carried her into supper.

* * *

Summer sat in silence as the rest of the Riley family seated themselves around the table. Clayton said the blessing and soon the meal was underway. No one spoke for a few moments as the food was passed and each of them served themselves. She was a little surprised

when Clayton, instead of passing the small platter of pot roast to her, served her himself. He then without saying a word, cut her meat for her as if it was the most natural thing for him to do. She watched as his brother Spencer did the same for their mother. She'd never seen such a thing and had to consciously close her mouth when it began to hang open.

“Miss James,” Mrs. Riley began. “Oh but what am I doing calling you that? You’re going to be my daughter in law after all! Now Summer, about your wedding dress, I understand you haven’t a thing to wear.”

“Ma, can’t that wait? She’s in no shape for marrying yet.” Clayton was quick to interject.

“I know that dear, but making a dress takes time, and we have to get started right away! By the time I’m done making it her foot should be good enough to stand on.”

Summer’s eyes darted back and forth between mother and son.

“Abbey Davis will help.” Spencer said between mouthfuls. “You know how she likes to sew all that fancy stuff.”

“Yes, but her mother ... well ... *you* know how she gives me a headache!”

Mrs. Riley lamented. “I can’t work like that and besides Abbey will talk poor Summer’s ears off!”

Summer stopped chewing all together. She was hoping to be able to enjoy the meal (which was fabulous so far) and

not have to talk, but it looked like that wasn't going to happen. She peeked sideways at Clayton who looked like he was equally hoping to get through the meal in peace but ...

“Ma! No more talk of dresses, wedding cakes, or flowers while we're eating.”

Mrs. Riley's eyes lit up. “Oh I completely forgot about the cake! Why thank you Clayton. Be sure to stop by the Anderson's on your way to the jail tomorrow morning and see if Mrs. Anderson wouldn't mind handling the baking. She's so much better at decorating a cake than I am.”

Clayton's mouth hung open as he looked at his mother. “Stop,” was the

only word to escape him before he took another bit of his dinner.

“But...” she began.

“No! No more! Besides, let Miss James decide on these things, it *is* her wedding after all, not to mention mine.”

Summer chewed slowly. My but the mashed potatoes were good! She never had anything so good at Winslow!

“Yes, I know that dear,” Mrs. Riley began. “But I figured, what with her injury and all, that she’d not want to have to think about the details. I was just trying to help.”

Summer took another bit of pot roast and continued to watch. Maybe if she were quiet enough no one would actually talk *to* her. They’d just keep talking

about her.

“I know, ma. But ... I’ve had a rough few days, and ... well I’m not much up to talking about any of it right now. Besides, who knows when the wedding will be.”

Summer’s mouth stilled as a chill went through her body. Had he changed his mind? Was he not going to set a time for their wedding because he thought she might be lying to him about never being in trouble with the law? How could she tell him about the horrors of leaving Winslow? What would he think of her? But what did a small time Sheriff know of the evils of a city like New Orleans? What would he think of the life that awaited her if she went back? How

easy it was for one of her lot to be forced into such a shameful state of being?

“All right Clayton, you win. I’ll speak no more of it tonight. But it *does* need to be discussed!” Mrs. Riley stated as her usual happy face transformed into one of disappointment. She looked around the table then grumbled, “land sakes, at the rate you’re moving the two of you will be lucky to be married by Christmas!”

Summer swallowed her food and took in the acute disappointment on Mrs. Riley’s face as she poked at her mashed potatoes. Perhaps the woman was right. Maybe she and Clayton wouldn’t be married until Christmas. She hid a smile. Summer had always hoped,

always dreamed she would be married on Christmas day! It was a silly thing really, the fancy of a young child who used to wish such a thing would happen but knew it never would. What were the chances? Christmas was over a month away. Surely her foot would be healed before then and besides, if Mrs. Riley had her way, they'd be married before Thanksgiving! Though she wanted to marry Clayton, (it was why she was there after all) the thought of a Christmas wedding still teased her heart. Summer sighed.

“Is something wrong dear?” Mrs. Riley asked.

Summer looked up. All eyes were upon her. “Oh ... why ... no, every

thing's wonderful Mrs. Riley. Thank you."

"Oh I won't stand for being called Mrs. Riley," she admonished with a smile.

"Ma..." Clayton began.

"Now you shush, Clayton! Summer is going to be my daughter in law and she might as well get used to calling me ma just as you two boys do!"

Another chill went up Summer's spine. So, he didn't want her to call his mother "ma". Maybe he *was* planning on sending her back! Tears suddenly stung the back of her eyes but Summer bit the inside of her mouth to keep them at bay.

"Ma!"

“Don’t you *ma* me young man! There is nothing wrong with Summer calling me that!”

Spencer let go a soft snicker from across the table.

“You shut up.” Clayton warned.

“I wasn’t going to say a thing!”

Spencer said in his defense. “Besides, I agree with *ma*.”

“We’re not married yet.” Clayton said as he stood up and left the table.

Summer trembled as cold seeped into her heart. At this rate she’d be lucky if she got married at all. What was wrong with the man? Why was he tender at times, then so suddenly cranky when their wedding was discussed?

“He’ll be back,” Spencer said. “Don’t

worry.”

“Are ... are you sure your brother wants to marry me?” Summer couldn’t believe she’d asked it.

“Of course he wants to marry you!” Mrs. Riley quickly said. “He’s just got cold feet like all prospective husbands do. That and Clayton can be a perfectionist. He likes everything his way but I can teach you how to handle him. You just bake him up a pie or cake and he’ll be like putty in your hands!”

“He did have it rough while he was chasing those outlaws,” Spencer told her. “It’s hard to watch your men get shot up like the ones riding with Clayton did. He’s worried about them, that’s all.”

Summer took in his words. How would she feel if some of her fellow orphans had been harmed? How worried would she be? Would nuptials be the foremost thing on her mind? She didn't think so! She began to understand why Clayton was acting the way he was. Spencer was right. She needed to let Clayton Riley take care of business first and worry about the wedding details later.

Besides, there were more than wedding details on his mind, of that Summer had no doubt, her true origins and what happened in New Orleans being the foremost. How long would it be before he cornered her in her little room and asked ... no... *demand*ed to

know? Of course the right thing to do would be to tell him the truth. But what if he was disgusted by it? What would he think of a dirty orphan girl who had no choice but to marry him?

“Ma, where’s the pie?” Clayton’s voice yelled from the kitchen.

Spencer laughed and winked at Summer. “He always gets a sweet tooth when he’s nervous or upset.”

“What is he upset about?” She asked as she listened to the sounds of Clayton banging around in the other room.

“Oh now don’t you go thinking you had anything to do with it, dear!” Mrs. Riley told her as she reached across the table and patted her hand. “You didn’t! He’s just not himself at the moment. Spence

is right. Clayton *has* had a rough few days. But as soon as he's had some dessert he'll feel much better."

Summer was about to comment when Clayton came back into the dining parlor with a pie in one hand, plates and knife in the other. He laid everything out on the table, cut the pie and dished each of them up a slice. Mrs. Riley fetched a pot of coffee as he sat and began to dig in.

The food in the Riley household was incredible, from the cookie she had that afternoon to the pot roast, apple pie and coffee that evening. Summer certainly hoped she would be as good a cook as Mrs. Riley one day! Clayton had his dessert and settled right down as if he'd

been given some miracle elixir! If he ate Summer's cooking he'd likely go to the barn, saddle up his horse and head for the hills!

“Miss James, would you like to go out on the porch with me?”

Summer lifted her head. She'd been staring at her hands in her lap since she finished her pie and was just about to tell them all good night. She needed to be alone and think but that wasn't about to happen. She needed to get this over with. “Of course.”

Clayton got up from the table, scooped her up and left the dining parlor. He stopped near the front door where his coat hung on a peg in the wall next to several others. “Here,” he began as he

managed to grab a shawl. “It’s cold outside and ma won’t mind if you wear this.”

She took it from him, grateful. It was of course much colder here than New Orleans and she’d not brought a decent coat with her. For one, she’d never owned a decent coat!

She clutched the shawl to her as he carefully opened the door with her in his arms and carried her outside. He nodded to a swing that hung at one end of the porch. It was a pretty thing, though functional and sturdy looking. He sat her down and she immediately wrapped the shawl around her shoulders. It was colder than she thought it might be. She started when he

lowered himself down beside her, his weight making the swing sway this way and that as he did so.

“Don’t worry, it’ll hold our weight. Built it myself.”

“You did? It’s very nice.”

“Thank you.” He then cleared his throat but said nothing.

Summer wrapped the shawl more tightly about herself before she looked at him. He stared straight ahead, his eyes and face unmoving. But he wasn’t looking at anything. No, he simply stared.

Summer glanced at her surroundings. She hadn’t had much time to take them in when she first arrived. A large barn sat opposite the white washed farmhouse.

Several other outbuildings were also nearby. The moon was bright and the clear sky lit with stars. It was beautiful. Summer had never seen such stars before.

“They’re pretty, aren’t they?” Clayton asked her. “I love these clear, cold nights.”

She nodded as she looked at the stars beyond the barn. “Beautiful,” she whispered.

“Yes, beautiful,” he whispered in return.

She sensed his eyes on her but didn’t look at him. Her heart began to thunder in her chest and she couldn’t figure out why. She finally concluded it was because he was going to question her

about her past at any moment. But that's not what Clayton Riley did.

"I'm sorry, Miss James. I'm sorry for everything."

"What?"

"I shot you! No sooner than you got off the stage and I shot you! Then I left you at Doc and Milly's and let you think the worst of me. I should've made myself clearer on what I was doing. I should've sent word when I had to leave town with the posse, heck I should've come and told you myself!"

"You've already apologized, Mr. Riley."

"Let me finish," he said as he put a finger against her lips to quiet her.

His finger was warm despite the crisp

chill in the air. For a scant second she wanted to kiss it as it lingered there, but he removed it when he spoke again.

“I’m a suspicious man by nature. I guess that’s one of the reasons I’ve survived being a lawman. You don’t stay alive by trusting folks. You stay alive by listening to what your gut tells you.”

She stiffened. Here it comes ...

“Miss James, what I’m trying to say is ... well ...”

“Mr. Riley, please ... I can’t go back.”

He looked at her, his brow raised, his mouth half opened. His eyes darted about a bit before they settled on her once more. “Why?”

She swallowed hard. “Bad things will

happen if I do. I've no where to go."

"What about your family?"

"I don't have any family."

He puckered his brow at her remark.

"No family? Where are they?"

She shook her head and almost laughed. "I don't know."

He sat up straight and looked down at her like a horn just sprouted out of her head. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

"Mr. Riley, I don't know where my family is because I never had one to begin with."

She would *not* cry! To admit no one wanted her, that no one thought she was worth keeping, even adopting! She'd been rejected her whole life and now he

was going to do the same! He was going to ask it. She just knew he was going to ask the question she hated most of all!

“Why don’t you have a family? What happened?”

She looked him right in the eye.

“Because, Mr. Riley. I’m an orphan.”

Seven

“An orphan?” Clayton asked, his voice coming out an entire octave higher than normal. Summer James was an orphan? Well, that explained a lot. He on the other hand, was about to admit he hadn’t been the one to answer the advertisement for a mail order bride. That his brother Spencer (not to mention his accomplice their mother) had sent in the request to the Ridgley Mail Order Bride Company. But now this?

He caught the glistening shine of a single tear in the moonlight as it ran down one side of her face. He put a finger under her chin and pulled her face

up to his. What he saw made his gut twist and his heart wrench.

Shame. She was horribly ashamed to tell him she was an orphan. “How long have you been an orphan?” Perhaps it was a stupid question, but he wanted to know.

She sniffed back her tears as more began to fall. “All my life, for as long as I can remember.”

“You *never* knew your parents? That’s plumb awful! I can’t imagine what that must have been like. So are you telling me you spent your entire life in an orphanage ... until you turned *eighteen*?” He knew the law, of course she would have to leave once she turned eighteen. But to spend her whole life in

an orphanage, to never have been adopted... His gut twisted up another notch or two with the thought.

“Yes, but there was no work to be found, and ... and ...”

“And so you sought out the help of a mail order bride service?”

She shook her head. “No, actually, they sought me out.”

“What?”

She nodded, “Yes, that’s exactly what happened. They contacted the orphanage. Mrs. Teeters the headmistress sent me there with a letter of recommendation that basically said I can read and write, knew my numbers, and do at least a few things decently.”

She burst into tears at the admission.

Clayton's jaw clenched. *Nooooo, not the tears!*

But then something stirred from deep within Clayton Riley in that moment. Instead of running from the crying woman with his hackles up which usually happened in the company of a sobbing female, he instead sat ramrod straight. In fact the action was pronounced enough to make the swing move. His jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed as a fierce protectiveness washed over him. How did this happen? How could a beautiful woman such as this go unnoticed as a child? So much so that she went her entire life without being adopted by a set of loving parents? It was one of life's many

cruelties and he hated it. As a lawman he'd seen his fair share of cruelty to people, especially women.

His hands balled into fists for a moment before he suddenly took her in his arms and held her close. "I'm sorry Miss James. I'm sorry you've never had any one to belong to. I can't imagine, can't begin to fathom ..."

She trembled in his arms and cried. He now understood her panicked display in town, what caused her to fall into such hysterics. It was like the icing on the proverbial cake of rejection. To finally think that for once in your life you were going to belong somewhere and to someone, only to be sent back ...

Clayton shut his eyes tight against the

realization he'd caused the woman in his arms such anguish. Worse, he didn't realize he had until he and Spencer were bringing her back to the farm.

“There now, you don't need to cry. You're safe here, understand?” And Clayton suddenly realized she was. How could he possibly think of sending her back when he knew what she'd endured? Of course he would marry her and one day, (he hoped) they would come to love each other. But that could take time, Sarah's death had left a hole in his heart the size of Texas and he wasn't sure if anyone could fill it. But at least the woman in his arms would provide him with some company and fill the lonely nights in his bed.

“I ... I ... I’m sorry I’m being such a ninny. I don’t usually cry so much, it’s just that...”

“You don’t need to explain yourself, honey. You’ve been through more than anyone should. I’m glad you told me. It helps me make more sense of things.” He held her away from him and looked down at her. Even with tear filled eyes and a nose red from cold and crying she looked adorable in the moonlight.

“Tomorrow you and ma can talk wedding details while I’m working. I’ll give her some money and when you’re up to it, the two of you can go into town and get what you need.”

She smiled at him like a child who’d just been given the best Christmas

present in the world. “Oh thank you, Mr. Riley! Thank you!”

He gathered her into his arms again and held her close. He was going to have to get her out of the cold and into the house but couldn't resist holding her a few minutes more. She fit into his embrace like a glove and he liked the feel of her small body wrapped in his strong arms. How he missed this! What had he been thinking all these years denying himself the company of a woman? Sarah had been gone for six years, *six!* Waiting for so long had done nothing but make him even lonelier, more bitter. But the woman in his arms was beginning to melt the winter in his heart. How aptly named she was! Summer. Summer to

his cold, barren, wasteland of a life.

Of course, none of it meant Spencer was going to get out of the licking of *his* life! Clayton still wanted to kill him! If only for his pride's sake! He inwardly chuckled at the thought before giving the woman in his arms a healthy squeeze.

“There now sugar, you just let me take care of everything and before you know it, you’ll be up and around and we’ll be married.”

“Thank you again, Mr. Riley!” She mumbled into his chest.

He smiled. “Don’t you think it’s time you started calling me Clayton?”

She sniffed back more tears and looked up at him. “Thank you, Clayton.”

He smiled again as he looked down at

her and wiped some of her tears away with a finger. “What was I thinking all these years?”

“I beg your pardon?” She said between little hiccups.

He shook his head. “Nothing to concern yourself with, honey. Suffice to say I can be stubborn at times, not to mention stupid. You might as well know that about me.”

She wiped at what tears remained with the back of her hand. “I’m sure there’s a lot for us to learn about each other, especially since we never got the chance to write one another before hand.”

He stiffened slightly. “Ah, yes. Very true.” He took a deep breath. “I’d best get you back inside before you freeze to

death.” He glanced to the sky beyond the porch and noticed the clouds rolling in.

“I bet it snows later tonight.”

“Do you get much snow here?”

“Depends, every year is a little different.”

“Do ... do you get snow at Christmas time?”

Her voice was hopeful, childlike. It made the protectiveness within him double. He had to take another deep breath to steady himself. “Sometimes. I bet it does this year.”

“I’ve always wanted to see a white Christmas. To decorate a beautiful tree ... to have presents to wrap and give.”

Good God! How much had she gone without by growing up an orphan?

Clayton Riley made a vow right then and there. He was going to make sure he gave Summer James the best Christmas she ever had! How many other things had she been made to go without because of growing up the way she did? “You concentrate on healing up and I’ll see about the rest, alright?”

She looked up into his eyes, her face locked in shock. He knew then she’d never had the things he did growing up. Oh sure, the orphanage would have had some kind of Christmas holiday. But a poor orphanage might only have a little extra food at Christmas and nothing more. Had that been the type of place she’d been raised in?

He cupped her face with one large

hand. "I'll see to everything ya hear? Don't you worry your pretty little head about any thing. This is going to be the best Christmas you've ever had."

She burst into tears again, tears that for once made Clayton Riley smile. For these tears, were tears of relief and pure joy.

And it felt good, Clayton realized. Real good.

* * *

Summer relaxed against him as he picked her from the swing and carried her into the warm embrace of the house. The smell of apple pie and coffee hung in the air and she'd never thought she'd

ever smelled anything so wonderful! In fact Summer felt so relieved she had trouble keeping her tears of joy at bay. Every time she thought about the words Clayton spoke, that they would be married soon enough and she needn't worry about a thing, well ... it was almost too good to be true! At last she would belong somewhere! Have a family to call her own, even a mother! And though she had yet to really get to know the Riley's, Summer was sure she would come to love them all very quickly. Especially Clayton. She could fall in love with him quite easily, especially now that there was no doubt in her mind they were to be married! How wonderful! How blissful her life

had suddenly become! She never dreamed anything like it could possibly ever happen to her!

But what of the others?

Summer sobered at the thought as Clayton carried her into her small room and set her down upon the bed. “Ma will be in to help you get ready for bed and see to anything you might need. I’ll most likely be long gone by the time you get up but I’ll see you tomorrow night come supper time.”

She looked up at him, “Thank you. Thank you again for everything.”

He cupped her face with his hand. “You don’t have to thank me, you should be thanking...” He suddenly stopped what he was going to say and stared at

her with an odd look on his face.

“Who? I don’t understand?” She said.

He smiled and coughed into one hand. “Shucks, never mind me, I don’t know what I’m talking about. It’s been too long of a day and tomorrow’s gonna be even longer. You get some sleep now honey and I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

He winked at her as he left the room. The word ‘honey’ standing out as if it hung in the air along with the apple pie and coffee aroma. She liked the endearment and it made her heart flutter every time he’d said it that evening despite her being so upset at times.

Summer chastised herself for not trusting in the good Lord’s decision making where her life was concerned.

He knew what He was doing sending her to Nowhere, and she was sure He wasn't done with her yet. But she also realized that so far she hadn't been very good at trusting the Almighty with her life's details and figured she'd better get a hold of herself and make good with Him. She clasped her hands together quickly and sent up a prayer that she'd do just that when Mrs. Riley burst into the room.

“Oh my sweet dear! Clayton just gave me the news! We'll start planning first thing in the morning! Of course this means I'll need to round up some help, it's too big an undertaking for one person and oh! Nellie Davis will be just green with envy that my Clayton is

getting married. She's had her eye on Clayton for her daughter Charlotte since he was knee high to a grasshopper!"

Summer sat in stunned silence. Was the woman ever going to take a breath? Mrs. Riley prattled on and on about wedding details as she busied about the room and pulled a nightgown from a trunk at the end of the bed. She then helped Summer put it on as she continued to talk non-stop. By the time Summer was ready for bed and Mrs. Riley blew out the lamp on the desk, Summer thought she might explode from holding the laughter in. But some things Mrs. Riley rattled on about gave Summer pause, and her thoughts lingered on them as she stared at the moonlight

streaming in through the window. Who was this Charlotte Davis? Why hadn't Clayton married her if Mrs. Davis was so adamant about it? Mrs. Riley made it sound like had not Summer come along when she did, Clayton would be doomed to marry Charlotte and spend the rest of his days in dismal servitude to the woman. The thought was almost laughable. Summer couldn't picture Sheriff Clayton Riley being in any sort of servitude to any one let alone a woman. Surely Charlotte Davis wasn't *that* bad? Was she? And what of her mother? Mrs. Riley painted her as some busy bodied wicked witch that wanted nothing more than to marry both her daughters to both of *her* sons. And even

though Mrs. Riley spoke well of Abbey, the younger daughter, she and Spencer had never hit it off. They were good friends, yes, but had no attraction for one another as far as Mrs. Riley could see. Without love, then what sort of marriage would they have?

And that was the most troubling thought of all. Summer and Clayton themselves were going into a marriage without love. Would they be able to build a lasting union without it? Or would they simply be two people who shared a house, meals and a bed? But what did it matter? Right now marriage to Clayton Riley meant she'd have a decent life away from the horrible streets of New Orleans and men like Mr. Slade.

Summer sent up another quick prayer that the other girls at Winslow would be delivered from the same fate. Marriage as a mail order bride was far better than the miserable life that waited to swallow them up the moment they stepped foot from Winslow.

Summer's thoughts stilled and her eyes widened as she noticed something outside the window. She suddenly sat up and stared in awe at the sight of snow gently falling through the fading streams of moonlight. Clouds began to blot out the stars as they slowly moved across the sky to settle in and send to earth what would surely blanket the farm with beautiful white by morning.

Snow. Summer had never seen it. Not

even during her long journey to Nowhere. Oh sure it was evident in the mountains above the cities and towns she'd passed through on her way. She'd stared at the snow-covered hills for as long as she could before getting a horrible kink in her neck as the stage coach rumbled along. There was more sunshine than anything else once the stage entered the Washington territory and she began to wonder at the stories she'd heard from her fellow passengers as to the never-ending rain that plagued this part of the country. But she wasn't going all the way to Oregon City. Nowhere was located at least three hundred miles northeast of there. The sun obviously much more abundant in

this part of the territory and for that Summer was glad.

She settled back as best she could without moving her foot too much, put her hands behind her head and sighed in contentment. Snow, it was pure, clean and bright and to Summer, represented the beginning of her new life. And it was all due to Mrs. Ridgley and Mrs. Teeters.

Summer smiled, sent up another prayer for her two benefactors, closed her eyes, and for once in her life fell into a blissful dream filled sleep.

Eight

The next day passed pleasantly enough. As Clayton said, Summer didn't see him until supper time, neither him nor his brother. Mrs. Riley took advantage of the absent menfolk to see to it Summer got cleaned up. She helped her into a chair that afternoon and washed her hair over a small metal tub on the floor. She used a bucket of hot water and a pitcher for rinsing, then helped her wash her body as best she could as she was unable to get into a tub of water herself. However, Summer was used to this type of 'dry bathing' as there was never any time for an actual

bath at the orphanage. For one, the several tubs they used usually had a child in it! She and the older orphans helped Mrs. Teeters take care of the endless stream of dirty little ones that needed constant bathing.

Summer was then delighted when Mrs. Riley presented her with a beautiful red dress she had stored in the attic. “It was mine when I was your age. I think it should fit. I wish I had another for you to have for day use but I gave them all away. I saved this one though.”

“Why did you save this one?”

Mrs. Riley smiled as she held up the dress. “I was wearing it the day I met Charles. It was near Christmas time, just like it is now and I was singing in

the church Christmas pageant. That was when Charles and I both lived in Philadelphia. Oh those were grand days! I should bring the hat down too. It matches this dress perfectly! I don't know what happened to my red jacket or muffler but I'm sure we can get those things at the mercantile."

"Oh Mrs. Riley, it's so beautiful! If I can get my hands on some yarn and knitting needles, I can knit a shawl. You don't have to go through all the trouble and expense of getting a coat and muffler."

"Nonsense, child! You'll freeze to death out here once winter really sets in! And besides, you can't have a good old fashioned snow fight with the boys

wearing just a shawl!”

“Snow fight?”

“Yes, dear. It’s tradition. My cousins travel down every year and spend the holidays with us. With luck we’ll have snow and then you’ll see what a battle is really like! But even if there isn’t any snow, they’ll be excited all the same because of your wedding!”

A tingle of delight raced up Summer’s spine. Mrs. Riley hadn’t been able to stop talking about wedding details until early that afternoon. It was only just now as she helped Summer put on the dress that she brought it up. “Lean on me dear and brace yourself while I smooth out the skirt.”

Summer did as instructed and standing

on one foot, held onto one of Mrs. Riley's shoulders as she bent over and brushed out the skirt with her hands. "How do I look," Summer asked as the woman finally stood.

Mrs. Riley brought a chair over. "Hang onto this dear," she began as she walked a circle around her and inspected her handiwork. "Oh its beautiful! A little outdated maybe, but beautiful just the same! Wait until Clayton gets a gander at you! Won't he be fit to be tied?"

"Fit to be tied?" Summer echoed, worry in her voice.

"Oh don't misunderstand me, what I mean is he's gonna bust a gut he'll be so enamored with how you look! I bet he

starts thinking about running into town to fetch the preacher!”

Summer relaxed. Her sudden insecurity at the remark surprised even her. She was going to have to learn to trust the man and take him at his word. She just needed to be sure she understood clearly any “words” that came out of Clayton Riley’s mouth or they might have another misunderstanding such as the day before. Summer certainly didn’t want a repeat of that incident!

Mrs. Riley went about preparing supper after she had Summer resettled on the bed with a book of poetry. She no sooner got in a few poems when she

heard voices and the sound of horses trotting into the barn yard. The brothers were home.

Summer sat up straighter and craned her neck to see out the window but her little room was on the right side of the house and she couldn't see the barn yard. What she could see was the beautiful dusting of snow she awoke to that morning and that had remained throughout the day. She hoped it would snow again. She longed to touch it, feel it against her skin, even taste it! What she'd really like to do was lay in it and make snow angels like the ones she heard Elnora talk about. Summer sighed in remembrance as she listened to the Riley brother's voices drift in through

the glass of her window.

Elnora, how she missed her little friend. Elle was always getting into trouble. She could still hear Mrs. Teeters yelling, *Elnora Barstow! Your parents are gonna turn over in their graves when they see what you're doing!* She and Elle would giggle then run like the dickens to avoid getting caught by Mrs. Teeters or her handyman Clarence for their mischief. What fun it had been! Summer wondered what Elle was going to do when it came her time to leave. Good heavens! That could be any day now! Her birthday was ... was ... Summer quickly calculated dates in her head. Good Lord! Elle's birthday was next week! "Oh no!"

“Oh no what?” Clayton asked from the doorway.

Summer jumped. She’d been so busy trying to figure out if Elle’s birthday had come and gone she hadn’t heard him enter the house. “Lord have mercy, you scared me!”

“I can see that. You about came off the bed. Now answer the question. *Oh no what?*”

Summer blinked at him a few times as she tried to gather her wits. “My ... my friend Elle. Elnora actually, Elle’s her nickname. Her birthday is next week.”

“Are you worried she’ll think you forgot?” Clayton asked as he pulled the chair away from the desk and sat.

“No, no it’s not that it’s ...”

He looked her over carefully as he took in her expression. "It's what?"

"Nothing," she said quickly.

"That nothing means something Miss James and I aim to find out what it is."

Summer gulped. She could see she'd not be able to keep anything from Sheriff Clayton Riley. It was probably one of the things that made him a Sheriff in the first place!

"She ... she's turning eighteen."

Clayton rubbed his face with his hands a few times before he looked at her. "I see. And that means she's about to be in the same pickle that you were in is that it?"

Summer nodded, tears in her eyes. The thought of Mr. Slade getting his vile

hands on Elle made her entire body go cold. “If she can’t find work right away ...”

“She has just as good a chance as you did. Besides, maybe she’ll become a mail order bride as well and if she’s lucky, land herself a fella as handsome as me.”

She smiled and her shoulders shook with silent mirth. But his teasing didn’t make the cold, dark feeling of dread go away and Summer began to wonder how she was going to get in touch with her friend.

“My, my, don’t you look pretty!” Clayton suddenly exclaimed, distracting her from her train of thought. “That color looks incredible on you! What a

beautiful shade of red! Where ever did you ...”

Summer blushed from head to toe at his compliments. “Yes, it’s your mother’s,” she said when his brow knit together in recollection. Surely he’d seen the dress before, but his expression clearly told her he couldn’t remember where or when.

“Ohhhh yes, that’s where I’ve seen it! Up in the attic! You mean to tell me my mother dragged that old thing out of a trunk and put you in it?”

“But you just said it was beautiful!”

“I did, and it is, but no wife of mine is going to where hand me downs.”

Summer practically melted when he said it, for the look on his face was

decisive and determined and she reveled in the word *wife* long after it escaped his lips.

“But enough of all that, I’m starved. How about you?”

She smiled, nodded, and then let Clayton scoop her up into his arms so he could carry her into the dining parlor. He turned toward the door with her and stopped.

“What is it?” she asked.

He stood and thought a moment, opened his mouth to speak then shut it again. Finally he looked down at her, his eyes softened with a tenderness she’d not seen before. “I think I’m gonna miss this once your foot heals.”

Summer blushed a bright pink and

smiled shyly back.

Clayton readjusted her in his arms, grinned, and took her in to supper.

* * *

The next day company arrived and Mrs. Riley was abuzz with nervous chatter at the untimely and unexpected intrusion. "It's that Nellie Davis and her daughter Charlotte!" She exclaimed the minute she saw the buggy pull up outside. "How rude to just drop in unannounced! Here to check out the competition no doubt."

"Competition?"

Mrs. Riley turned to her from her place at the parlor window. She helped

Summer hop into the room after breakfast. The thought of spending another whole day in the tiny bedroom sent a horrible dread through Summer. She wasn't used to being this idle and couldn't stand to just sit there all day. She at least wanted to make herself useful and offered to do some of the mending for Mrs. Riley. She happily agreed, but no sooner had she gotten settled, the Davis women drove their buggy into the barnyard.

“Yes, competition, *you* my dear. I've told Nellie that Clayton won't have anything to do with her daughter Charlotte but the woman won't listen! Maybe after she sees you she'll give up!” She let the lace curtains fall back

into place then wrung her hands together. "Well, I guess there's no help for it, we'll just have to muddle through the visit as best we can. I do wish Abbey had come with them, she at least would soften the blows."

"Mrs. Riley, are they really that bad?"

The usual happy expression she wore turned to a frown. "Yes." She stated flatly then said, "Brace yourself dear, they shoot with both barrels."

Summer's mouth dropped open at the comment. For Heaven's sake! If the women were *that* bad then why were they allowed into the house in the first place?

A loud knock sounded at the door and Summer straightened in her chair. She

almost wished she was wearing the beautiful red evening dress of Mrs. Riley's, but it was too inappropriate for day use. Instead she wore her old dress from the orphanage, the one she'd had in her satchel. She wasn't expecting to have visitors and figured it was good as anything to sit around and convalesce in. At least her face was clean and her hair was up. She took a deep breath as Mrs. Riley answered the front door.

“Why Leona Riley! We had no idea you'd be home! I thought sure you'd be in town shopping for the wedding!” A shrill voice came from the hall. Summer couldn't see the front door from where she sat and cringed at the remark.

“If you thought I was in town then what

in Heaven's name are you doing here, Nellie?"

"Oh, mother and I brought your guest something to make her feel better. I baked them myself," another voice, this one not so shrill answered. *The infamous Charlotte.*

An odd pang of jealousy pierced Summer's heart and she quickly pushed it away. How could she be jealous of a woman whom Clayton supposedly had nothing to do with?

Supposedly...

The women glided into the room with tiny, precise steps, Mrs. Riley right behind them, her frown firmly in place as she eyed the two with suspicion.

Summer felt her spine stiffen in the

chair.

“Oh there you are! Aren’t you just a vision!” Charlotte exclaimed. “Look mother, isn’t she just too adorable with her foot all wrapped in bandages like that? Kind of reminds me of our milk cow Effie when she broke her leg,” she said then turned to Summer. “We had to shoot her of course to put her out of her misery.” Her face suddenly took on a wide-eyed look of innocence. “Does it pain you something awful, dear? My, my! And to think we can’t take you out and put you out of your misery like poor Effie! I’m afraid you’ll just have to suffer through!”

Oh. My. Lord. Summer thought. She chanced a glance at Mrs. Riley who

looked as if lightening was about to shoot out of her eyes to obliterate the two women. Summer clamped her mouth tightly shut to keep from laughing.

Nellie turned to Mrs. Riley whose suspicious look immediately sweetened into a smile. "I declare, Leona, hasn't the child anything decent to wear? Just look at that old rag she's got on! Aren't you the least bit embarrassed?"

Summer's spine stiffened further. She couldn't help it if what she wore was all she had. She could see that Mrs. Riley whole heartedly agreed as her eyes once again looked like they could be lethal weapons.

"Miss James and I are going into town to purchase what we need for a new

wardrobe just as soon as she's up to it. Clayton would have it no other way."

Summer immediately noticed Charlotte's jaw clench. She turned to her mother, her brow raised in question. "And would this mean you're going to see Mrs. Jorgensen?"

"Of course it does! What other dressmaker is there in town?" Mrs. Riley asked firmly.

Charlotte slowly turned back to face Summer. "I see. Well, you'll certainly be pleased with Mrs. Jorgensen's work. She used to be a dressmaker in Boston before coming out west. Why she bothers with any of the scruff in this town I simply don't know."

Summer's eyes narrowed. Charlotte

was trying to make going to the dressmaker sound like something for the underprivileged, but even Summer knew better.

Nellie took a step toward her and looked her up and down like she was nothing but a trinket in a shop.

“Obviously she’ll suit you better than your last dressmaker.”

Charlotte giggled. “Oh mother, you are a card! It’s quite apparent she’s never seen a dressmaker in her life, have you sweet thing?”

Summer’s hands clutched the arms of the chair. “I never had to, I make my own clothes.”

Nellie smirked. “Then perhaps Leona can give you a few sewing lessons to

correct the area in which you're sadly lacking. I must say Leona, she's more homely than I thought." She turned to Mrs. Riley with an air of innocence.

"What?" Mrs. Riley spat. "Nellie Davis, how dare you come into my home and insult my son's future bride!"

Nellie closed the distance between herself and the chair in which Summer sat. "Well look at her, I mean really! The idea of a fine man like Clayton marrying the likes of this! Surely you've lost your senses! She's so thin for one thing!"

"I don't like the look of her eyes," Charlotte commented nonchalantly. "They look dull. If she doesn't get some decent rest everyone will think she's

stupid.”

Summers eyes widened as her mouth dropped open in shock. She then tried her best to quell the burning retort she had at the ready. One didn't spend life in an orphanage and not know how to fight back. It was full of children from the streets and surrounding swamplands. Some children came to the orphanage and acted little better than animals.

Mrs. Davis smirked. “Leona, doesn't she know she's in polite company? Is the poor child dumb?”

Summer glanced about the room. “Of course not,” she calmly said. “It's just that I find your company to be so...” she made a show of looking Mrs. Davis and her daughter up and down as they had

done to her. “Interesting.”

Charlotte’s eyes flashed along with her mother’s as they realized Summer was herself a worthy opponent. Mrs. Davis then quickly turned to Mrs. Riley. “Do let us know if you need help with the wedding preparations that is ... well ...” she stepped over to her and whispered loud enough so Summer could hear her every word. “If Clayton is *really* serious about marrying this girl. After all, she’s obviously lacking and you know our Clayton only deserves the best. But men can be so stubborn when it comes to admitting they’ve made a mistake. I’m sure sending her back won’t be too much trouble. You’ll let me know if you need help with that, won’t

you?”

Mrs. Riley's eyes narrowed to slits. “Summer is not going anywhere. Clayton fully intends to marry her so you might as well give it up Nellie Davis!”

Mrs. Davis's hand flew to her chest in shock. “Why Leona! My dear sweet friend what ever do you mean?”

Before Mrs. Riley had a chance to comment (or in this case shriek as her face was turning redder by the second) Charlotte grabbed her mother by the arm and steered her toward the front hall. “Obviously the whole family is as stubborn and as proud as Clayton, mother. But rest assured, they'll figure out the error of their ways and come to their senses. All we can do in the

meantime is pray.” Her face had taken on the most angelic look Summer had ever seen. Her own face twisted up at the brazenness of the girl and she didn’t know whether to laugh or just sit there and stare in utter shock.

“Well I must say Leona, I never thought I’d see the day you’d let your son marry a woman he’s only just met. And to think she came through the mail no less!”

“It was by train and stagecoach actually.” Summer managed through clenched teeth.

“What ever.” Mrs. Davis said as she dismissed the comment with a wave of her hand. “Well, I’ll not stand here any longer and see you taken in by this charade. I’ll do what ever I can to help

you. You just let me know when you want to get her out of your house!”

“She’s not going anywhere, Nellie. She’s going to marry Clayton.”

“Ohhhh I just can’t stand it!” Charlotte wailed. “What will people in town think of our Sheriff marrying such a dull girl?”

“Oh for Heaven’s sake!” Summer said as she rolled her eyes then looked to Mrs. Riley. “Are they always like this?”

“Oh no, dear. Not this bad, but still ...”

“Well! Of all the nerve, Leona! And I thought you were my friend!” Mrs. Davis huffed. “Come Charlotte, we don’t have to take this sort of ill treatment!”

The two women stomped to the front

door, threw it open and stormed out into the sunshine and cold. Mrs. Riley threw her face into her hands at the dramatic exit before she slowly made her way to the door and closed it.

She re-entered the parlor just as slowly and plopped into a chair next to Summer. "I'm afraid there will be no peace for us now."

"What do you mean? How could those two be so rude?"

"Oh my dear," she said as she reached over and patted her on the leg. "You don't know the likes of Nellie Davis. She's a spiteful thing. She's still upset over Clayton rejecting Charlotte. As long as I can remember she's counted on Clayton and Charlotte getting married.

Too bad she never once informed Clayton of the fact.”

“What?” Summer said in shock. “You mean she literally planned it all out and then expected it to happen?”

Mrs. Riley nodded. “Something like that. Now with you here she’s going to be exceptionally nasty to deal with. I’ve never seen either one of them so bent out of shape before. Apparently she’s still holding out for her plan to come to fruition.”

“What sort of person does such a thing?” Summer asked, truly perplexed.

“Someone like Nellie Davis. You’ll find the world has no shortage of them. All you can do is avoid them.”

“But why do you put up with her? Why

even let her set foot in your house?”

Mrs. Riley let go a long sigh.

“Because she didn’t always use to be like this. Long ago when we were both young, we were the best of friends.”

Summer shifted in her chair and automatically leaned toward the older woman. “What happened?”

Mrs. Riley calmly shrugged. “The thing that usually happens to split best friends apart. A man.”

Nine

Clayton pinned the wanted poster up on the wall. He then stepped back and took a good look at it. Had he seen the man? Clayton didn't think so, but for some reason "Red Ned" looked awful familiar.

"That's a nice reward for old Ned." Spencer remarked.

"Sure wish I could remember where I've seen him."

"He does look kinda familiar, don't he?" Spencer said as he peered at the likeness of a bearded, one-eyed man.

"Shouldn't be too hard to spot. Just look

for a man with an eye patch!”

“Could be other ways to hide a missing eye. He might have a fake one. Be sure to tell the boys to keep an eye out.”

Spencer burst out laughing.

“No pun intended,” Clayton chuckled.

“But seriously, he was spotted down near Clear Creek a few months ago then again about fifty miles southeast of here.”

“Think he has anything to do with that outlaw gang we’ve been after lately?”

“Don’t know. All I know is it’s lunch time. Let’s go down to Hanks restaurant and get something.”

“Sure,” Spencer agreed as he went for his hat.

Billy Blake, Clayton’s other deputy

sauntered into the office from the cell area. “Where ya goin’ boss?”

“Lunch,” Clayton answered. “You want us to bring you back something?”

“Nah, Abbey Davis is bringing me mine.” Billy drawled with a smile.

“Abbey Davis?” Spencer said surprised. “Since when did you and Abbey start courtin’?”

Billy smiled and winked. “Just now. Done run into the pretty little thing this mornin’ as she was walkin’ into town. I was takin’ my daddy’s wagon to leave at the livery to get the springs fixed. Poor lil’ gal was freezin’ so I done drove her the rest of the way.”

“Why was Abbey walking? What’s wrong with their rig?” Clayton asked.

“On account her sister Charlotte and their ma went out to pay a visit to your place.”

Clayton was about to put on his hat and froze, the hat halfway to his head. “*Our* place?”

“Yep, Abbey done said she wanted to go too, said she was lookin’ forward to meetin’ your bride to be, but her ma made her come into town and get some things at the mercantile. I told Mr. Quinn to make sure she got home all right and so he said he’d leave Mrs. Quinn to mind the store and he’d drive her home himself. Abbey told me she’d come by here with something to show me her appreciation fore’ Mr. Quinn left with her.”

Spencer grinned. “You gonna hold out for a kiss?”

“Spencer!” Clayton snapped. “Never mind about that. Mrs. Davis and Charlotte went to the house this morning!”

“Are you worried there may have been blood shed? Maiming, maybe?”

Clayton glared at his brother. “Hardly anything that extreme, but you know how Mrs. Davis and ma get when it comes to ...”

“Your bachelorhood, which of course is about to be remedied,” Spencer finished for him.

“I’m probably overreacting. I’m sure the visit was fine. Still ...”

Before anyone could speak the door of

the Sheriff's office opened and who should walk in... but Charlotte Davis.

Clayton put on his hat and turned toward the door. He cringed as Charlotte sashayed her way to where he stood.

“Why Clayton!” She exclaimed. “I’m so glad I caught you! I must speak with you immediately!”

Clayton sighed and glanced to Spencer who stood with an innocent smirk on his face. “I’ll catch up with you later, order my usual for me will you?”

Spencer nodded, tipped his hat to Charlotte, and left.

“Billy, do you mind?” Charlotte asked. “I’d like to speak with Clayton in private.”

Billy shrugged and left to wait for

Abbey outside. As soon as he was gone, Charlotte spun to Clayton. “Oh Clayton! I’m so very sorry!”

Clayton raised a curious brow. “Sorry for what?”

“I didn’t want to be the one to tell you this, but I just can’t stand by and stay quiet any longer!”

Clayton tipped back his hat and sighed. “Quiet about what, Charlotte?”

She pressed her lips together a moment as if the dread of her next words was almost too much for her to bear. “That woman, the one in your house? She’s a criminal.”

“What?” Clayton barked.

Charlotte’s eyes grew round as saucers. “It’s true! I swear it! She ...

she ...”

Clayton narrowed his eyes on her.

“She what?”

“She’s just using this whole mail order bride business because ... because she’s running from the law!”

Clayton let go a long, weary sigh.

“Charlotte, in all my years of knowing you, I never thought I’d see the day when you would sink ...”

“Clayton Riley! You can’t marry that horrible creature! She’ll plumb ruin you! She’s lied to you from the start!”

Clayton put a hand to his forehead and massaged it. Maybe if he massaged hard enough the headache she was causing would stop before it really got going. Unfortunately he had to stop his own

ministrations when she threw her arms around his neck. “Can’t you see it, Clayton? She’s running from the law and if you marry her it will only get you into a heap of trouble!”

“Charlotte, I’m sorry you’re so upset about this, but what’s done is done.”

She immediately stilled. “What do you mean?”

He sighed. “I’m gonna marry Miss James. It doesn’t matter who sent for her, I’m gonna marry her.”

Her eyes widened. “You mean you’re not the one who sent away for a mail order bride?” She squeaked.

He slowly shook his head. Maybe if she knew that Spencer sent for Miss James and that Clayton planned to marry

her anyway, Charlotte would finally, *finally* give up the notion he'd marry *her*.

“Spencer answered the advertisement for a mail order bride, not me. But his intention was to send away for one *for* me.”

Now Charlotte began to rub her own forehead. “Wait a minute! You mean to tell me your brother sent away for a bride so *you* could get married?”

He nodded and said nothing.

Her face ran through a series of shocked expressions before she finally settled on one that looked like a cross between rage and heartbreak. For a brief moment Clayton regretted telling her, but it looked like it was having the

desired affect.

Her mouth dropped open in shock when next she looked at him. “You ... you’d marry a complete stranger that you didn’t even send for over *me*?”

Clayton took a deep breath. “Charlotte, we’ve been over this a thousand times. I like you, you’re a nice girl, but I don’t fancy you for a wife. My heart just doesn’t lead me in that direction where you’re concerned. How cruel would I be to marry you when I don’t love you?”

She pressed her lips together again. She stood there, her hands balled into fists at her sides, her body shaking now from her barely controlled rage. “I see. I see that I’m not good enough for you Clayton Riley. That you’d rather marry

some little gutter tramp that you know nothing about than me! How much love is in that?"

"Oh, good Lord ..." Clayton began on a sigh.

"No!" Charlotte held up a hand as if to stop him. "You don't have to say anything else. I understand."

Clayton blinked at her a few times. "You do?"

"Yes, I can't help it if you've lowered your standards. Go ahead, marry the girl, I wish you both the best."

"Well that's mighty kind of you Charlotte," he began, ignoring her obvious insult. "Thank you."

"But tell me, Clayton. If Spencer hadn't sent away for a mail order bride,

would you have given marriage a second thought? Would anything else have changed?”

“I suppose it took meeting Miss James to wake me up a little and realize I needed to move on.”

“So now that you realize it you’re ready to get married?”

He thought on it a moment then nodded. “Yes, yes I am.”

She made a show of smoothing her skirt then adjusted her bonnet. Well, I wish you both the very best.” She held out her hand.

Clayton stared at it a second before he finally took it. She made to shake it, but Clayton, instead bent at the waist, raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it.

“Thank you Charlotte, I knew you’d understand.”

She blushed. “Well, I guess the best woman won.”

“Ah, don’t take it so hard. Your man will come along some day.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” she pouted. “I just wish he’d hurry it up. He takes any longer and I’ll be nothing but an old maid.”

Clayton smiled and let go her hand.
“Never.”

The door to the Sheriff’s office opened and Charlotte’s sister Abbey stood in the doorway. “Charlotte! There you are. What are you and mother doing in town? I thought you’d still be visiting out at the Riley farm.”

“No, mother needed to speak with Mrs. Jorgensen. I suppose you can ride home with us now that you’re here.” She turned without looking at Clayton and headed for the door. Billy moved out of the way as she sashayed past him and went out onto the boardwalk. “Come along Abbey, mother’s waiting I’m sure.”

Abbey nodded to Clayton, gave Billy a bright smile, and then followed her sister off the boardwalk and across the street.

Clayton and Billy watched the two sisters as they walked away, their skirts swishing to and fro as then went.

“That Abbey Davis sure is a pretty thing, ain’t she Sheriff?”

“Did you steal a kiss?”

“Nah, wasn’t time. She heard her sister carrying on in your office and finally decided to poke her head in.”

“You were eavesdropping?”

“I wasn’t eavesdropping, I was eatin the candy she done brought me. She sure had *her* ear to the door though.”

Clayton smiled. “Women.”

“Maybe now Charlotte will take them claws of hers and sink em into some other fella.”

Clayton looked down at Billy who was easily several inches shorter. “I thought you said you weren’t eavesdropping?”

“I wasn’t, but ya can’t help but hear everything that went on the way Miss Charlotte was screeching at the top of

her lungs.”

Clayton laughed at that. “Well I hope you’re right Billy. I hope she’s done with any plans she may have to marry me. It never would have worked.”

“Maybe. Only the Almighty knows.”

That and Charlotte Davis, who, after turning a corner and heading down another street, put her nose in the air and smiled. Within moments of leaving the Sheriff’s office she’d devised a plan, and that plan was moving along perfectly.

* * *

Come quitting time Clayton couldn’t wait to head home. The anticipation he

felt was familiar yet so very different at the same time. When Sarah was alive he used to love coming in from the orchards come suppertime, couldn't wait to take Sarah in his arms and see what she'd been up to. But this was different. This anticipation made his heart drop into his stomach and his mind begin to race over things to say to the pretty little thing he'd find waiting for him at home with his mother. Most of all, he couldn't wait to sweep her up his arms and carry her into supper. Last night when he carried her back to her room he'd lingered a moment or two with her in his arms and teased her about a spot of jam she had at one corner of her lovely mouth. It was all he could do not to kiss the jam away and he

had to fight to keep from doing so. It was too soon to kiss her, even though *he* wanted to. But his future bride needed time, and he wanted her to feel comfortable with him the first time they kissed.

He was amazed that once he decided to marry her, he began to notice wonderful little things about her. Like how she had dark flecks of a deeper blue in her eyes. How her mouth curved up to one side when something amused her. The tiny little dimple on the left side of her mouth. How she blushed whenever he came into the room. The smell of lilac in her hair when he carried her into the dining parlor last night...

“You gonna wait for me to at least

mount up first?" Spencer called after him as he watched Clayton trot away.

Clayton brought his big black gelding to a stop and turned to face him as Spencer mounted his grey mare.

"Thought you were right behind me."

"How could I be? You lit on outta that office like your pants were on fire! What's the hurry?"

Clayton smiled. "I got something waiting for me at home." He winked, turned his horse, and cantered down the street.

Spencer nodded to Billy who stood smiling in the doorway of the Sheriff's office, laughed, and followed his brother.

“Hey sweet thing, wake up.”

Summer’s eyes opened slowly. She smiled when she saw Clayton’s face bent over hers, his emerald eyes sparkling with something she’d never seen before. “I must have dozed off. Is it time for supper already?”

“Sure is. Ma told me you had visitors today.” He leaned back in the chair by the desk and waited.

“Oh, yes. *That.*”

“I don’t want you to worry about it. I spoke with Charlotte today, she’s got a handle on herself, even wished us the very best.”

Summer pushed herself up with her

elbows to better look at him. “Really? Did your mother tell you about what happened when they were here?”

“She doesn’t have to, I know the Davis women. Don’t worry about it any more, okay?”

She let go her breath and sank back into the mattress. “Okay.”

“Now, it’s time my lady.”

She quirked a brow at him.

“Time to escort you to dinner.”

Summer smiled.

Clayton pulled off the quilt she’d used to cover herself earlier, then easily scooped her up and stood. “Ahhhh,” he sighed. “I’ve been waiting for this all day.

She blushed a bright pink at his flirting

and wrapped her arms about his neck.

“Tomorrow I have a surprise for you,” he told her with a wink.

“A surprise? What sort of surprise?”

“Thanksgiving is only two days away so tomorrow you and I are going into town and see about getting you a few things.”

“Oh no, Clayton. You don’t have to do that.”

He stopped in the hall and looked at her. “You’re to be my wife and I’ll see you dressed and taken care of proper, ya hear?”

Summer’s heart sank. Was he embarrassed of her? She knew her two dresses were horrible. Charlotte and Nellie Davis only drove home the

obvious during their little visit.

“No argument, tomorrow we’ll see what we can do. Spencer spoke with Abbey Davis while she was in town today and she’s got a few things you can use until we have some dresses made for you.”

“Oh Clayton...”

He entered the dining parlor and set her down in her chair at the table.

“What? Can’t I provide for you? It’s my job you know.”

She looked at him and fought the tears welling up. “I know, it’s just that no one has ever ... ever done this sort of thing for me before.”

He straightened, looked down at her, and smiled. “Well it’s about time

someone did. And I'm glad it's me and not some other fella."

She swallowed, unable to keep a tear from falling. "So am I."

Clayton sat next to her as his mother and Spencer brought in dinner. Once they were seated he said the blessing, winked at her, and reached for the tureen of stew.

Summer sighed as another tear escaped. She wanted to pinch herself to make sure she was awake and not dreaming. Her current circumstances were almost too good to be true. So much had happened to her since the day she sat outside Mrs. Ridgley's office not a month ago. *Thank you Lord and thank you Mrs. Ridgley.* Summer thought to

herself as two realizations suddenly hit her. First, that for the first time in a very long time she was happy. And second? She suspected that the wonderful warm feeling in the center of her very being was more than a simple reaction whenever she saw the handsome Clayton Riley. In fact, Summer began to suspect she was falling in love.

Ten

The next morning Clayton prepared the wagon for a trip into town. Summer was once again riding in the back on blanket-covered hay, warmly wrapped in quilts while Clayton and his mother sat up front. She tucked the quilts about her more tightly whenever a cold blast of wind swept across the landscape. The air was cold and dry but the sun bright over head. It was a beautiful day with not a cloud in the sky. Apple orchards were on either side of the road before giving way to fields of pumpkins. Summer could see a few stray orange gourds still in the fields as they drove

by.

Summer sighed and wished it would snow again but thought better of it while they continued into town. It wouldn't do to be sitting in the back of a wagon for several miles while it snowed. At least she didn't think so. On the other hand, if she was snuggled against Clayton up front on the wagon seat, it might prove to be quite nice.

Once they reached town Clayton parked the wagon in front of Quinn's Mercantile, set the brake and helped his mother down. Spencer came out and waved. He must have been waiting for them. He left right after breakfast for the Sheriff's office and had already been in town for several hours.

Spencer hopped up into the back of the wagon. “Good morning! How’s my future sister in law?” He bent down and scooped her up before she could reply then deftly handed her down to Clayton’s waiting arms.

“Fine,” she said as Clayton looked into her eyes and smiled.

Spencer laughed. “Yes, I can see that.” He jumped down from the wagon, ran up the steps and into the mercantile.

Clayton continued to smile and look into her eyes. People stopped and stared at them and Summer began to feel self conscious. After all, her *was* holding her in his arms in public where everyone could see! Did any of the folks now staring at them know of her injury?

“Well, well, there you are!” A tall, thin grey haired woman called out from the doorway of the mercantile. Mrs. Quinn stood with a wide grin on her face.

“Don’t just stand there, Clayton! Bring her inside where it’s warm! I’ve got some might pretty things to show you Miss James!”

Summer smiled at her as Clayton carried her up a set of stairs, across the boardwalk and into the mercantile. Warmth quickly wrapped around her as he carried her toward the pot-bellied stove near the counter and gently set her down in a chair. He took the quilts from her and handed them to Spencer who folded them up and plopped them on the floor.

“Oh you have new ribbons!” Mrs. Riley exclaimed from across the mercantile. “Summer, I must get some of these for you!”

“Oh no, Mrs. Riley ...”

“Stop!” Clayton barked. “There will be no, ‘*oh no Clayton, oh no Mrs. Riley,*’” he mimicked. “You are going to sit there and let me take care of you.”

Summer’s eyes grew wide. Could this be real? Her breathing became short and her chest tightened. She almost felt as though she would faint! To see someone *want* to take care of her was almost beyond her understanding. Oh sure, she’d imagined it millions of times, ever since she was a small child. If not dreaming of a set of parents doing it,

she'd pictured a family of sorts, or friends, and finally, she began dreaming of the day a husband would do this sort of thing. But now that it was real, she felt queasy and faint. When would it all simply disappear? When would she find herself fighting for scraps in the streets? But no, she was past that, she was out of danger. Clayton said he would marry her. And besides, he'd sent for her hadn't he? She was here! This was *not* New Orleans! There was no Mr. Slade lurking in the dark shadows and alleyways waiting to grab and enslave her the first chance he got. She was safe, safe, safe!

But the fear in her heart was old, oh so *very* old, and would not be silenced

over night. She was going to have to work hard to keep it at bay, to silence its relentless screaming that said this was all a mistake, he really didn't want her, it was only a matter of time before he sent her back ...

“Do you like the pink or the green better, dear?”

Summer shook herself and forced her eyes to meet those of Mrs. Riley's. She swallowed hard. “Oh, the pink. I like the pink.”

“So do I. It will look lovely with your hair.” Mrs. Riley happily agreed. She set the ribbons on the nearby counter then left to speak with Mrs. Quinn who was pulling bolts of cloth from a shelf. Clayton took a chair and pulled it up

alongside her. “Now, I want you to tell ma what fabrics you fancy for a few dresses. You’ll need a pair of shoes too, and a coat. Just let ma know what you like and she or Mrs. Quinn will fetch it to you to look at. Are you warm enough?”

Summer stared at him dumbfounded. “I ... I...” She snapped her mouth shut. Her head began to spin and her heart felt as though it would leap from her chest. She felt herself precariously begin to lean to one side.

“Whoa there, honey!” Clayton exclaimed as he pulled her upright. “What’s the matter?”

She took a few deep breaths. What *was* the matter? Good grief! She felt as

if she just wanted to go back to the farm and hide in her little room! And all because Clayton was showing her kindness and wanting to take care of her? *Oh Lord help me! Help me to receive these wonderful gifts and the blessings You're providing! Help me not to mess this up!*

“Do you want me to take you home?” Clayton whispered in her ear.

The fear in her heart leapt to life at the question. *Yes!!!!!!*

Summer closed her eyes against it. If she gave in and let fear win out, it would only happen again and she had to get a handle on it! She slowly shook her head. “I’ll be all right. Just give me a moment.”

Clayton ran a hand over her back a few times. “You take all the time you need, honey. I’m not going anywhere until I know you’re all right.”

“Is something wrong?” His mother asked as she walked up with a bolt of blue calico in her hands.

“Miss James felt a touch dizzy I think, but she’s fine now,” he answered as he put a finger under her chin and turned her face toward his. “Ain’t that right?”

Summer nodded, the dizziness gone. She took a deep breath and smiled. “I’m fine now, really.”

He eyed her a moment longer before he finally looked satisfied. “Okay, if you say so.” He turned to his mother. “I need to check on some things, see if there’s

been any word concerning those outlaws. You'll look after her won't you ma?"

"Of course dear. Mrs. Quinn and I will be a while yet. Take your time."

Clayton took one of Summer's hands in his own and stood. "You sure you'll be all right?"

Summer smiled at the concern in his eyes and voice. Her body warmed then, from the top of her head to the tip of her toes. Could it be he felt something for her? She brightened at the thought and her smile widened. "Yes, thank you. It's just... it's just that this is all so new for me." She blushed at the admission.

Clayton knelt before her and engulfed her hand in both of his. "Ahhhhh honey, I

think I understand. But you have nothing to worry about, not anymore. You're here now, and that's what counts."

She swallowed and tried to sit still as the fear in her heart banged against the door she so recently tried to close on it. She nodded, unable to speak and watched him slowly stand. "I'll be back for you. Have fun now." He then turned to Mrs. Quinn. "Get her whatever she wants." He then tipped his hat and left.

Mrs. Quinn let go a gasp of delight and clapped her hands in front of her. "Well, I must say Miss James, but you're a lucky girl this day!"

Summer's breathing escaped in short pants. She fought the rising lump in her throat, against the fear the whole scene

would disappear into a puff of smoke and she'd find herself cold and alone in some alley hiding from the likes of Mr. Slade.

“What’s the matter? Can’t decide on what you fancy first?” Mrs. Quinn asked.

Mrs. Riley took the chair Clayton had so recently occupied. “Sarah, would you bring me that brown calico? I want to show it to Summer.”

“Certainly,” Mrs. Quinn replied. She turned to do as asked.

Mrs. Riley watched her go then said, “Now don’t you worry about a thing, dear. We have plenty of money to get what we need. In fact, why don’t we get some yarn and needles and you can start some knitting for Christmas? It would

be the perfect distraction while your foot heals.”

“Mrs. Riley,” Summer began on a sigh. “It’s all so overwhelming.”

“I’m sure it is dear! Why, I can’t imagine what it would be like to travel out here alone to marry a man you’ve never met, and on top of it let him leave you in the mercantile and tell you to get whatever you want! Though if it were me, I’d especially like that part! But seriously dear, Clayton is a good man and a good provider. He wants you to have these things and you need to have them! None of this is frivolous so don’t you be feeling guilty about it.”

“None of it?”

“For Heaven’s sake, no!”

Mrs. Quinn approached with the bolt of brown calico. "Land sakes, child! You're gonna marry the man, let him take care of you!"

Summer took a deep breath. She could do this. "All right then," she began as she looked first to Mrs. Riley and then to Mrs. Quinn. "Let's shop."

* * *

Clayton left the mercantile and marched straight to Doc and Milly's. He banged on the door and waited impatiently for someone to answer. Milly swung open the door with a look of concern which quickly changed to annoyance when she saw he was alone.

“What’s all the banging about? Where’s the patient?”

“At the mercantile.”

“What do you mean, at the mercantile? What’s going on?”

“I left Miss James at the mercantile with ma. She needs some things. In fact she needs a lot of things. But that’s not why I’m here. She nearly fainted.”

“What?” Milly began. “Come in Clayton and tell me what happened.”

Clayton went into the house and followed Milly into the parlor. “She seemed fine, but then nearly fainted after I set her down in a chair and started to tell her to get what she needed.”

“Has she been eating okay?”

“Yes, sleeping all right too as far as I

know.”

“Did something happen to upset her?”

Clayton drew in a deep breath. “Nellie and Charlotte Davis came out to the house yesterday, but that’s about it.”

Millie frowned. “That’s enough. Those two harpies were buzzing around town yesterday like a pair of hornets. Mark my words they’re up to something. I trust that Nellie Davis about as far as I can toss her!”

“Don’t know what it could be, Charlotte’s okay with me marrying Miss James. Wished me luck and everything.”

“Clayton Riley, tell me you’re not that stupid!”

Clayton looked down at Milly, his eyes suddenly wide.

“Yeah, you’d better be worried!” She spat. “You’re far too trusting! It’s amazing that Charlotte hasn’t found a way to make you marry her by now!”

“I don’t love her,” came Clayton’s simple reply.

“Well then what’s the difference between Charlotte Davis and Miss James? Do you love *her*?”

Clayton stiffened. “I ... I ...”

“You’d better make sure your hearts in the right place before you up and marry that girl. True, you *should* marry her, especially after she came all the way out here. Besides, you’re a lonely old cuss and will only get lonelier if you don’t get married. But court her until ya at least start having *some* feelings or she

ain't gonna be no better than if you married Charlotte!"

Clayton let his breath out slowly. Milly was right. What was the difference? Except Charlotte would drive him crazy in a matter of months, but other than that, there was no difference. And he knew Charlotte, he didn't really know Miss James.

"Clayton, I've doctored you your entire life. Sarah was my daughter and a good woman, and it's a shame she died so young. Take this girl, fall in love, marry her and start fresh. Heck, let Spencer be Sheriff and go back to farming! I bet it would do you good!"

Clayton looked down at her with a furrowed brow.

“All I’m really sayin’ is ... well ... let your heart out of that box you put it in the day Sarah died. Don’t be afraid to let someone else have it. My guess is, you figure if you marry her right away, you won’t have time to feel anything for her, and that love will grow out of time. But son, I know you. That’s an excuse. Go ahead and court her a little. Get to know her. Let love have a head start, then marry. Don’t give your heart a chance to bury itself deeper into the ground to hide.”

Clayton’s jaw clenched. “Milly...”

“Don’t you Milly me, I’m as much a ma to you as the one you got at home. Speaking of which, I’m sure Leona loves her already!”

Clayton closed his eyes a moment. His mother did love Miss James, made her feel at home, doted on her, took care of her during the day, talked about her to Spencer and himself every waking moment. Summer James had brought life back into his mother, and for that he was grateful. Besides, he didn't realize until that very moment he *was* starting to have feelings for her. At first he thought it was simple attraction. She was a beautiful woman, very beautiful and Clayton began to find it difficult to take his eyes off of her, found it difficult the last couple of days not to think about her during the day.

“I hate it when you're right, Milly.”

“I know you do. Now stop you're

worrying. I'll have Doc stop by your place later this afternoon and check on her. Will that settle you down?"

Clayton nodded. "Thanks, Milly. I knew I could count on you."

"Count on me for what?"

"For doctoring me, or at least in this case my heart. You're right, I need to let it loose instead of keeping it corralled. I'll court Miss James proper, then marry her."

"Good. Now, go fall in love. Doctor's orders!"

Clayton smiled, winked, then got up and left the house.

* * *

By the time Mrs. Riley and Mrs. Quinn were done with her, Summer had in her possession four different sets of calico fabric, a new pair of shoes, a coat, several different colored yarns, two sets of knitting needles, a new hair brush and half a dozen different colored ribbons. It was more than she'd ever owned in her lifetime and Clayton Riley had given it all to her. Mrs. Riley was just paying the bill when the bell over the door rang.

Summer's heart sank as Nellie Davis strolled into the store like a queen, Charlotte close on her heels. "Why there you are Leona! I thought I saw your wagon in town." Nellie crooned.

"How can you possibly miss it? It's parked right outside." Mrs. Riley

pointed out dryly.

Nellie ignored her and glided up to the counter and eyed the purchases Mrs. Quinn was wrapping up in brown paper. “My, my, what ever do we have here? Is this all yours Leona? Are we Christmas shopping?”

“No, I’m shopping for Summer. Clayton wanted her to have some new dresses and a few other things.”

“Summer?” Nellie asked feigning ignorance. “Oh, you mean that horrid creature staying at your house? Don’t tell me you’re keeping her?”

Charlotte placed herself right next to Summer. “Mother, really now. She’s right here!”

Summer immediately became

suspicious at the girl who spoke in her defense.

Nellie turned. "Oh, so she is. Well, I suppose if you're going to be that stubborn about it, all we can do is help you out."

"I don't need any help from you, Nellie Davis." Mrs. Riley said. "Mrs. Jorgensen can whip up anything we need."

"Oh, but I'm afraid you'll be out of luck. I just spoke with Mrs. Jorgensen yesterday and she's busier than a bee this season making things for folks for Christmas. She couldn't possibly take any more work on."

"She doesn't need to," Summer said. "I can sew my own clothes."

Nellie looked her up and down with disapproval. "Yes, we've all seen how well you sew, haven't we?"

"Summer, you don't have to worry about a thing, I'll make whatever you need if Mrs. Jorgensen is too busy." Mrs. Riley told her with a smile.

Summer caught the flash of anger in her eyes as she quickly glanced at Nellie Davis. "I know you will, and I so appreciate it."

"But what about your wedding dress?" Charlotte asked innocently. "Mrs. Jorgensen is too busy and you can't expect Mrs. Riley to make everything for you, that would be taking advantage of her, don't you think?"

"I'm sure we'll both be working on the

dresses together.” Summer said diplomatically, though her hands were balling into fists in her lap.

“Still, that’s a lot of work to do,” Nellie began. “I’m afraid you’ll have to post pone your wedding until the dress is done. Too bad Mrs. Jorgensen is so dreadfully busy or she could have finished it for you in no time.”

Summer was about to comment, as was Mrs. Riley, their mouths both open when Clayton strolled through the mercantile’s door.

“Why Clayton!” Charlotte exclaimed and all but ran to him. She quickly wrapped an arm around one of his and snuggled against him. “It’s so nice to see you! We were just talking about

wedding dresses!”

Clayton looked down at her but didn't pull away. “Were you now?”

Summer watched and tried to fight against the sudden wave of jealousy that hit her like a fist to the gut. Despair soon followed and pierced her heart, freeing the familiar fear. *No, no, no!* She told herself. *Don't let it take over!*

“It's too bad you can't get married right away,” Nellie began. “What with the time it takes to make a dress and all. A lot can happen between now and then.”

“I'm not worried about it.” Clayton drawled.

Charlotte tightened her grip on his arm before she stood on tip-toe to whisper in

his ear. “You mean you’re not in any hurry to get married?”

Naturally, she whispered loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

Summer closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She then opened her eyes and looked right at Clayton. “No,” he said as he met her questioning look.

Summer’s heart sank. Charlotte stood straighter and then to everyone’s surprise, kissed him on the cheek. “I thought as much.” She then released him and sent Summer a triumphant smile before she turned to her mother.

“Well, I guess you won’t be doing as much sewing as you thought, Leona.” Nellie said without looking at her and started for the door.

Clayton ignored both the Davis women as he made for Summer. He stood next to the chair she sat in. She could feel the heat of his body, took in the sheer size of him, the broadness of his chest and shoulders as he towered over her. “Is everything settled here?” He asked Mrs. Quinn.

“Yes, Clayton. We’re all done.” Mrs. Quinn said as she glared at the Davis women.

“Good,” he said and quickly scooped Summer up into his arms. “C’mon honey, lets go have us some lunch over at Hank’s restaurant. Old Hank makes a mean bean soup!”

Nellie and Charlotte’s mouths dropped open at the same time. “You mean you’re

going to carry her all the way down to Hank's?" Charlotte asked in shock.

"How else would I get her there? She can't walk yet." Clayton asked.

"You can't carry her down the street in public!" Nellie gasped.

"Why not? The whole town knows she's injured. Makes perfect sense for me to carry her."

"Clayton Riley! You can *not* carry her!" Charlotte whined.

Clayton looked to Summer, her fear immediately disappeared the moment he lifted her into his arms. His strength was incredible, the warmth of his body intoxicating. He smiled down at her. "I can't think of anything I'd like to do more than carry this pretty little lady to

lunch.”

“But everyone will see!” Nellie scolded.

“Clayton sent her a wide grin. “Yes, Mrs. Davis. I know.”

He winked at the woman, turned on his heel and left the mercantile with his future bride in his arms. It was all Summer could do not to let the tears fall. He’d just championed her in front of Mrs. Davis and her daughter. He’d slapped them with the fact that he cared about her. Summer took in a shaky breath as the cold and bright sunshine hit her.

“Close your eyes honey and enjoy the ride,” he whispered to her.

Summer did, at least for a moment as

she realized she could fall deeply and madly in love with Clayton Riley.

And she was.

Eleven

Thanksgiving dawned bright and cold. Summer awoke early to the clatter of pots and pans coming from the kitchen as Mrs. Riley began her day. She wanted to be in the kitchen to help her and struggled to try to get out of bed and dressed. She could at least hobble about at this point but still had to be very careful. The doctor from town paid a surprise visit to her two days before and checked her foot. In fact he kept checking her for fever but she knew well she didn't have one. At least not the kind the doctor suspected she had. No, Summer's flushed face, rapid heart and

goose-pimpled flesh was not from any sort of cold or fever, but from Clayton Riley.

The minute Summer remembered how Clayton carried her through town to take her to lunch, her heart began to race, she blushed something awful, and delightful chills went up her spine. She couldn't stop thinking about it after Clayton drove them home, got her settled, then rode back into town to finish out his day at the Sheriff's office. It wasn't long after that the doctor showed up.

But the doctor hadn't seen what Clayton did, had no idea how he'd championed her in front of the Davis women. His actions made Summer feel much more secure and the look on

Charlotte Davis's face was priceless! By the time Mrs. Riley joined them at Hank's restaurant, Summer felt as if she were a beautiful damsel in distress just rescued by a handsome prince. A silly dream she'd had so often as a child was just fulfilled and nothing could dampen her spirits. It was the best day of her life and she knew she would treasure it always.

"Oh good, you're up." Clayton said as he poked his head into the room. "Ma could sure use some help in the kitchen. I'd do it but Spencer and I have to run into town to check on some things, but we'll be back in plenty of time for supper."

Summer clutched at her nightdress and

looked at him. She noted how he nonchalantly studied her in the early morning light coming in through the window. Heat shot through her like gunfire and she sucked in a breath. Good Heavens but he was handsome!

“Do ... do you have to go?” She asked, suddenly unable to bear the thought of him leaving her at all.

He smiled. “Ahhhh honey, I can think of better ways to spend my time than having a meetin’ with a tired out posse, but duty calls.” He stepped into the room. Summer clutched the nightdress to her more closely as he bent to her. “In fact I can think of a *lot* of things I’d rather be doing.” He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand and smiled.

“I’ll send ma in to help you dress, then I’ll help you into the kitchen.” His voice had dropped in pitch and Summer felt her stomach do a full somersault. Her breathing slowed and she couldn’t get any words to come out, as if his touch had rendered her completely speechless. All she could do was look up at him and nod.

He lingered there a moment longer and quietly stared down at her. He closed his eyes and turned his face away a scant second before he pulled his hand away from her face. “I’ll be back with ma. Don’t go anywhere now, ya hear?”

She smiled. “I won’t,” she managed. He left the room and she let go a heavy sigh. Oh Lord! How could she stand

it? One minute she felt her heart flutter wildly in her chest, her whole being somehow engulfed by Clayton's mere presence, no ... his *essence*. Then just as suddenly the familiar cold fear would come over her, reminding her that it could all disappear in a puff of smoke and she'd find herself once again faced with the likes of someone like Mr. Slade. But not today! Summer forced her heart to still and let herself enjoy the lingering feel of his hand against her cheek. The scent of wind and soap and leather than surrounded him, the knowledge that soon she would be his, completely.

If only he would just marry her! Why was he waiting? Of course her foot, she

knew that made him take pause. He wanted her to be able to stand for their wedding, but her insecurities would not still so easily, and she had to constantly fight to keep her emotions under control. She hoped today they too would take a holiday and leave her alone.

Mrs. Riley helped her dress and soon Clayton had carried her into the kitchen where he sat her down at the table. He bent to her, and much to Summer's surprise, kissed her on the cheek. "See you later darlin'. Ma, don't tire her out." He then put on his hat and left through the kitchen's back door.

"My, my, that son of mine certainly is in a good mood this morning." Mrs. Riley said then gave Summer a wink.

Summer swallowed and tried to come down from the cloud she was floating on. She smiled as a furious blush crept into her cheeks. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Riley laughed as she set a large pan down in front of her on the table. The turkey in it barely fit. “Now, let’s stuff this bird and get things underway. Those boys of mine are gonna be mighty hungry when they get home.”

Summer smiled as she took it all in. The warmth of the kitchen, the smell of pies in the oven, the dinner they were preparing for the men and their guests coming later that day. Summer’s smile widened as she realized this was the second most wonderful day in her life.

* * *

Clayton frowned at the news the posse brought back. The men were tired, cranky, and hungry. He told them to all go home and take a few days off. They deserved the rest and time with their families. He'd worry about Red Ned and his gang of cutthroats later, but he'd sure have to be thinking about them soon. They'd been spotted not twenty miles from Nowhere, and that didn't set well with Clayton. No, it didn't set well at all.

“Red Ned,” he mumbled to himself.
“Who comes up with these names?”

“Locals usually,” Spencer commented from behind him. He stared at the wanted poster over Clayton's shoulder.

“Ned’s spilled enough blood to have earned the name, that’s for sure.”

“Yeah, well Ned had better not interrupt our dinner tonight that’s all I can say,” Clayton grumbled as he reached for his hat. “Are you ready?”

Spencer grabbed his own hat. “As ready as I’ll ever be. Let’s do our rounds and make sure everything’s nice and quiet, then go home and eat! I’m starved already!”

“Sure hope Billy’s enjoying his holiday supper. I wonder if Miss Abbey will come down and bring him some pie this evening while he’s on duty.”

“Ha! Not if her sister Charlotte can help it! Now that you’re taken, she’s probably looking for some other

unsuspecting prey!”

“Unsuspecting prey?”

“Yeah, as in any unmarried man within fifty miles of here!” Spencer said with a laugh.

Clayton eyed him before his face broke into a smile. “Well little brother that would include you. Fancy that.”

Spencer’s laughter abruptly stopped. “Sam blazes you’re right!”

“Maybe I outta send you out with the next posse so Charlotte doesn’t have a chance to get a hold of ya.”

Spencer gulped, “That might not be a bad idea.”

The two men laughed, put on their hats, and left the Sheriff’s office to go make their rounds before going home. It was

the longest set of rounds Sheriff Clayton Riley could remember. Spencer was in an exceptionally good mood which made the day go by much quicker but didn't help Clayton keep his mind off of what was waiting at home. He was beginning to enjoy the idea of getting married. Even more so, he was enjoying the idea of courting Miss Summer James until she couldn't stand it any longer and would have to be carried to the alter. Not because of her foot or that he had to force her, but because she'd be so enamored with him she'd be weak in the knees and swooning. Clayton smiled at the thought. Yes sir, he'd court her like no woman had ever been courted before. He'd make sure she felt

something for him and he planned on having fun doing it too.

Clayton smiled and relaxed as they rode from farm to farm to give folks the warning to keep an eye out for the notorious outlaw Red Ned and to take no chances when it came to strangers. But not even the news they delivered that day to the townsfolk and their families could dampen Clayton's mood. He was exceptionally happy and, for the first time in a very long time, didn't think about the emptiness of his heart or the void left there after Sarah's death. What Clayton did realize was he'd found something to fill it.

Yes siree, Summer James had no idea what was coming her way!



Thanksgiving came and went. It was the most wonderful day of Summer's life! The food was incredible and she helped to prepare it as best she could. The Browns were delightful company and she enjoyed Milly and the stories she told of the Riley brothers when they were children. Mrs. Riley shared her own stories much to Clayton and Spencer's utter horror, and Summer had laughed until her sides hurt and she couldn't see for the tears in her eyes. But the best part of the day came after the pumpkin pie and coffee, when Clayton carried her into the parlor while the

others told stories around the dining room table. He set her down then sat next to her, his body so close their shoulders were touching.

“That was a lovely meal, thank you, honey,” he told her, his voice soft and low. “I can’t remember when I’ve eaten so much.”

She smiled and blushed at the compliment. The lamplight was dim and she didn’t wonder if he had slipped into the parlor earlier and turned it down. The smell of pie hung in the air and mixed with Clayton’s own intoxicating scent. She felt tired from the day’s labors, what few she was able to perform, and wanted nothing more than to rest her head against his shoulder, but

she didn't dare. It would be too improper, even she knew that. Growing up in the orphanage Mrs. Teeters taught her what was what. But Mrs. Teeters hadn't taught Summer what to do when Clayton put an arm across the back of the settee and leaned toward her. His face was so close she could feel the breath escape his lips as he spoke. "Today was a might fine day, and ya know what would make it even finer?"

She melted at the sound of his voice, his face so close to hers. She sat and looked straight ahead, afraid to look at him, afraid the closeness of him would be too much for her to bear. He'd been carrying her around for over a week! One would think she'd be able to face

him. But Summer's fear raised its ugly head just then, and she feared what she might see if she turned to him. Would he be looking at her with lust or admiration? With indecision or loving intent? How *did* he feel about her, really? He hadn't said one thing about their wedding or more importantly, *when*. Dinner had been taken up with talk of the outlaws they'd been searching for and stories of his childhood antics. In fact not once did anyone at the table mention anything pertaining to their upcoming marriage.

Summer's heart sank at the thought and she fought to still her racing heart and the fear that began to squeeze her chest so tight she wondered if she'd be able to

breath.

“Is there something the matter, honey?” Clayton suddenly asked.

She closed her eyes and quickly shook her head.

“Are you sure? You don’t look so good.”

“I’m sure. I’m sorry, I guess I’m just tired.”

Clayton removed his arm from behind her, placed his hands on his legs and sighed. “Well then, maybe you outta turn in,” he said, his voice laced with sudden flatness.

No, no, no! Summer! Stop it! Stop it now! But the fear had her, and she felt her heart dive straight into disappointment. The same

disappointment that would grip her whenever she heard Mrs. Teeters say, *“I’m sorry she didn’t suit you, but we have other children who might...”*

Nooooo! She screamed in her head as Clayton let go a heavy sigh. *Oh please God make this stop! Why does it always have to come and ruin everything?*

“All right then, let’s get you to your room,” Clayton said as he stood. He turned to her, regret written all over his face as he unceremoniously scooped her up from the settee and turned toward the hall.

Oh please! No! Not yet! But it was as if an invisible gag had been placed on her and she couldn’t tell him to stop, tell

him that she wanted him to hold her, tell him how she was beginning to feel. Summer then began to wonder if she ever would ...

Her stomach knotted up and she felt the first hot sting of tears threaten as he pushed the door to her room open with his foot, went in, and set her on the bed. Her entire body went cold and she felt the familiar bracing of her spine, the tightness in her chest, as he looked down on her, his face an expressionless mask.

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

She would *not* start crying! How could she explain herself if she did? What would he think of her? She quickly nodded without looking at him. It was then he bent down on one knee in

front of her, and took her face in his hands. “You wouldn’t be lying to me now, would ya?”

Her eyes widened. “No,” came out barely a whisper.

“Well then, you get some sleep honey, you do look plumb tuckered out,” he said. But he didn’t let go. Instead he knelt, her face in his hands, and stared into her eyes as if searching for something. His head cocked to one side as he studied her further. His eyes then inadvertently went to her mouth, and stayed there.

She sucked in a breath. Good Lord! Was he going to kiss her? *Why would he do that? Why on Earth would he kiss you? Why? Why? Why?*

Always the voice of fear screamed its way from her heart to her head, always when the hope of love, at long last realized came, it shouted and drove her in the opposite direction.

She stifled a sob as he knelt and looked at her, his head slowly coming closer. He abruptly stopped, turned his head away and sighed. "All right then," he said. When he again looked at her, his face was calm, yet his expression flat. "Get some sleep." He then stood and left the room.

As the door closed behind him, the hot tears of disappointment began to stream down her face, the voice of fear loud and triumphant. *See? See he left you just like all the others. He doesn't*

want you! Who would ever want you?

Summer turned, fell into her pillow and screamed. “Shut up! Go away, just go away!”

Fear did leave then. But it left behind what it always did, a heart broken by a lifetime of rejection and disappointment. A life lived day to day with the knowledge that she would always be alone. That one day, she would die the same way. Alone and unwanted.

Summer wept bitterly and cried into her pillow as she so often did when the battle with fear raged. “Why, Lord? Why doesn’t anyone want me? And now that I’ve met someone who does, I can’t let him? Why? Please, please heal me from this!”

But Summer felt no comfort after she cried out. Not like she sometimes felt in the past. Instead, her tears came in violent waves and soon her pillow was soaked with them when her strength was finally spent.

By the time Mrs. Riley came into the room after listening to Summer's pain filled weeping, it was to find the girl's head upon a wet pillow, her tear stained face red from crying, and her body so exhausted from her recent battle with herself she lay as if dead.

Mrs. Riley looked at her and brushed away her own tears before she knelt down beside the bed and did the one thing she knew would help. She prayed.

Twelve

The next week passed with eerie repetition for Summer. Clayton and Spencer left before dawn every day and by the end of the week, came home to tell them they were heading out with the posse for a few days in search of an outlaw called Red Ned. Summer had gone from being the happiest girl in the world for a brief few days to feeling nothing but an odd sort of numbness. It was how she always felt after a couple had rejected her at the orphanage. Why would she feel any different here? Of course, Clayton hadn't told her he didn't want to marry her anymore, but why else

would he be spending so much time away from the farm? They came home late for supper, and often times Mrs. Riley helped her to her room and into bed. She hopped from room to room during the day and at the end of the week was delighted when Doc Brown brought her a pair of crutches. Now at least she could go outside and help Mrs. Riley with more of the work.

Summer fed the chickens and did other simple little things around the barnyard. And even though it was growing colder by the day, she enjoyed the time spent out of doors. It gave her time to think and decide what to do. Several times she sat on the porch swing and let the cold air embrace her. Once so badly,

she barely managed to get out of the swing with Mrs. Riley's help. She'd received quite the scolding for letting herself get so cold and Summer decided to be careful of her time spent outside from then on. She didn't want Mrs. Riley to worry. And the woman *was* worried, Summer could see it in her eyes whenever she looked at her. Perhaps it was because Mrs. Riley suspected her son was pulling away from his bride to be as well, that it was only a matter of time before he announced he changed his mind and would be sending her back.

Summer thought on the possibility all week. Why else would he be staying away from her? He'd hardly spoken

three words to her since Thanksgiving! And now he was gone completely for who knew how long! How many days *would* it before they returned?

As it turned out, Clayton and Spencer were gone off and on for nearly three weeks before they finally returned from their search unsuccessful, tired, and worn out. By the time they managed to drag themselves back to the farm after giving up their search for the outlaws they were totally spent. Clayton and Spencer got home and without a word, both crawled up the stairs to their rooms and hadn't been seen from since. At least until early afternoon the next day when Summer happened to be in the kitchen peeling apples for a pie.

She stopped breathing when Clayton entered the kitchen and headed for the stove. Summer had kept the pot of coffee warm for when they did get up but worried it would be too old by now. She watched as he poured himself a cup, ran a hand through his sleep tousled hair, and came to the kitchen table. He noted the crutches that she'd propped against a chair but said nothing. He just stood and stared at them.

He then looked at her.

Summer felt herself go cold. His eyes were expressionless and he said nothing. She might as well pack her things up and head to town right now.

“Clayton, sit down and I'll make you something to eat,” Mrs. Riley said as she

came into the kitchen. “Is Spencer up yet? Oh but you look a fright!”

He slowly looked at her and shook his head. He took another sip of coffee before he once again looked to Summer, his body still as a statue, and stared.

It was all she could do to sit there. What was he thinking? Why didn’t he just say it? *I’ve changed my mind, I’ve thought about it while I was out searching with the posse, and I’ve decided we won’t suit.*

Finally Summer could stand it no longer. “I think I’ll go finish the mending now,” she choked out as she reached for the crutches.

Clayton numbly looked at her as his eyes narrowed to slits.

“What?” She suddenly demanded.
“What is it you want to say to me?”

She was angry then, angry he was toying with her. Angry that he wouldn't say what he needed to say and get it over with!

But all he did was stare, his face like stone as he stood straight and slugged down what coffee was left in the cup then looked to his mother. “I have to go to town.”

He then turned and left. Left without another word.

Summer couldn't help what she did next. She choked back the tears threatening to erupt and went to her room. She would leave. Enough of this torture! She'd pack up her things and

hop to town if she had to!

Mrs. Riley followed her to her room. "Now don't think he's upset with you dear. Something's eating him, that's for certain, but I'm sure it has nothing to do with you."

"Nothing?" Summer blurted out on a sob. "How can you say that? Didn't you see the way he was looking at me? He's going to send me away, Mrs. Riley, I just know it!"

She turned from her then, ashamed of her outburst, ashamed to speak the truth to a woman who had shown her nothing but kindness. Oh how she wished she could stay! But how could she knowing Clayton was done with her?

"Don't say that," Mrs. Riley began.

“Neither one of us knows what’s wrong with that boy, but rest assured I’m going to find out!” She spun on her heel and stomped out of the room. Summer listened as the back door of the kitchen opened and slammed shut. Fine, let Mrs. Riley hear it before she did. Let Clayton tell his mother what he was going to do. Summer would make sure she wouldn’t be around long enough for him to tell her! She’d have Spencer drive her into town. She’d then ask Doc and Milly if she could stay with them a few days until she could make other arrangements. Of course, Clayton would be *sure* to make arrangements. Arrangements for her to leave that is and she was certain she wouldn’t have to wait long. But she

couldn't stand the thought of hearing him say it. To hear him tell her he was sending her back. If only she could escape without seeing him, without having to talk with him. Perhaps then she wouldn't feel her heart completely shatter and break.

Break. Why does a heart break? Why should she feel anything at all?

"Oh Summer ..." she said to herself as realization hit. "Why'd you have to go and fall in love?"

She sat on the bed and closed her eyes. When did this happen? She'd been fearful for the last three weeks! Ever since Thanksgiving night! Sure she tried to stay occupied by helping Mrs. Riley sew the dresses she was making

for her. She was wearing the brown calico now and Clayton hadn't even noticed!

Summer choked back another sob and looked about her room for the few things she had. She stood, hopped to the trunk at the end of the bed and picked up the blue calico dress they'd finished just last night. It was beautiful and Summer began to feel guilty about taking it with her. Perhaps she should leave with only what she originally brought.

She struggled to get down on her knees and pull her satchel out from under the bed. She pushed herself up, threw it down on the mattress and opened it up.

"Going somewhere?" A familiar voice cooed from behind her.

Summer inwardly groaned as she turned around.

Charlotte Davis glided into the room and glanced about. “My, my! Packing already? Oh I’m so sorry!”

Summer stood straight and squared her shoulders. She would not let this woman see how upset she was! “It never would have worked out anyway. It’s for the best.” She let her anger take control, numb her to what was happening. Nothing like adding insult to injury, now she had to deal with this!

“Where is everyone? I drove up, knocked on the door but no one answered.” Charlotte asked with genuine concern.

“Clayton ...” Summer began. “He went

to town. Mrs. Riley ... she must still be in the barn. She went out there earlier to ... she'll be back in a moment I'm sure."

"Oh, that explains it. And Spencer? Is he all right?"

"Yes, he's still asleep. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm very busy."

"I can see that. Leaving are you?"

"Why else would I be packing?"

Summer said through clenched teeth. It was all she could do to keep her control.

"I'm so sorry, really I am. It's such a terrible thing. Tell you what, I'll drive you into town so you don't have to disturb Spencer."

Summer froze. Here was her chance, her chance to run, run from the pain, run from the heartbreak that was sure to

come if she heard it from Clayton himself. She spun to Charlotte. “What are you doing here anyway?”

“I came to see if Clayton and Spencer were okay. Billy came over to the house to see Abbey after the posse got back to town. They all had a rough time of it out there. More men were wounded ...”

Summer’s face fell. “What? How many?”

“At least five. That nasty outlaw Red Ned has been giving our men a heap of trouble these last couple of months.”

Summer closed her eyes a moment. How could she be so selfish? Here she was worried about what Clayton was going to do to her and she hadn’t given one thought to what might have happened

to him while searching for a blood thirsty outlaw. “What am I doing?” She whispered to herself.

“Packing?” Charlotte finished for her.

Summer again looked at her. “Take me to town. I ... I need to go to town.”

“Yes, I’d be happy to. Let’s hurry then.”

Summer grabbed the crutches and went to get her coat near the front door.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Charlotte called after her.

“No, let’s just go! I have to talk to Clayton!” Summer called back as she quickly put the coat on.

“All right, I’m coming.” Charlotte said as she quickly glanced about the room again. She then stuffed the blue dress

into the satchel, grabbed whatever other personal items she could find, threw them in, and then promptly tossed the satchel into the trunk at the end of the bed.

She smoothed back her hair then innocently sashayed down the hall to the front door. “Let’s hurry so you can catch him before he heads out anywhere.”

Summer stopped and looked at her, “Thank you.”

Charlotte smiled broadly. “Oh don’t mention it, I can see you’re a woman in love.”

Summer too smiled. “Yes, yes I am.” She then turned and headed out the door.

Charlotte’s smile quickly faded as she watched Summer hobble down the steps

and head to the buggy. “Too bad Clayton will never find out.”

* * *

Mrs. Riley pushed herself up from the barn floor. She'd not been able to talk to Clayton, probably because Clayton didn't talk at all. He said nothing to her as she came into the barn as he quickly saddled his horse. Said nothing as she implored him to tell her what was wrong with him, and when he did finally speak, it was only to say that he was riding over to the Johnson's farm adjacent to their own to see Mr. Johnson before he went to town. He rode out of the barn and took off through the orchards to the neighboring farm and never looked

back. She'd sunk to her knees then, sunk down and heaved a sob. What was wrong with her son? She'd never seen him so bleak. What happened to him while he was out there this time? He'd gone out with other posse's but never had he come back so distraught and full of despair! She prayed then, prayed and wept for her boy, for both of them. And while she cried out to God, she never heard the buggy that pulled up, nor did she hear it leave. So when Mrs. Riley finally dried her tears and slowly made her way back to the house, it was with shock and worry that she discovered Summer had disappeared.

* * *

Charlotte kept the horse at a good trot all the way back to town. Summer shared light conversation with her and noted how well the woman could handle the horse and buggy as they drove. She was somewhat jealous, but then it wasn't something she couldn't learn to do herself at some point. Maybe Clayton would teach her. She sniffed back a tear at the thought.

Clayton, she *had* to talk to him! She'd tell him, tell him how she felt! Tell him now while she was angry and not suffocated by fear! The fear never let her speak, never! It bound and gagged her as sure as any ropes and strips of cloth could. But Summer was

determined not to let it this time! The moment Charlotte told her how bad it was for Clayton, Spencer, and the rest of the posse on their last search, her heart broke. Not because of rejection and not because of any thoughts of Clayton sending her away, but with thoughts of what Clayton must have been through. Whatever it was, it had to have been horrible. She knew how he felt about his men, any man that rode with him. Many of them had families of their own, Mrs. Riley told her so. Who knew what horrors the men had seen or suffered in the search for the outlaw gang that terrorized the farms and surrounding towns?

Suddenly what she felt didn't matter.

What did was that she made sure Clayton was all right. It was as if he was in some sort of shock when he looked at her earlier. As if he'd seen something so terrible, he couldn't speak of it. She knew what that was like, had experienced it herself when ever a fellow orphan died which was often. Especially in winter, and though she'd not known real winter until now, the orphans got sick during the colder months back in New Orleans all the same.

She sniffed a few more times to keep the tears at bay as Charlotte pulled the buggy up in front of the Sheriff's office.

"I can help you down, or I can go in first and see if he's here," she sweetly

offered.

“I’ll get down.” Summer said and immediately began to maneuver herself to do just that. She didn’t care if she hurt her foot. She had to talk to Clayton!

Charlotte helped her, and Summer was beginning to believe the woman was being truthful at last. That she really had let bygones, be bygones and was trying to help.

She clung to the thought as they went up the steps, crossed the boardwalk and stepped to the door of the Sheriff’s office. Charlotte tried the knob but it wouldn’t open. “Oh dear,” she said.

“It’s locked?” Summer asked in shock. “Try it yourself.”

Summer tried the door. It was indeed

locked. “Where could they be?”

“They might have rode out already to start another search. I’m sorry we didn’t catch Clayton before they left.”

Summer’s heart sank. “So am I. I really needed to speak with him before...”

“Before you leave? Oh Miss James I am sorry!”

Summer glanced at Charlotte who stood there looking quite empathetic. But how real was it? She still didn’t trust her fully. “I suppose I should have you take me back to the farm. I’m sorry you drove me all the way into town like this, but it was ever so kind of you.”

“Oh now don’t you worry about it. I’ll tell you what, why don’t you come sit a

spell at my house, I'm sure Abbey would love to see you. She's been dying to meet you and we'd love the company this afternoon. Mother and daddy have gone over to our uncle's house to look at a horse. They won't be back until supper time."

Summer sighed and noted how Charlotte mentioned Mrs. Davis wouldn't be there. In other words, she would be safe from the woman's comments about how unfitting she was to be Clayton's wife. Even if it appeared Charlotte had turned over a new leaf, apparently her mother hadn't.

"I suppose it would be all right. You are closer to town than the farm ..."

"Oh and Mrs. Riley won't mind. After

all, she didn't say anything when we left and I'm sure she saw us."

Summer hadn't thought of that. In fact, she wondered why Clayton's mother hadn't come out of the barn at all.

"Let's get out of the cold and have some nice hot tea with Abbey," Charlotte said as she took her arm and pulled her away from the door. Summer hopped down the steps of the boardwalk and back to the buggy. Charlotte helped her up then turned back to the Sheriff's office.

"Let's leave Clayton a note and let him know where you are," she suggested.

Now why hadn't she thought of it? Summer rolled her eyes at her having overlooked something so simple. "Good idea."

“I have a piece of paper in my reticule and a pencil, I’ll just write him a note and slip it under the door.” Charlotte went to the door, her reticule in hand and pulled out what she needed. She then wrote the note and slipped it under the door just as she said she would. She then came back to the buggy and climbed in. “There, all done! Now, let’s go to my house and have some tea and biscuits.”

Summer felt a pang of guilt. The woman was being so incredibly helpful. Maybe she shouldn’t be so distrustful of her at this point. Maybe she really was trying to help.

She let go a weary sigh. “Tea sounds wonderful. Thank you, Charlotte. For

everything.”

Charlotte let go a sweet smile. “Don’t mention it.”

Thirteen

It was near dusk by the time Clayton finally made it to town. He rode straight to the Sheriff's office, dismounted, and trudged up the steps to the boardwalk. Nowhere was quiet. Most folks were probably done with whatever errands brought them to town and were heading home to supper. Clayton wished he was, he missed Summer, and he was going to have to explain his earlier behavior to her when he got home. But first things first, he had work to do.

He made to enter his office but the door was locked. Billy must still be making rounds, letting folks know of the

danger nearby. It also meant Spencer was still back at the farm. Poor Spence, he'd taken a nasty fall and got quite the bump on the head. Their mother was going to go crazy with worry when she saw it. He meant to stop by Doc's and have him go out to take a look at it. If he was lucky Doc had already gone to check on not only his brother, but Summer's injury as well. Unfortunately, Clayton wasn't sure and made a mental note to stop by Doc's house before going home.

Clayton unlocked the door and went inside. The office was full of shadow at this time of day and he had to light a lamp to have enough light to write out his reports and letters. He wearily sat at

the desk and worked for the next several hours. By the time he was done, it was an effort to get up out of his chair. Just as he stepped away from the desk Billy entered.

“You look like something a cat drug in!” Billy exclaimed when he saw him.

“I feel like it too,” was all Clayton managed. He leaned against the desk, folded his arms over his chest, and heaved a weary sigh. “I don’t know when I’ve been as tired.”

“Not too tired I hope! Not with that pretty little thing you got waitin’ at home for ya!”

Clayton smiled as he let his head drop to his chest, his eyes closed. They were dry and felt like someone had thrown

sand in them. When he opened them he noticed something on the floor. He squinted and cocked his head to one side as if that would help him see any better.

“What is it?” Billy asked.

“Move your foot,” he instructed.

Billy did and looked down. “Hey, what’s that?”

“A note, hand it to me will ya?”

Billy snatched up the note and handed it to him. Clayton’s name was written in a neat script on the folded piece of paper. He opened the note and began to read. His eyes immediately widened at the first two words. In fact, they were the *only* two words!

I’m leaving.

Clayton looked up from the note in his

hand, his mouth wide open in shock. He blinked a few times and looked to the note again.

I'm leaving.

Sincerely,

Miss James

Clayton's heart stopped. He knew he should have explained himself before he left the house but he was still in shock, still too bent on protecting his family and farm. He'd lit out of the barn and went straight to the Johnson's. He wanted to let Mr. Johnson know he was ready to get back to farming and that he would let him go from the lease or, if Mr. Johnson wanted, he could finish out the year. He'd then ridden into town to write the necessary letters to let his superiors

know he was retiring from the office of Sheriff and going back to farming. He was done with chasing outlaws, seeing bodies strung out like a trail of blood across the wilderness. How could he continue to put his life in danger day in and day out with a wife? No, he would make sure he could be with her, be at home to protect his family. Red Ned had terrorized too many folks of late and Clayton realized that while he was out protecting Nowhere and it's townsfolk from such outlaws, he himself was neglecting to protect his own.

It was time to make a change, go back to where he belonged, and to finally let go of the past. To let go of Sarah's death.

But now this...

Clayton folded the note and shoved it into his shirt pocket. "Was there a stage coming into town today?"

"I reckon so."

Clayton stopped breathing. "What time did it leave?"

Billy scratched his head. "The usual time I would think. Two o'clock or there about."

"Good God!" Clayton grabbed his hat and shoved it onto his head. "It's after seven! I'll never catch her!"

"You Okay, boss?"

Clayton grabbed Billy by the shoulders and shook him. "Did you see Miss James in town today?"

"No, I done just got back to town

myself.”

“Did you go to my farm?”

“Well no, why would I when I knew you were already out there? Besides, Spencer’s home ain’t he?”

“He’s wounded. Oh my God, I need to ... to...”

Clayton’s face took on a sudden look of determination as he headed for the door. “Tell Doc to head out to my place, have him check on Spencer.”

“Where are you going?”

“To see if Miss James is on that stage!”

“What?”

“She’s gone, Billy! She’s left! There’s no good reason for it! No good reason at all!” And with that he stormed

out of the Sheriff's office.

Billy watched as Clayton mounted his big black, kicked him into a gallop, and headed down the street. "Wooo wheee," he mumbled to himself as he watched his boss ride out of sight. "Now that there's a man in love." He chuckled, closed the door to the Sheriff's office, and whistling, headed for his horse.

* * *

"How did you like your chicken, Miss James?" Mr. Davis asked.

Summer stared at her plate, the dinner was delicious but the company wasn't. Mr. and Mrs. Davis had returned home over two hours ago and Summer was

still trying to fathom how she went from putting on her coat at the sight of them to sitting down to fried chicken and mashed potatoes. She looked at him and forced a smile. “Delicious.”

“Glad to hear it!” Mr. Davis said as he slapped a hand on the table. “If you think that was good, wait until you try the cake Abbey made! She’s quite the cook our little Abbey!”

Summer’s eyes widened. Mr. Davis was a balding, portly fellow with fat cheeks and twinkling blue eyes. How could this jovial, pleasant man be married to such a shrew of a wife? Summer had been pondering it all evening. But that wasn’t the only thing she’d been pondering. She’d also been

puzzling over why Mrs. Davis was suddenly so cordial and polite. In fact, Summer could even go so far as to say Nellie Davis was being *nice*.

“I think I’ll go put the coffee on. Miss James, have you had enough?” Mrs. Davis asked sweetly.

Summer forced herself not to audibly gulp at the woman’s syrupy tone. Something *had* to be wrong! Her eyes darted about the table. Abbey and Charlotte were giggling as they talked about something Milly Brown said to their father while Mrs. Davis continued to look at her with a silly smile plastered across her usually pinched face. Summer knew a fake smile when she saw one. None of the evening

seemed real, and she began to seriously wonder if any of it was.

But then, this wasn't Winslow, and it wasn't New Orleans. Maybe folks out here got over things quickly. Like venomous snakes that suddenly decided they no longer liked the taste of plump little mice.

Summer finally gulped.

"Is something wrong, Miss James?" Mrs. Davis asked.

Summer forced another smile. "No, nothing's wrong. But I really do need to be going..."

"Nonsense! You can't travel at night in your condition!" Mr. Davis huffed.

"What if something happened? You'd never make it back to town on foot."

“I ... well I...” Summer began.

“You can stay here!” Mr. Davis chortled. “Folks in these parts do it all the time. Your ma ... I mean, your soon to be ma... she knows you’re here. Let that Clayton come fetch you in the morning. It’s too cold for any of us to be out this late. Besides, you know what they say, absence makes the heart grow fonder!” He slapped the table again and burst into laughter.

Summer tried not to grimace. The thought of spending the night with the Davis family made her head swim. Pain shot straight to her temples and she closed her eyes against it as Mrs. Davis disappeared into the kitchen. In between dinner and dessert Mr. Davis continued

to smack the table every time he talked, his dutiful daughters both laughing along with any thing he said.

Oh Clayton, Summer inwardly sighed to herself as Mrs. Davis finally returned to the kitchen with cake and coffee.

Where are you?

* * *

Clayton raced down the street to the stage and telegraph office to see if Sam Olsen, who ran the office, was still there. Unfortunately the office was closed. He groaned, turned his horse and headed back the other way, slowing only enough to turn down another street that would take him to the main road out

of town and home.

How could she leave? Had Spencer driven her to town? But how could he? Clayton wondered if Spencer could even get out of bed! He was still sleeping when Clayton got up and didn't look so good when he'd gone in to check on him. He meant to ride straight to Doc and Milly's as soon as he got to town, but the moment Clayton saw Summer sitting at the kitchen table peeling apples everything changed.

The brutality of what he saw the last few weeks flooded his mind. Two entire families slaughtered and not fifty miles from Nowhere. The women, the children ... what sort of evil possesses a man to do such things? Now he knew

how Red Ned got his name. He left a trail of blood where ever he went and all for a few horses and supplies. Why didn't the man just take what he needed and leave the settlers alone? But no, Red Ned liked to leave his mark behind.

Clayton vowed that before he retired as Sheriff and went back to farming he'd make sure Red Ned was brought to justice. He didn't have to go out with every posse and could make do in town not to mention wire a few U.S. Marshalls to widen the search. From the looks of it, Red Ned had headed south. Clayton decided he'd better wire his Uncle Harlan in Clear Creek, it being the largest town south of Nowhere. Besides, Uncle Harlan would have his

hide if he didn't give him the heads up the murdering varmint was heading back his way.

By the time Clayton made it home it started to snow. He put his horse in the barn but didn't unsaddle him in case he needed to leave right away. He wondered if Doc was coming as he headed into the house to find his mother and see what she knew about Summer.

She was at the kitchen table, eyes red from crying, her face puffy. "Ma? What happened?"

His mother looked up at him. "Clayton! Oh Clayton is Summer with you?"

"No, I was hoping she was with you..."

“I can’t find her anywhere! And Spencer, he’s been sick all day! I’ve been so afraid to leave him!”

Clayton glanced about before he stormed across the kitchen to the small office Summer used as her bedroom. Nothing seemed out of place except the fact she wasn’t in it. But as he looked around he noticed some of her things were no longer there. The hair ribbons he’d bought for her, the book of poetry she liked. Even that rag of a dress she wore was gone. He’d seen it hung up on a hook near the window at night after she'd put her night dress on.

Clayton closed his eyes as his hands balled into fist. “Summer ...”

“I looked everywhere for her. The

barn, the orchards, I found no trace,” his mother said from behind him. “And what’s worse, her satchel’s gone. I know she kept it under the bed, and it’s gone, Clayton! Gone!”

He turned to his mother and quickly took her into his arms as she wept anew. How could that girl have done such a thing? What could have possibly happened to make her leave so suddenly? Surely his behavior that morning hadn’t been enough to drive her away? Or was it? She was an orphan and he knew what her biggest fear was. Rejection, abandonment. Had Summer misinterpreted his actions? Did she think he didn’t want to marry her any more? He and Spencer *had* been gone

for a spell but the job called for it. In fact, it was one of the reasons he decided to quit being a lawman and go back to apple farming.

“Clayton, what are we going to do?” his mother cried.

“First thing I’m gonna do is figure out how she got herself off this farm. Someone had to have helped her.”

His mother sniffed back her tears, looked up and studied him a moment. “Yes, you’re right. None of the other horses are missing and the wagon’s still here. Someone had to have helped her. But who?”

“You didn’t hear anything? See anyone?”

She shook her head as she sniffed back

more tears. “I was in the barn for quite a while after you left, you upset me so.”

He drew her back into his chest and held her there. “Ah ma, I’m sorry. But during this last search me and the posse found things no man ought to lay eyes on, not even a lawman. It made me think and decide to make some changes. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about them before I left in such a hurry. Old man Johnson’s agreed to give the orchards back once the lease is up. Be good for the both of us. It’s become too much for him and I’m ready to get back to farming. But I don’t have time to explain now, I’ve got to find Summer! If she left on the two o’clock stage then she’s got half a day’s head start on me.”

“Oh Clayton, do you really think she left town?”

He pulled the note from his pocket and handed it to her. His mother gasped when she read it. Clayton took the note from her hand and stuffed it back in his pocket.

“You can’t let her leave, Clayton! You just can’t!”

“I don’t plan on it, even if I have to chase that stage all night. They had to have stopped over at Gunderson’s. I’ll saddle Spencer’s horse and head out right away. Fix me a sandwich or something will you?”

His mother nodded as she wiped her tears. “There’s no good reason why Summer would have left, none. She

seemed so happy here!”

“Don’t worry ma. I’ll bring her back if it’s the last thing I do.”

Of course, Clayton had to find her first.

* * *

Summer lay in the bed she was sharing with Abbey and let go a weary sigh. Before the Davis sisters fell asleep she had to listen to Charlotte carry on about the horrors of living in Nowhere for what seemed like an eternity. Summer decided that if she had to listen to Charlotte’s prattle for one more minute she’d die. Thankfully sleep finally overtook both sisters to leave Summer alone with her thoughts, disturbing

though they may be.

If Summer didn't know any better, she'd say Charlotte was trying to dissuade her from staying in Nowhere. Perhaps that's exactly what she was doing, but then how would she know? All she knew was how badly she wanted to see Clayton and be able to talk with him. To tell him how she felt. To tell him she loved him. She just hoped and prayed that when she did see him the fear usually so quick to render her speechless remained silent for once. She *had* to tell him! She just had to!

Abbey suddenly laughed in her sleep, turned over, and flopped one arm over Summer's belly. Summer let go a small "umphf" before she sighed. She then did

her best to pick up the girl's arm and move it. At least she was sharing a bed with Abbey and not Charlotte. If she was, she was sure the girl would *still* be talking!

Oh Clayton, why didn't you come for me earlier? She sighed to herself. But wait a minute. Why *hadn't* he? They'd left the note at the Sheriff's office and he had to have gone there at some point during the day. Good Lord! Surely he'd read it by now! So why didn't he come get her earlier and take her home? He couldn't have known she had decided to leave and began to pack her satchel unless he went back to the farm first. Would he be angry that she'd done so? What did Mrs. Riley think?

Summer fought against the guilt rising like bile in her throat. Poor Mrs. Riley, did the woman think she had run away? But no, Mrs. Riley had to have seen her with Charlotte as they left the farm.

Oh what was she to think? Well, other than the obvious ...

Clayton didn't come for her after reading the note because he *had* decided not to marry her. Summer's heart sank with the thought. *Oh Lord! No! Help me to show him I love him! Help me get back to the farm first thing in the morning!*

But what good would it do? If he'd wanted her back at the farm she'd be there. He surely would have come for her after reading the note and taken her

home.

Home ...

Where would her home be now? What was she to do? She'd been so angry that afternoon, so confident in her spur of the moment plan to go to Doc and Milly's and stay there a few days until she decided what to do.

"I have no money ..." she whispered to herself as tears began to stream down her face and on to the pillow. "I have no family ... no place to go and no one to see."

The numbness came out of nowhere. It encircled her heart and mind with a force so powerful, so deadly, that in the past it would have alarmed her. But not this time, this time she welcomed it.

This time she hoped it would give her the strength to do what she knew she had to.

Leave.

Fourteen

Clayton stood in shock as he watched the stagecoach driver fold his arms over his chest and spit. “I’m tellin’ ya Sheriff, there ain’t no woman on this stage by the name of Summer James. There aint’ no women period. Them’s all men asleep in there!”

He’d ridden through the dark with nothing but the bright moonlight shining upon the snow covered ground and arrived at the Gunderson’s stage stop well after midnight. He immediately found the driver and woke him up. Of course at that point he probably woke up the entire establishment but didn’t care.

He had to find Summer!

“You mean there wasn’t a woman on this stage at all?” Clayton asked in disbelief.

“No sir. Just three men. Maybe she planned on taking the morning stage.”

“Morning stage!”

“Yep, ten o’clock.”

“Good God!” Clayton tried to collect himself as he calculated what time he’d seen Summer the day before. “No, it’s not possible, she couldn’t have left on the ten o’clock stage.”

“Have to agree with ya there.”

Clayton stared at the driver. He was tired, he was hungry, and he wasn’t sure he heard him right. “What did you say? How could you know she didn’t take the

ten o'clock stage?"

"Because it ain't left yet. This here's the two o'clock stage, there's a ten o'clock stage leavin' Nowhere in the morning."

"Today?"

The driver spit again. "Yep." He scratched at his long underwear. "Now if you don't mind, I need to get me some shut eye. Dawn comes mighty early ya know."

Clayton stood with his mouth hanging open like some dote and stared at the wall. She hadn't left, she couldn't have. But if she didn't leave Nowhere then where did she go?

He rubbed his tired eyes with his hands. He'd be a fool to try to ride back

now. Spencer's horse needed food and rest and so did he. He'd have to get at least a few hours sleep before heading out again.

He went outside, led the horse to the barn and took care of him. He then returned to the house, found the food Mrs. Gunderson set out for him, ate, and then after finding the blanket she left, bedded himself down in the parlor. But sleep didn't come so easy to Clayton for there were too many unanswered questions, one in particular.

Who did Summer leave the farm with?

Clayton suddenly groaned when he realized it could only be one person, or in this case four. The Davis family. Who else would have her and *not* let any

of his family know about it? “Lord have mercy!” Clayton spoke to the dark. “Charlotte, you scheming little minx, what are you trying to pull now?”

* * *

“I’m so sorry none of it worked out for you, but I’m sure you’ll find a job in Clear Creek. Why that little town has the prettiest hotel in Oregon. Big too. I’ll be sure to send a telegraph to Mr. Van Cleet the hotel owner. I’ve had dealings with him a time or two. Nice fella.” Mr. Davis told her as he helped her climb into the morning stage.

Charlotte and Abbey awoke before dawn to Summer’s soft weeping and

both sisters did their best to console her. Charlotte even told Summer she should wait and talk to Clayton before she left but Summer wouldn't hear it. She was determined to leave and was now convinced the girl was only trying to help her. After all, if Charlotte wanted to truly get rid of her she'd have all but shoved her onto the afternoon stage the day before, but she didn't. Instead she took her home to have tea and biscuits with her sister. Now she was trying to get her to wait until Clayton showed up to speak with him. But as the morning waned on, it became quite apparent that Clayton Riley wasn't going to be showing up any time soon.

“Thank you Mr. Davis. I'll repay you

just as soon as I can,” Summer told him. At breakfast Abbey sweet-talked her father into lending the stage fare. As she didn’t have enough money to go back to New Orleans, and wasn’t about to ask Mr. Davis for the money to do so, Summer took Charlotte’s suggestion to head south and accepted fare to Clear Creek. The best thing about it was she wouldn’t have to face Clayton.

Wouldn’t have to hear him tell her he no longer wanted to marry her. Didn’t have to suffer the humiliation of hearing him say it in front of his brother and Mrs. Riley. Maybe she was being a coward but she didn’t care. She didn’t even care that she was leaving with nothing but the clothes on her back. She just wanted to

get out of town as soon as possible!

The ten o'clock stage lurched forward. She waved numbly to the Davis family as they huddled in a little group to stay warm. Even Mrs. Davis came along and sadly waved her goodbyes to the sound of jangling harness and the slap of leather reins.

As the stage headed down Nowhere's main street Summer turned from the window, faced forward and took a deep breath. Did she feel guilty for leaving without a word? No. No because she didn't feel anything. Nothing but the numbing effects of her weeping the night before and the cold hard fact that hit her then and hit her even now.

Clayton hadn't come for her.

Maybe Charlotte was right. Maybe she should have talked with him. But didn't she wait until the last possible minute before it came time to leave and *still* he hadn't come.

Summer, the only passenger on the stage, took advantage of the dark solitude of the empty coach and for the first time that morning, bitterly wept.

* * *

Clayton left at dawn. He was furious as he rode out and if he hurried he figured he would come upon the stage not more than an hour or so after it left town. But as the morning wore on and the closer to Nowhere Clayton got, he suddenly realized he didn't see any sign

of the ten o'clock stage. Could it be running late or perhaps had some trouble along the way? A wave of panic suddenly gripped him as he thought of Red Ned and his gang who'd been terrorizing the area for months. But then, he just as suddenly breathed easier when he remembered that Ned, in all probability, was heading south to Clear Creek. The outlaw would now become his uncle's problem. As soon as he had Summer safely back home he'd try to remember to wire Uncle Harlan and warn him that Red Ned was heading his way.

But first he had to find her.

Clayton reached Nowhere and went straight to his office. He burst through

the door to find Billy leaned back in his chair with his feet propped on the desk talking with Doc. “Doc! Have ya been out to the farm? Is Spencer all right?”

“Whoa there son. Yep, already been out there and back this morning. He’ll be fine. Nasty bump he got but he’ll pull through and be ready for Christmas morning! Sorry I couldn’t make it out last night but I was back at the Colson farm again. Poor Mrs. Colson’s got herself a new bouncing baby boy. That makes six youngins! My but that poor woman has her hands full!”

Clayton nodded in acknowledgement then pushed his hat off his forehead.

“Were either of you here when the stage left this morning?”

“I was still out at your place,” Doc told him. “In fact I just got back into town.”

Billy took his feet off the desk, pushed the chair back and stood. “I was down at the livery stable. My horse done threw a shoe this morning.”

“Did either of you see Charlotte in town with Summer?” Clayton asked.

“I didn’t,” Billy said as Doc shook his head.

Clayton closed his eyes a moment in frustration. He then opened them and looked at Billy. “I need your horse.”

“My horse? What for?”

“I gotta catch that stage.”

“But boss, you don’t even know if she’s on it.”

“Billy’s right, Clayton. If you think your little gal was with Charlotte Davis, then she might still be there. Why don’t you go on out to the Davis place and check first before you go galloping after that stage.”

“Yeah, you might chase the stage down only to find Miss James ain’t on it,” Billy added.

Clayton groaned. “You’re both right. I guess I’m plumb tuckered out and not thinking straight at this point. Heck, I didn’t even see the stage when I was coming back from the Gundersons.”

“Well boss, that’s probably cause it wasn’t heading that way.”

“What do you mean? Where is it then?”

“The ten o’clock stage was going to Clear Creak.”

Clayton took his hat off, hit his leg with it, then slammed the desk with his fist. How could he have forgotten a detail like that?

Doc laughed. “Son, what you need is some marrying! Why don’t I go round up the preacher while you go round up your pretty little gal, then you can get down to business!”

“Yeah,” Billy agreed. “Won’t she make for a nice Christmas present?”

“Christmas?” Clayton barked.

“Well, yeah boss. Today’s Christmas eve.”

“What? Christmas eve!” Clayton couldn’t believe it! Where had the time

gone? Had they been searching for that no good varmint Red Ned all month? Apparently they had and he was more tuckered out than he first thought. He didn't even know what day it was! He hadn't given a single thought as far as Christmas was concerned! He wasn't even sure if there was a tree up in the house! Probably not as he and Spencer were the ones to usually go out and find one! Why hadn't his mother said anything?

Because you haven't been around to say anything to, you idiot!

Clayton slapped a hand against his forehead and let it slide down his face as he groaned.

No gifts.

No tree.

No preparation what so ever.

And no wife...

First things first, he suddenly thought.

“I’m heading over to Charlotte’s. If Summer’s not there, then I’m going after that stage.”

“What do you want me to do, boss?”

Clayton looked at him, grateful for Billy’s help. “If you’ve got the time, get my mother a Christmas tree.”

“How can I help?” Doc asked.

“Clayton’s eyes flashed with determination as he looked to him.

“Fetch the preacher. We’re gonna have us a wedding.”

And with that, Clayton Riley stormed out of the Sheriff’s office in search of his

future bride.

He mounted Billy's horse in case he needed to ride out of town in a hurry after the stage, and headed for the Davis's house. Their place was at least a mile out of town in the opposite direction the stage would have gone and he seethed knowing Charlotte had been up to no good. But what if he was wrong? What if there was no ill intent involved? Hadn't he best calm himself down lest he be tempted to break through the front door and storm into the house? What would Summer think of him then? On the other hand, maybe barreling into the Davis house, throwing her over his shoulder and carrying all the way to the

preacher's house was what he needed to do! Prove to her he wasn't messing around and that he meant business!

No, not business. Love.

Clayton slowed the horse down to a trot as he got closer to his destination. He didn't want Summer to see him angry and decided the best thing to do would be to gather her up, get her home, and get ready for the upcoming holiday. They could be married that evening and wake up Christmas morning as husband and wife.

Clayton smiled at the thought. She might fuss a little over not having a wedding dress and all, but she could always wear his mother's red dress and hat. She sure looked mighty pretty in it

the day she had it on. In fact, the sight of her in that dress took his breath away. He knew why his mother kept it, knew the story behind the dress. His mother was wearing it when she met his father. Clayton's smile broadened as he rode up to the Davis's hitching post and dismounted. He was much calmer now and began to think of all the things he wanted to tell Summer as soon as the door opened and he caught sight of her.

Clayton went through the gate, marched up to the front door, took a deep breath and knocked.

Nellie Davis answered the door. "Why Clayton Riley, whatever brings you here?" She asked innocently.

"I've come for Summer. Where is

she?”

“Summer? Oh, you mean that Miss James?”

“Of course that’s who I mean, where is she?”

“Well now don’t get upset, how should I know where she is?”

“You mean she’s not here?” Clayton barked.

“Certainly not! Why on Earth would she be?”

Clayton stared at her as the first traces of panic began to grip him. “You mean to tell me she’s not here at all, didn’t come here yesterday?”

Mrs. Davis pursed her lips together before she spoke. “No. Why would she?”

Clayton's hands balled into fists. Now where was he to look? What could have happened to her?

"Who's that at the door, mother?" a voice called.

"It's Clayton, he's come looking for that Miss James."

Charlotte pushed past her mother as she wrapped a shawl around her shoulders. "Why Clayton, what a surprise!" She quickly turned to her mother. "Why don't you go back inside and close the door. The house will get cold with it hanging wide open like this!"

Mrs. Davis smiled sweetly and nodded in agreement. "You two have yourselves a nice little visit. Come by again soon,

Clayton. Christmas maybe?”

“Don’t count on it,” he said as he glared down at her.

Mrs. Davis’s face took on its usual pinched expression as she forced a smile and closed the door.

“Where’s Summer?” He asked through clenched teeth as he turned his attention to Charlotte.

“Summer? Why, I have no idea. Isn’t she at home ... oh dear ...”

“Oh dear, what?” Clayton asked, his jaw tight.

“Oh, well ... you see ... there *was* talk that she left. I thought I was hearing things, you know how rumors get started.”

“What talk?” he demanded.

“Well, down at the mercantile, Mrs. Quinn might have mentioned that she heard Miss James had had enough of this town, and was going to leave. In fact, she was so desperate to leave she ... well ... she...”

“She what?” Clayton spat.

“She didn’t even wait for the stage, she rode out with some stranger.”

Clayton’s eyes narrowed to slits. “Is that the truth, Charlotte?”

“Oh now Clayton, I got the story second hand, how should I know if there’s any truth to it? And who knows who Mrs. Quinn heard it from.”

It was all Clayton could do to keep from growling at the woman standing before him. Who in Sam blazes would

have taken Summer and ridden out of town with her? She *had* to have taken the stage! Clayton finally did let go a frustrated growl as he turned on his boot heel to leave.

Charlotte reached out and grabbed his coat. "Clayton!"

He spun to her, his face covered in barely controlled rage.

Charlotte took a deep breath as she took in his expression. "It never would have worked between you. What are you so angry about it? I think it's a blessing in disguise she's gone."

"A blessing for who Charlotte? For you? Are you thinking that just because Summers gone, if indeed she really *is* gone, that I'll marry you now?"

Her mouth fell open in shock.

“Clayton Riley, how could you say such a thing?”

“Easy enough! I know you too well.”

“Oh now Clayton, you’ll get over her. She wasn’t good enough for you anyway. Why, the girl was dull and ugly. I’ll never understand why you even considered marrying her! Besides, you said so yourself you weren’t the one that sent away for her in the first place!”

Clayton’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“What have you done with her?”

Charlotte backed up a step at his tone.

“Why, nothing. What makes you think I had anything to do with her leaving town?”

“If there were any strangers in town

Billy would have told me about it.”

Charlotte swallowed hard and pulled the shawl more tightly about her. “I think I better go inside before I catch my death of cold!”

Clayton took a step toward her.

“Where is she?”

“Now Clayton, I really do have to be getting inside.”

Clayton reached out, grabbed her by the upper arms and pulled her to him. Her expression immediately changed to dreamy adoration. “Why Clayton Riley, you’re holding me in a most improper way. Why, if my daddy saw us like this he’d get out the shot gun and insist we marry.”

Her tone was sugary sweet, almost

sickening and Clayton knew. *Knew* Charlotte had done something to Summer. “Tell me what you did with her Charlotte. Tell me now.”

Charlotte put her arms around him and pulled her body against his. “Don’t you see, Clayton? She was never meant for you! She left because she knew you didn’t want her! Knew it the moment you didn’t come for her! That’s why she left!” Tears formed in her eyes and she held him ever tighter. “Kiss me Clayton! Kiss me and tell me we’ll be married now! I don’t want anybody else! I’ll die if I have to marry anyone except you!”

Clayton let go a heavy sigh and closed his eyes. He was about to comment and begin the task of peeling Charlotte off of

him when the front door opened.

Mr. Davis stepped out, a shot gun in his hand. "What's going on out here? Mrs. Davis told me you were compromising my little girl! Said she saw ya do it through the window!"

Charlotte's face lit up and her arms tightened as Clayton quickly glanced to the window. The lace curtain fell back into place before he could catch a glimpse of Charlotte's scheming mother. Obviously she'd sent Mr. Davis out with the news *and* the shotgun!

"Mr. Davis it's not what you think!" Clayton growled.

"I think it is! Just look at the way you're holding on to my little girl!"

Clayton quickly held up both hands as

his face twisted up in disbelief. Charlotte had her arms locked around him in a vice grip, her cheek against his chest and a delighted look on her face, like a child who'd just been given her first pony.

“There’s only one thing to do in a case like this,” Mrs. Davis cried as she shoved her way through the door past her husband. “He’s going to have to marry her!”

“What?” Clayton spat, “Are you out of your mind? I’m not marrying Charlotte!”

“But Clayton! Don’t you love me?” Charlotte wailed.

“No!”

“Why you low down scum!” Mr. Davis began and raised the shotgun higher.

“First you break the heart of that pretty little gal we sent off this morning and now my Charlotte’s! You ain’t fit to be Sheriff!”

Clayton stiffened at his words. Charlotte squeezed him tighter in response, so tight he wondered if he’d be able to breath. “What did you say?”

“You heard me!” Mr. Davis barked as he held the gun a little higher. “You’re not fit to be Sheriff and not only that, you’re not fit for my little girl!”

“Daddy!” Charlotte cried as she loosened her grip on Clayton and turned toward her father. “He is so, and you’d best tie him up and then go fetch the preacher quick like!”

“Oh good grief.” Clayton moaned.

“I’ll get some rope!” Mrs. Davis cried as Charlotte once again tightened her arms around him in a vice grip.

Clayton reached up and rubbed his temples with his fingers. “Dear Lord, make it stop.”

“I always respected you, Sheriff, but after this morning I see you’re nothing but a cad.” Mr. Davis said as he took a threatening step forward and raised the shotgun higher still.

Clayton put both hands in the air. “Put that gun away, Mr. Davis,” he told him sternly.

“Are you gonna do the right thing and marry my little girl?”

“No.”

“Then you leave me no choice.”

“Daddy!” Charlotte cried, “For God’s sake don’t shoot him! He’s the only one I want!”

Mrs. Davis had disappeared at this point and Abbey sauntered out.

“Daddy! What are you doing?”

“Thank God,” Clayton mumbled to himself. “Abbey, where’s Summer?”

“We put her on the stage this morning. She’s heading to Clear Creek.”

“Abbey!” Charlotte screeched.

Clayton ignored her. “Abbey, did she *want* to leave?”

Charlotte shot her sister a warning glare as Mr. Davis lowered the gun... a little.

“I don’t know. We all thought you’d come for her last night but you didn’t.

Then we thought you'd at least show up this morning, but then ..."

"I didn't know she was here. I didn't know where she was. Heck, I chased down the stage and spent the night at the Gunderson's thinking I'd find her there."

"What?" Mr. Davis barked. "But she left you a note telling you she was here!"

"She left me a not telling me she was leaving."

Mr. Davis lowered the shotgun.

"Charlotte!"

Charlotte audibly gulped and slowly turned to face her father. "Yes, daddy?"

"What mischief have you and your mother been up to? Who wrote that note?"

"Er ... well ..."

“Get your hands off that Sheriff!” Mr. Davis demanded. “And get inside the house!”

Charlotte gritted her teeth and let go of Clayton. She glared at him before she tossed the same look to her father. She then spun to Clayton. “It’ll never work, Clayton Riley. Mark my words. You’re a fool! You pout over Sarah for years then go and take the first little harlot that comes along when you could have had me!” She stomped her foot for emphasis, shoved Abbey out of the way and stormed into the house.

Mr. Davis watched her go before he gave Clayton a sheepish look. “I’m awful sorry, Sheriff. I had no idea ...”

“It’s all right Mr. Davis. Just do us

both a favor and keep a tighter rein on your daughter from now on.”

Mr. Davis nodded. “If you don’t mind me saying so, that little gal of yours loves you. Abbey here tells me she cried most of the night when you didn’t show up. The only thing I could think of that might help her broken heart would be to get her out of Nowhere and have herself a fresh start some place else. Maybe it was the wrong thing to do, but at least now ya know where she is.”

Clayton let go a weary sigh. “I’m much obliged you told me.”

A loud wail came from the other side of the door. Abbey turned to it then looked to her father with a horrified expression on her face. “Daddy ...”

“I’ll take care of your sister, you go on inside now.” He turned to Clayton. “I can’t say how sorry I am. Go get your bride Sheriff. She’s a much better match for you than Charlotte will ever be. Besides, you’re deserving of a good woman after what you’ve been through these last few years.”

Clayton let a smile form on his face. He reached out and shook Mr. Davis’s hand. Thank you, Mr. Davis, and Merry Christmas.”

Mr. Davis smiled broadly. “Merry Christmas son, and speaking of Christmas, you’d best go fetch your Christmas bride!”

“I’ll do that.” Clayton said with a wink. He untied his horse, mounted, and

went to get his Christmas present. Or rather bride, but at this point Clayton almost felt he needed to wrap her up with ribbon and keep her under the tree until they could be married. At least that way he wouldn't lose her again!

Fifteen

Summer awoke at the first stage stop several hours out of Nowhere with a kink in her neck and a hitch in her side. She'd cried herself to sleep earlier and now felt completely wrung out, like an old dishrag that had seen better days. She would need help down from the stage and wondered if the driver remembered her injured foot. She noticed the driver watched as Mr. Davis handed her the pair of crutches before they left town. They were on the seat opposite hers and she stiffly reached for them as she heard the driver climb down.

He opened the door, tipped his hat, and helped her out. “We’re changing horses, you’ve got twenty minutes before we head out again.”

She nodded her thanks, took her crutches and headed for the nearest building. Summer glanced around. Make that the only building. Well, that and a barn, but so long as they had water and a little something to eat she’d be fine. Abbey gave her some money for the trip, at least enough to survive on until she got to Clear Creek. After that she was on God’s good humor. That and the man called Van Cleet.

She hobbled inside and waited for her eyes to adjust to the dim light before searching the room for any signs of life,

of which there were none. Except that of a man passed out on a table. An empty whiskey bottle and glass sat near his head that rested on one arm. He began to snore something awful and she felt her spine stiffen against the sound.

“Hello?” She said weakly. “Is anybody here?” Summer glanced about once more but there was no one, only the man at the table. She briefly wondered if he was the proprietor then thought better of it. Why would the owner of the establishment be passed out at a table if he knew a stage was coming in? But she did have to remind herself once again, that this was not New Orleans.

The man mumbled something into his arm, snorted, then snored loudly once

again. Summer sighed, went behind the small bar and tried to see if there might be a pitcher of water. She found a clean glass at least, but nothing but whiskey to drink. Maybe there was a kitchen out back. With the aid of her crutches she made her way down a hall and sure enough found the kitchen.

“Oh thank the Lord,” she said to herself as she spied a pitcher of water on the counter. She just hoped she could find another clean glass as she left the one she found in the other room. Thankfully she did, poured herself some water, and was just about to take a drink when she heard it.

A pain filled groan.

Summer froze. She looked to the right,

the left, but nothing.

The groan came again. This time she followed the sound and looked to the left, and down.

Summer dropped the glass. It shattered as it hit the floor. “Oh my God!”

A man lay on the floor in a pool of blood. Summer’s hands flew to her mouth to stifle a panic-filled scream. What should she do? Where was everybody? She quickly got her wits about her and hobbled down the hall to the front room and out the door. By the time she was back outside tears were streaming down her face from the horrible sight of the dying man in the kitchen.

“Help!” She cried. “Come quick!”

But no one answered.

Summer looked this way and that.

Where was the driver? She then noticed the same team of horses was still hitched to the wagon. Nothing had been done yet to change them out. What was going on?

“Help! Where are you? There’s a man inside that’s bleeding!”

But still there was no answer. No one had heard her. Summer began to panic. She made her way behind the stage to the other side where she very promptly screamed first, then just as promptly fainted.

The driver lay on the ground, his throat slit ear to ear.

* * *

Clayton rode Billy's horse hard. If he hurried he'd catch the stage before it left the first stop. They'd change horses there and that at least would give him a little more time to catch up. The wind was cold but the sun bright. What snow was left on the ground wasn't enough to slow him down and for that he was grateful. In the distance he could see clouds forming, they'd be overhead by nightfall and Clayton smiled at the thought of a white Christmas. He sure hoped Billy was able to find a tree! How much more perfect could the evening be? A tree, snowfall, his beautiful Summer in his arms and a proposal on his lips. He'd see them

married before the day was out, that was sure! He wasn't about to let her slip away from him again unintentional or not! He was going to tell her he loved her as soon as he found her. Then he was going to kiss her senseless. Kiss her so long and hard her knees gave out and she couldn't breath. Kiss her until there was no doubt as to how he felt about her. Then he'd make her his wife and show her how he *really* felt!

Clayton smiled at the thought and kicked Billy's horse into a faster gallop.

* * *

Summer opened her eyes slowly. Her foot hurt but her head hurt worse. She

remembered going outside, tried to find the driver and then ...

She'd found him all right. Dead as a door nail in a pool of blood much like the man in the kitchen. Summer's stomach lurched at the thought and she suddenly sat up to discover she was tied to a chair. She automatically screamed but the sound was cut off. She froze, tried to calm herself against the mind-numbing fear threatening to take control. What was going on? Who had done such horrible things? She remembered the man passed out on the table. He was still there! Still slumbering away and snoring softly now.

Fear took hold at that point and she sobbed into the gag. She must have

made enough noise to attract attention as voices suddenly sounded from the kitchen. Boot steps followed and soon two men entered the room.

One of the men wore an eye patch. He looked her up and down then laughed. "You see? I told you she wouldn't be out for long! Now we have some fun, eh?" He laughed again and hit his companion on the back.

"But Sam's still out cold."

"Too bad for Sam! More for us then! I get her first!" The man made for the chair and pulled out a huge knife. Summer again screamed as tears filled her eyes.

"But Ned, we need to get the horses. There's nothing else here."

“You get the stinkin’ horses and then wake Sam up. As soon as I’m done, we’ll leave.”

“Now wait a minute, what about me?”

“If you’re so worried about getting those horses together then go do it! While your brother is waking up you can have your turn with the girl, until then, get to work!”

The other man grumbled as he turned on his boot heel and stomped his way back down the hall to the kitchen.

Summer sobbed into the gag, she was beyond frightened at this point and couldn’t think, could barely breathe! The man growled low in his throat as he looked her up and down. “What happened to your foot?” he asked matter

of fact as he leaned down and cut the ropes they'd used to tie her ankles together.

Summer instinctively kicked at him but it only served to make him laugh. He leaned over her again and cut the bonds lashing her wrists together behind the chair. "You want to fight me, eh? Maybe you can be the one to take down the famous Red Ned?" He laughed again, picked her up and threw her over one shoulder like a sack of grain. He then sauntered his way down the hall and kicked doors open in his search for a bed as he ignored her struggles.

Red Ned! Not the same outlaw Clayton had been searching for all this time? Summer sobbed again. She was

surely going to die and even though she knew what was to come, her only regret was her own foolishness. She regretted leaving Nowhere. She regretted ever letting her anger get the best of her. She regretted trusting Charlotte and letting her talk her into getting on that blasted stage. But most of all, as the infamous Red Ned threw her down upon the bed he'd finally found, she regretted never telling Clayton Riley she loved him.

“Now, let's see, how do you want it? Ah, I know! *Alive*. That way you will remember who had you right before you die.”

Summer knew she should fight him, fight him and try to escape! But every muscle had locked up and froze to make

her completely immobile. Besides, how was she to run? She could barely walk yet. She closed her eyes as Red Ned whistled while he took off his gun belt, then began to casually remove his shirt.

Self preservation finally kicked in and Summer rolled to the side, off the bed, and scooted under it. She'd done it countless times while growing up in the orphanage and it was all she could think of in the heat of the moment. If it would slow things down and let her live a few moments longer it might be worth it. *Oh Lord, help me!*

But Red Ned didn't grab her and drag her out from under the bed as she expected. Instead he threw back his head and laughed. "You think that's going to

help you? I can just throw the bed to the side you know and take you on the floor. Is that what you want?" He laughed again as he made for the bed. In fact, the outlaw was laughing so hard he didn't hear the man that entered the room behind him.

Summer watched from beneath her scant cover as Clayton Riley boldly stepped into the room, spun Red Ned around and punched him square in the gut before delivering an incredible upper cut to his jaw. The outlaw reeled from the blow and tumbled back upon the bed. Summer's head was smacked against the floor from the impact and she lay stunned for a moment as the sound of booted feet scraped across the floor. She

barely recognized what was happening as the two men began to fight.

“That’s for mistreating my bride!” She heard Clayton growl before he punched Red Ned in the face again. “And this is for what you intended to do!” Another punch. “And this one’s for the settlers you murdered!” Another punch, and another, and Red Ned was down, his face now an unrecognizable bloodied mess. Summer could only stare at the man which now lay on the floor not feet away. She watched numbly as Clayton dragged him to the side of the room then quickly came to the bed. He then did as Red Ned threatened and simply flipped the bed up and away from her to expose her completely.

“Summer!” He cried as he bent to her and took her in his arms. “Baby, are you Okay? Did he hurt you?” He removed the gag, tossed it to the side and took her face in his hands. “Talk to me Summer, say something!”

She looked at him, then glanced to Red Ned’s crumpled form. She opened her mouth but nothing came out. Her body then began to shake and heave with silent sobs. Clayton gathered her into his arms and held her tight. “It’s all right, you’re safe now. He can’t hurt you any more ya hear?”

He kissed the top of her head and held her tightly against him, as on the first day she saw him. The day he shot her. She now began to think of what would have

happened if he hadn't. There would have been no reason for her to stay if he didn't want her. He would have packed her up and sent her on her way.

She pushed at him, looked up into his emerald eyes, and again tried to speak, but no words would come out.

"He looked deeply into her eyes. "It's okay baby, I know how scared you are, it's okay if you can't talk yet. It happens."

Red Ned groaned. Clayton glanced at him then quickly gave his attention back to her. "I have to secure him, then I'm taking you out of here. You're safe now, he cant' hurt you any more, understand?"

She shook her head. "Clayton..." she barely whispered. "There... are more."

He smiled, held her face between his hands and again looked deeply into her eyes. "I know baby. One lit on outta here as soon as he saw me ride up. I don't care about him, this one's the big catch." He lowered his face to hers. "I'm gonna take care of him, and then the dead men... then..." He lowered his face even further, his face so close now she could feel the warm brush of his breath against her skin. He let go a shaky breath. "Summer, Summer James. I love you." He didn't wait for her to say anything. He kissed her, kissed her with all the pent up longing of his lonely heart, kissed her like she'd never been kissed before. Which of course wasn't hard to do for Summer had never *been*

kissed! As far as first kisses go, this was not gentle, this was pure possession, and she thought she might faint from the power of it.

Fortunately, (or unfortunately, depending on how you looked at it) Red Ned groaned again as he began to regain consciousness. Clayton had to force himself to stop lest he give into the temptation to shoot the bandit just so he could keep kissing Summer! But no, Red Ned had caused too much trouble for him and Clayton vowed to see him brought to justice.

He got up and pulled Summer up with him. He then carried her to the other side of the room and set her down in a solitary chair. He kissed her again,

looked into her eyes one last time, then turned to secure the famous outlaw Red Ned.

* * *

The stage rolled into Nowhere just after dark. Billy ran out of the Sheriff's office just in time to see Clayton climb down from the driver's seat. He wearily went around to the back and motioned for his deputy to join him. "Help me get these men locked up."

"Jumpin' Jehosaphat! Is that Red Ned?"

"Yep. Let's get him locked up. I've got to get Summer home."

"Who's the other one?" Billy asked as

he noted the other man Clayton had tied to a horse like a sack of meal. Both outlaws didn't look too good. They'd both been tied to their horses in a similar fashion and then led behind the stagecoach all the way back to Nowhere. Both outlaws moaned as Clayton cut them loose and watched them fall to the ground.

“The other one is Sam Cooke. Escaped out of prison a year ago along with his brother Jack. He got away, but I'm sure he'll get rounded up soon enough.”

“I can't believe we've been after this scum for so long and here you go and bring him in single handed. How'd you do it?” Billy asked enthralled.

“Lets just say ol Ned let himself get distracted.”

“Well, don’t that beat all.” Billy said amazed.

Clayton and Billy dragged the outlaws into the jail and locked them up. Clayton then went back out to the stage, untied Billy’s horse along with the others and retied them to the hitching post. He then climbed aboard, and prepared to leave.

“Where ya goin’ boss?” Billy cried after him as he came out onto the boardwalk.

Clayton turned in the seat and smiled. “To get the preacher!”

Billy took his hat off, slapped it against his leg, and let out a holler. “Merry Christmas, boss!”

Clayton laughed as he gave a slap of the reins to get the tired horses moving. He would drive the stage to the edge of town and the preacher's house, his future bride safely tucked away beneath him in the coach. "Merry Christmas Billy!"

* * *

Christmas came with a gentle snowfall, the smell of cinnamon and pine in the air, and Clayton Riley standing at Summer's side. They stood in front of the preacher in the Riley's parlor, the Christmas tree just behind him. Spencer had lit the candles of the tree one by one just before they came into the room. It

was a beautiful sight and Summer wondered if she would ever see anything so beautiful again. They made it to the preacher's house only to find he was at the church for the Christmas Eve service. They patiently waited for him until the service was over and folks began to make their way home before the snow got too heavy. The preacher, knowing why Clayton was there, offered to perform the ceremony on the spot using his wife as witness. But Clayton wanted to make it special for Summer and asked the preacher to accompany him out to the farm instead. The preacher happily agreed but could his wife come along too? That was fine, and so they started out, but then Doc and

Milly caught wind of what happened and also wanted to be there. Soon the Quinn's came and then the Johnsons, and before Clayton knew it, he had a house full of people that all wanted to watch him get married to his mail order bride.

Summer James, no matter what she was wearing, would make a beautiful bride. She of course wore his mother's red dress and even donned the hat that went with it. Mrs. Quinn gifted her with a beautiful white lace shawl that matched perfectly and seemed to glisten like the snow that fell softly outside in the moonlight. All was quiet and still when the wedding began, and as the Riley's had no piano in the house to play the wedding march, the townsfolk present

sang instead. But it wasn't the wedding march that accompanied Summer James down the hallway from the kitchen to the parlor on Spencer's arm. No, the company within the house sang Silent Night. Doc and Milly started the song, feeling it was much more fitting considering it was just past midnight and now Christmas day.

Soft and low they sang, Mrs. Riley's voice the most prominent among them and Summer, despite the earlier horrors of the day, rejoiced that God had blessed her with a man who truly loved her. Who, because of her past pain and suffering she thought rejected her, was already filling the void left behind from years of loneliness and abandonment.

She closed her eyes as she heard Clayton's firm and steady "I do." Closed them again when he kissed her, and opened them to the cheers and words of congratulations. Some folks spent the night, others travelled home with the Johnsons to brave the snow in the morning and Clayton, his new wife in his arms, went up to bed.

In the morning...

Spencer was the first one to come down stairs and begin to snoop under the tree for his present.

"Spencer Riley! Stop that! You are not six years old!" His mother scolded.

"Ahhhh ma, I at least want to see if I

have anything!”

“Oh you’ve got something all right, trust me!”

He smiled and took her in his arms.

“You never disappoint! Whatcha make me this year? A new shirt? A scarf? I need mittens something awful you know! Tell me you made me something to keep me warm.”

Mrs. Riley winked at him.

“Mittens *and* a scarf?”

Clayton came into the parlor, Summer at his side, albeit on crutches. “Morning ma,” he said and kissed the top of her head.

“Oh just look at you! You two look like... like...”

“Like they didn’t get any sleep last

night?” Spencer laughed.

“Spencer!” Clayton warned.

Summer blushed and leaned against her new husband. No words could possibly come close to describing what she felt in that moment. The closest she managed was ‘at peace.’

“Let me get you two some coffee. Sit down and we’ll get started opening our gifts.” Mrs. Riley chirped as she headed for the kitchen.

“Gifts!” Clayton said and slapped his forehead with his hand. He turned to Summer. “I’m sorry honey, but I don’t have anything for you.”

She looked up at him and smiled. “I’ve already had my Christmas. You’ve given me the best gift of all.”

He kissed her then and was still kissing her by the time his mother came back into the room with the coffee. Spencer made a show of looking at an invisible watch as his mother looked wide-eyed at the kissing pair.

“Ahem!” Spencer finally said.

Clayton came up for air but didn’t look at his brother. “What?”

“Save it for later or I might get jealous. After all, I’m only getting a scarf and some mittens for Christmas to keep *me* warm!”

Clayton burst into laughter as did Summer and Mrs. Riley.

“Hey, I don’t think it’s very funny!” Spencer blurted above the noise.

“Thank you for the Christmas present,

Spence!” Clayton finally said.

Spencer folded his arms across his chest and rolled his eyes. “She’s non-returnable, just so you know.”

Clayton looked down into Summer’s eyes. “I wouldn’t dream of it,” he whispered then bent his head and kissed her again.

Mrs. Riley smiled at the kissing pair then went to sit next to Spencer. She pulled an envelope from her apron and handed it to him. “Merry Christmas dear.”

He looked at her. “No mittens?”

She smiled and shook her head.

“I was really hoping for mittens ...”

“Open it,” she urged.

Spencer opened the envelope and

pulled out two pieces of paper. One was a letter written in a neat hand. The other was a ...

“Good God! Mother, what have you done?”

“Now Spencer, sometimes a mother has to take things into her own hands. After all, how can I expect you to live under the same roof with Clayton and Summer being married and not have a wife of your own?”

Spencer stood in shock. Clayton looked from his mother, to Spencer, and back again. He then burst out laughing.

“Shut up, Clayton!” Spencer cried.

“This isn’t funny!”

“It sure was when you did it to me!”

“Stop it both of you!” Their mother

scolded. "Now Spencer, it's for your own good and there's no use arguing, what's done is done!"

Summer looked from one face to the other in confusion. "What's done?"

Mrs. Riley sat up straight upon the settee and smiled. "Spencer's going to get married, dear"

"Married?" Summer asked in shock.

"Yeah, married?" Spencer added with just as much shock if not more so.

"Married, Spencer! Face it, it'll do you good!" Clayton admonished.

"But, but ..."

"No buts," Mrs. Riley began. "You are getting married Spencer and that's final! If Clayton can have a mail order bride and get married on Christmas then

there's no reason why you can't get married on New Years Day."

"New Years Day! Good God Mother, WHAT have you done?"

"You asked that already, dear."

"Ma!"

Clayton stepped over to his brother and slapped him on the back. "Face it Spencer, I'm afraid you'll just have to get hitched, and then everyone will be *happy!*"

Spencer glared at his brother as he remembered saying the same words to him the day Summer arrived in town.

"Only Spencer," Clayton began with a chuckle.

"What?" Spencer asked roughly as he stubbornly folded his arms across his

chest.

“When your bride gets to town promise me one thing.”

Spencer glared at him. “What’s that?”

It was all Clayton could do not to burst into laughter. “Try not to shoot her.”

At that everyone laughed, including Spencer, who now sat on the settee and began to read the letter from his very own mail order bride.

The End

I hope you enjoyed reading The Christmas Mail Order Bride, the first book in the Holiday Mail Order Bride Series. Be watching for January's Promise, Book Two of the Holiday Mail Order Bride Series coming in December.

About the Author: Kit Morgan, aka Geralyn Beauchamp loves a good western. Her father loved watching them and they watched their fair share together over the years. If you liked this fun-filled western and would like to read an epic novel by the author, you might enjoy Time Masters Book One; The Call by Geralyn Beauchamp.

To find out about upcoming books and other fun news about Kit Morgan's books, check out her blog at www.authorkitmorgan.blogspot.com