



## Chapter One

Alexandra Avery's body flew from the seat, her head slamming into the wall of the stagecoach so hard bright flashes of light blinked before her eyes. She shook her head, then cursed under her breath when she bounced again, closing her eyes as the other passengers screamed. The sound echoed in the small space, the noise—along with the head-jarring impact with the wall—caused streaks of white-hot searing pain to crawl inside her skull. The coopery taste of blood filled her mouth as she bit her tongue and she turned to the window, leaned out the opening and spit. She could only imagine what her pa would say to that unladylike display.

Pete, the stagecoach driver yelled a string of words no lady should be subjected to. Growing up around cowpokes and saddle-bums on the Avery Ranch, she'd heard worse and leaned further out the window to see what they hit. "You getting too old to drive this thing, Pete?"

He barked out a few rude words, then jumped to the ground. "Mind your manners, missy." He gave her a cheeky grin before walking to the back of the stagecoach. "Damn," he said. "I knew that wheel wasn't going to make it."

Alex opened the door and climbed down, regretting the decision the moment her feet touched the ground. The fancy silk boots her stepmother insisted she wears sank in two inches of mud, the hem of her dress dragging through the murky water before she could snatch it up.

“Damnation. A week’s worth of washing won’t get that out.” She blew out a breath and looked at Pete. He was staring at the wagon wheel, shaking his head.

She’d spent the entire trip from Missoula so wrapped up in despair her stomach had begun to churn. This little reprieve was just what she needed. A minute to regroup, get her thoughts into order, and to steel her nerves. When the image of her father popped back into her head, she groaned.

Her fingernails had been chewed to the quick just imagining his angry face when he realized she not only went out of town without his knowledge but went behind his back to undo all the hard work he’d put in to set right the mistakes she’d made.

The uproar her hasty decision caused would be the talk of the town for sure.

Her internal misery was put aside as Pete cursed again and jerked the hat off his head, slapping it against his leg and dislodging the dust riding along the brim. “I told Frank that wheel wouldn’t last.” He glanced her way. “It’ll take a while to get this fixed.” He straightened and walked her way, his hand outstretched. Alex took it and let him help her from the mud. “We’re not far from Willow Creek,” he said, addressing everyone inside the coach. “Half hours walk, I’d imagine. You want to wait it out here until I get back with someone to fix this or walk in with me?”

There was a moment of silence, then everyone started talking at once. The ladies in the stagecoach were indignant at the thought of walking but the warm spring day had left the stagecoach stifling. A cool breeze would be a welcome comfort after the hours they'd spent cramped inside the coach and Alex didn't wait for the others to decide before she started for town.

Pete and her traveling companions followed a few moments later. Alex cast a few glances across the prairie as their small party of travelers headed toward Willow Creek. It wasn't uncommon for an occasional Indian to be spotted in the area and seeing them first would be the difference between getting out alive or being taken. Her aunt Sarah barely survived an Indian attack. Her uncle Colt gave them everything he had on him to keep her, even his horse and best boots.

The walk into town was uneventful unless you counted the complaining of the others in the group. Alex listened to every moan and whimpered complaint with half an ear, her attention on how her family would react when they found out her news.

By the time they reached town, sweat was running in small trickles down her neck to soak the front of her dress. This particular traveling frock had been a mistake. The material clung to her skin and the once pristine lilac silk was now wet, the fabric turning dark purple under her arms and breasts. Her hair was coming unpinned as well and she smelled worse than a cowpoke on a three-day ride.

As usual, the street and wooden sidewalks were filled with people, the hustle and bustle of everyone going about their day filled the air with noise. The squeak of wagon wheels, the heavy sharp ting of the blacksmith's hammer hitting metal and the voices and laughter she heard were only a small hum compared to that of Missoula. Even though the town had grown over the years, it was nothing compared to the larger communities that surrounded Willow Creek. Two days in Missoula was enough for her to long for the slow shuffle of home.

She glanced toward the school and sighed. The new building was large enough to seat most of the town and doubled as a church on Sunday, but seeing it at the end of town was a constant reminder of how spectacular her past mistakes were. Mistakes she'd never live down if certain people in town had anything to do with it. One such person was looking down her nose at her now. Edna Pierce was marching across the sidewalk, her gait a bouncing clop as she barreled her way forward.

Alex acted as if she didn't see her and headed across the dirt road that ran through town, ducking behind a wagon when she reached the other side as Edna continued to yell her name. Hiding was undignified but Edna was overbearing on an average day. Now that school was set to start in less than a month, she was even more so.

She took a peak across the street, blowing out a relieved breath when she saw Edna talking with Ellie, the stagecoach station owner. Disaster avoided, she grabbed her skirts and jumped back onto the sidewalk, realizing her quick escape from Edna only landed her right in

front of calamity number two. Hugh Jacobs, the town's new blacksmith—and, apparently her beau, according to her father—was headed her way. By the look on his face, he'd spotted her.

He smiled as he stopped, his gaze scanning her from head to toe and lingering in certain places longer than she liked. "Run into a bit of trouble?"

She sighed. "You could say that."

His kind brown eyes shined with amusement. "Well, I hate to bring you more but Edna has been looking for you. She came by the shop earlier asking if I'd seen you."

Alex glanced across the street to where Edna stood. "I've seen her. I managed to get away but I'm sure it won't be for long." She turned back to face him and smiled. "Not to be rude but I'd rather her not see me like this so I really need to go."

"Of course. I didn't mean to keep you." He took a step to the left so she could pass and said, "Are you free this evening?"

Her stomach clenched tight. One look at the expectant expression on his face and she knew her father had been right. Hugh was actively courting her. How had she not seen it before now?

He'd caught the eye of more than one young lady since he'd taken up residence in Willow Creek and set up his blacksmith shop. He took notice to her the day she lassoed a runaway pig in the middle of town. He'd been impressed, and amused, and wasted no time approaching her. She'd been flattered and accepted his dinner invitation out of curiosity.

He'd always wanted to learn to rope and ride so she'd took it upon herself to teach him. The dinner invitations kept coming after that and she'd kept on accepting. She considered him a friend, after all, and the occasional bouquet of flowers was a sweet gesture but it didn't mean anything.

Or so she'd thought.

Now that her father had pointed out the obvious, she'd found herself nervous around him. Being courted by Hugh Jacobs wasn't all that bad a prospect. He was nice looking and kind and he made her laugh on occasion but was she ready to marry and start a family? She was only twenty-three. She had plenty of time yet, didn't she?

The way Hugh showed up at her door so often told her he may have other plans.

He was still staring at her, waiting for an answer to his invitation. She needed to make a decision where he was concerned. Either she was a willing participant in this courtship or she wasn't. It wasn't fair to keep him hanging on if nothing would ever come of it.

She had other things to worry about at the moment and courting and marriage wasn't one of them. "I need to speak to my father about something so I'm sorry, I'm not free this evening."

He smiled again but disappointment shadowed his eyes. "All right, then. Maybe some other time."

“Yes. I’ll let you know.” She walked away before he could say more. She breathed a sigh of relief the moment she’d put some distance between them.

What would her life be like married to him? The images her mind conjured weren’t terrible but something seemed—off. The happy feelings she should have felt at having a handsome man as her husband just weren’t there.

Maybe settling down was too new of an idea to embrace. She’d never really thought of it. Well, that wasn’t true. Like most young girls, dreams of a wedding, babies, and a house to call her own filled her childhood fantasies but there was always a problem when it came to the groom so she’d locked those wishes away. Now that she was a grown woman, maybe it was time to think about it again.

Hugh was handsome, had a decent size home, was liked by everyone who knew him and his business was one everyone in town showed up in eventually, even her pa and uncles. As far as marriageable men went, he was on the top of the list for many.

So why was she so reluctant to give in?

She caught her reflection in the storefront window of the mercantile. She stopped and straightened her waistcoat and raised a hand to tuck a few stray curls back into her bonnet.

Her reflection revealed a woman she barely recognized most days. She certainly wasn’t the same girl who ran away from home ten years ago, mad at the world and swearing to anyone who would listen that she

wouldn't be caught dead wearing some prissy dress and carrying on like some giggling debutant. But here she was, primping in front of a store window, worried she looked a mess after traveling all day.

Ten years ago she wouldn't have cared what people thought but now she was Alexandra Avery, schoolmarm in Willow Creek, and if Hugh Jacobs courting her was any indication of things to come, the future wife of the local blacksmith.

She sneered at her reflection and her thoughts. She hated titles more than being told what to do and marriage wasn't something she even wanted to think about yet.

Turning away from the window she headed to the school to change her clothes. Not that it mattered much. Once her pa found out what she'd done, her appearance would be the least of her problems.

She mumbled the speech she planned to give him under her breath again. She'd memorized it line for line on the trip back from Missoula. Hopefully, it would be enough to convince him to see things her way for once. She just hoped her nerves held out as she told him what she had to say.

The piano music from the saloon distracted her as she neared it. A few of the girls who worked the rooms upstairs were leaning against the front of the building, smiling and calling out to the men who passed by. That was a new practice that had Edna and the rest of the town council in an uproar. The girls from the saloon never ventured outside when she was younger, preferring instead to linger by the upstairs windows and

talk to those on the street from there but like everything else, things change.

She straightened her spine as she passed the first girl. She was young, her blond curls nearly the same color as her own. Her face was painted. Blue above her eyes and pink on her cheeks. The girl looked her over from head to toe then looked away as if bored. Alex did the same.

The noise inside the building was loud as usual. Shouting and boisterous laughter filled the air and she turned her head to take a look inside when she crossed in front of the swinging doors. Her eyes widened the moment she saw a man hurtling toward those same doors, the wood panels swinging open as he stumbled out onto the sidewalk to crash into her. His momentum was enough to carry them both to the edge of the sidewalk.

Alex squealed as she fell backward, the air knocked from her lungs upon impact with the ground. She gasped, staring up at a cloudless blue sky as the voices around her grew louder. When she regained her senses, she was flat on her back in the street with something warm underneath her seeping into her dress and the man who slammed into her sprawled on top of her.

She gritted her teeth and tried pushing him away. "Get off of me," she said. The words came out in a raspy whisper, the weight of him stealing what little air she managed to fill her lungs with.

Bunching the material of his shirt into her hands, she pushed again, trying to get his attention and realized he was laughing. His heated

breath tickled the side of her neck, the rasp of chin whiskers scratched against her skin and when he lifted his head and looked down at her, the smile on his face was familiar.

Recognition came in slow degrees. It did for him, too. His green, bloodshot eyes widened in surprise, the smile on his face disappearing before he squinted at her.

“Alex?” He leaned up a fraction, then looked down the length of her body. His left eyebrow rose, that irritating smirk she was sure to never forget curved his lips again and when he looked back at her face, her blood was boiling.

“Get off of me, you scraggly headed goat!”

“Yep, it’s you all right.” The timber of his voice was deeper than she remembered. The smokey richness of the sound caused gooseflesh to prickle her skin.

He crawled off of her and stood, holding a hand out to help her up. She refused the offer and got to her feet herself.

She scowled as she took in the multitude of changes he’d been through over the past ten years and stared in disbelief at the fact Jesse Samuels, the bane of her existence, was back in town.

He looked nothing like she remembered. Where was the tall, lanky red-head kid she used to fight with? This wide-shouldered, auburn haired man looking down at her was too handsome to be Jesse Samuels. He tilted his head to one side and smirked at her. That, she remembered.

It was Jesse all right. "I should have known it was you," she said. "No one else is as clumsy and oafish."

"Ah, there's the girl I know." He laughed and righted his hat. "I've missed the way you talk down to me. Nothing like hearing the contempt in someone's voice as they address you."

Alex took in his smile but something in his eyes said her words weren't being laughed off as he would have her think. She bit back the retort she had ready to let fly and tried to form some sort of coherent sentence that wasn't scathing but nothing seemed to come to mind.

She'd never been civil around Jesse. It was odd trying to be. It had to be the shock of seeing him again after ten years that left her so tongue-tied. It certainly had nothing to do with the fact he resembled nothing of the boy she remembered. The man he'd grown into was causing her heart to skip wildly in her chest while her pulse beat frantically along her veins. Why was he back? Was he staying?

A crowd had formed. The sidewalk was full, people staring, some pointing and snickering and a look down showed her why. The muddy hem of her dress was nothing compared to the dark green and brown sludge now covering her from shoulder to foot. The smell hit her when the breeze shifted and those laughs coming from the sidewalk caused her ire at Jesse to multiply by the second.

Less than ten minutes in town and she'd been humiliated, made into a spectacle for anyone looking by ending up flat on her back in a pile of horse manure big enough to fill a wagon.

Heat flushed her skin as the laughter rose, her face burning as she looked up at the man standing in front of her. Seeing him again wasn't as shocking as the sight of him was. He'd changed so much in the years he'd been gone. He was taller, the top of her head barely reaching his chin now. He'd put muscle on his once thin frame and his red hair had darkened and was longer, the ends brushing his shoulders. The look in his eyes was the same, though. Amusement shined as bright as always. The sight only made her anger burn hotter.

"I was wondering when I'd run into you." He chuckled, the sound as irritating now as it was the day he left town. Alex gritted her teeth when he said, "I didn't think it would be literally, though."

He gave her another look from head to toe, a low whistle filling the air as he did. "Look at you. All grown up and wearing girl clothes." He met her gaze again and grinned. "I guess your pa's plan to turn you into a lady worked. Not many thought it would but here you stand looking like a girl instead of the ugliest boy I've ever seen."

She didn't think beyond the insult he'd been throwing at her since she was old enough to pick her own clothes out. Old instincts kicked in, her fingers curling into her palm, and she hit him on that arrogant chin, the force enough to rock him on his feet and for the first time in ten years, she felt alive.

He was slow to turn his head back toward her and when he did, she hit him again for old times sake. "You're right, Jesse Samuels, I did grow up, but you're the same immature horse's ass you've always been."

“Now is that any way to talk to a friend?”

She snorted and narrowed her eyes at him. “We were never friends.” She left him there on the street and pushed her way through the throng of people still standing around gawking. She headed to the livery stable, barely acknowledging Percy when he greeted her. “I need my horse.”

He gave her a glance from head to toe, his brows lowering in concern. “What in the world happened to you?”

She ignored his question. “My horse, Percy.”

He straightened, a look of surprise covering his face when he looked her in the eye. “Is everything all right?”

“No,” she said, blinking to force unwelcome tears from her eyes. “I need my horse, please.”

He nodded, her obvious distress enough to get him moving without any more questions but every second that ticked by was one second too long.

Alex looked out the door and saw Hugh walking her way. She didn’t wait for him to reach her, or for Percy to get her horse ready to ride. She grabbed the reins of a chestnut gelding that stood in front of the stable, hiked up her skirts and hoisted herself into the saddle.

Leaning down over his back, she gave him a slight nudge with the heel of her boot to get him moving and rode away from the livery stable without a backward glance.

She passed Hugh without slowing and flew past the saloon and the crowd that was still gathered at a fast clip. She didn’t look to see if Jesse

was still there. Nor did she admit the tears burning her eyes had nothing to do with embarrassment.

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She blew by the saloon in a billow of lilac lace. If the look on her face was any indication of her mood, she was furious with him. Jesse grinned. It was as if he'd never left. He turned back to the saloon and paused when his oldest friend, Ben Atwater blocked his path.

“What the hell was that all about?”

Jesse stepped around him and jumped back onto the wooden sidewalk, pushing the swinging doors to the saloon open. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a crumpled bill and slapped it on the bar. “Here you go, Vernon. This should cover my tab.” He didn't wait for a reply and bumped into Ben when he turned back to the door. “Gotta go.”

“Go? But we just got here.”

Jesse hit the sidewalk at a fast jog and jumped to the ground and headed straight for his horse, untying the reins from the hitching post. “I know but I can't let her get away.”

“Her who?”

“Alex.” He tossed the reins over the horse's neck and looked up. “It's been ten years. I'm not willing to let our first meeting be nothing more than a few hateful words.”

Ben scratched the side of his head, his eyebrows lowered as if thinking. “What about your welcome home party? Aaron should be here any minute now.”

Jesse climbed into the saddle, shifted his weight until he was comfortable and grinned down at Ben. “Start without me. I’ll be back before that songbird Vernon hired starts singing.”

Jesse maneuvered the horse away from the others, replaying his first meeting with Alexandra Avery in his mind’s eye again. Ten years and she was as feisty as he remembered.

He nodded his head to Ben and left, barreling out of town as fast as his horse would carry him.

Ben Atwater was one of the best friends he had. They’d been inseparable as kids and knew everything there was to know about each other. Well, almost. There was one piece of information he’d managed to keep to himself since the moment he’d realized it and that was what he really thought of Alexandra Avery.

There hadn’t been a day in the past ten years that he hadn’t thought about her. Total pain in the ass she was, he’d missed her and he wasn’t going to let her get away with nothing more than a few spiteful words and her dainty fist upside his head.

He leaned down over the neck of his horse, prodded him to go faster and kept his eye on the horizon. He spotted her a few minutes later a good distance ahead of him. He closed the gap between them and smiled when she turned her head to look at him, scowling before shouting, “Go

back to where ever you've been for the last ten years, Jesse Samuels, and stay away from me.”

“Not a chance, darlin’.”

“I still hate you.”

He laughed. “I figured as much. Kind of hard to forget with you telling me once a week for years.”

She sat up straighter but ignored him for the most part. He ran a quick glance over her, smiling to himself at her straddling a horse in her too fancy dress. Her hair had come unpinned, those blonde curls he'd had trouble forgetting bouncing against her back.

Her dress was wrinkled, covered in Lord only knew what, but the sight of her caused his heart to race and for silly notions he'd had in his youth to come flooding back. “I'm sorry.”

She threw him an incredulous look. “You're apologizing?”

“Yes.”

The unbelieving look on her face didn't last long. “Apology not accepted.” Stoney anger darkened her blue eyes. “Now stay away from me.”

She prodded her horse again and he let her get ahead of him. He followed in silence, feeling a sense of dread when she rode under the arched entryway to the Avery ranch.

She passed her aunt and uncle, Tristan and Emmaline's house without so much as a glimpse in their direction and kept going, past the barn and straight toward the house. Jesse stopped a short distance from

her, lingering in the background as she jumped from her horse and stomped toward the house.

The front door opened before she reached the steps. Holden Avery stepped out onto the porch and stumbled to a stop. He frowned in their direction and stared down at Alex for long minutes before glancing up at him. “What’s going on?”

“Hey, pa.” Alex shifted her weight, straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. “I came to talk to you.”

To Jesse’s surprise, Holden didn’t look happy to see her. The reasons why puzzled him. He’d definitely been gone too long. He didn’t know half of what was going on anymore.

Alex took the stairs slowly, her gaze leveled on her father and it wasn’t until Laurel, Alex’s stepmother stepped out onto the porch that the tension that had been building dissipated. In an instant, the quiet, tense stares were gone and replaced by questions.

Laurel gave Alex a look from head to toe. Her eyes widened when she got a good look at her. “What in the world happened to you?”

Alex turned her head and shot him a glare. “Nothing worth mentioning.”

Jesse looked toward the barn to keep from smiling. Their confrontation in front of the saloon was still fresh on his mind. The chatter of voices grew louder as two younger boys—Alex’s brother’s if he had to guess—joined them on the porch. He was about to head back to town when the noise suddenly stopped.

He glanced back at the house just as the front door swung shut. Everyone was gone. Well, everyone but Holden. He was still there with a strange look covering his face. The corner of the man's lip raised into what Jesse assumed may have been a smile before he straightened and nodded his head toward him. "Did you find a fight you weren't expecting?"

He raised a hand to his jaw. "Something like that."

"How did Rafe and Grace take the surprise of you showing up on their door?"

Jesse lifted his hat, ran his fingers through his hair. "As to be expected. Happy at first." He grinned. "Then I had to endure an entire evening of scolding for staying gone so long."

Holden laughed. "I'm sure you did." He studied him for long moments, then let out a breath. "Thanks for seeing Alex home, Jesse. She's more independent than most her age but that doesn't mean I want her traipsing across the prairie by herself. Especially now that so many people are being assaulted by whoever it is out there causing so much trouble."

"Don't mention it." Jesse shifted in the saddle, his thoughts running rampant at the possibility of Alex being accosted by that gang of thieves he'd heard were prowling around the countryside. Their being in the area hadn't even crossed his mind when he took off after Alex. All he'd been thinking was, there's Alex. After ten long years, he was in the same

vicinity as she was. “She hasn’t changed much,” he said, raising a hand to rub his jaw. “Still has a wicked right hook.”

Holden laughed. “That she does. Good to see you again, Jesse.”

When he turned and went back inside, Jesse glanced up at the window in the front of the house, Alex’s bedroom, and was surprised to see her staring down at him. He smiled and tipped the front of his hat up in her direction, then laughed as she made a face at him.

Pulling the horse’s reins, he clicked his tongue and got the horse turned back toward the main road and tried to put Alex out of his mind. Lord knew having her occupy his thoughts again would eat up more of his time than it should.

He’d left the best friends he’d ever had back in town and as much as he hated not going back, he knew he wouldn’t be much fun. Not tonight. Not after seeing Alex again. He’d been dreaming about her since the day he left town and now that he’d seen her again, there wasn’t any distraction in the world big enough to take his mind off of her.

He glanced back up at Alex’s window. She was still there, watching him. He’d never get her out of his head now. He hadn’t managed it in the ten years he’d been gone. He didn’t see it happening now that she was full grown and more beautiful than she’d ever been.

## Chapter Two

“Come away from there and get out of that dress.”

Alex watched Jesse ride away from the ranch, his image a blurry dot on the horizon before she dropped the curtain and turned to face her stepmother. Laurel’s arm was draped with petticoats and a pale blue dress. She laid them on the bed before looking her over from head to toe, her nose scrunching a bit. “Is that muck on your dress what it smells like?”

Alex snorted unladylike and narrowed her eyes. “Yes, thanks to Jesse.” She grabbed the front of her jacket and unbuttoned it, then gave Laurel a grateful smile when she stepped over to help her out of her traveling dress.

The stench of too many hours in multiple layers was more evident with every piece of clothing she removed. She’d have to soak for a week to get the stink off of her. “Speaking of Jesse, did you know he was back in town?”

“Yes. He got in a week ago.” Laurel handed her a dressing gown and gathered up the discarded dress. “I’m surprised you’re just now seeing him.”

Guilt caused Alex’s face to heat. She hadn’t been in town to see anyone, let alone Jesse Samuels.

“He showed up here the other day with Ben Atwater,” Laurel said. “He didn’t stay long and if I had to guess, I’d say he was looking for you.”

Alex’s heart skipped a beat. “Me? Why?”

“Because the entire time he was here, he kept glancing at the house. What else would he have been looking for?”

Alex snorted. “I doubt it was me. We hate each other, remember?”

Laurel laughed. “So you keep reminding everyone.” She grabbed the soiled dress and petticoats and folded them so the manure was inside the fabric and wouldn’t spread more than it had. “I’ll go light the water boiler for the tub so you can have a real bath.” She looked at the soiled dress in her hands and sighed. “Then I’ll try to do something with this dress. It will be a miracle if it ever comes clean.”

Alex nodded as she left the room. She tied the dressing gowns belt to hold the edges closed and ignored the dress and petticoats Laurel had laid across the bed. Crossing the room to the wardrobe, she opened the doors. As long as she was at the ranch, she didn’t have to pretend to be the proper lady everyone assumed she was and she wasn’t wearing that dress unless she had to.

As always, the wardrobe was filled with clothing but nothing inside looked like hers. “What in the world?” She riffled through the garments, her horror growing when she saw nothing but gingham dresses, traveling frocks of silk, and blouses that buttoned clean to the chin.

Laurel chose that moment to walk back through the doorway. “What is all of this? Where are all my clothes?”

“Those are some of the older dresses I had and a few Sarah and Emmaline didn’t need. We were going to donate them to the church clothing box. I didn’t have anywhere else to put them.”

“Where are all of my old clothes?”

“Gone.”

She glanced back over her shoulder. “Gone where?”

Laurel sighed. “Your father got rid of them.”

“Got rid of them?” Her voice was louder than it should have been. She turned back to the wardrobe and stared at the dresses now taking up the space. All of her things were gone? “Why?”

She heard Laurel sigh again. “Because he wants you to act like a lady, Alex, and it’s hard to present yourself as one while you’re wearing men’s clothing. He doesn’t want you wearing them, even out here on the ranch. You’re lucky he hasn’t raided the wardrobe in your room behind the school. If he had his way, you’d never wear another pair of trousers, ever.”

Alex gritted her teeth and shut the wardrobe doors. “Are you sure getting rid of my trousers is all pa’s doings and not yours?” At the look on Laurel’s face, Alex shook her head and said, “You know what? Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

She crossed the room and picked up the things Laurel had laid out for her. “I just want to bathe and talk to pa. I still have to go by the mercantile before it gets dark.”

“And your father wants to talk to you. He’s none too pleased about you sneaking off to Missoula by yourself. He almost went after you.”

He knew? “Is he mad?”

Laurel laughed. “I’m not sure mad is the word I’d use. Don’t expect any favors for a while.” She gave her a pointed look. “He’s got a lot on his mind, Alex. With all the new ranch hands roaming around and him trying to get everything settled before that cattle drive, he has too much to think about to have to stop and worry about us, too.”

Alex’s pulse leaped at the mention of the cattle drive. She hadn’t been able to think of much else since her father informed them he’d be driving the cattle to market himself. Even though she wanted nothing more than to talk about the upcoming ride, she stuck to the current conversation and said, “I’m not helpless. I did spend six months in Missoula without anyone watching over me in case you’ve forgotten.”

“You had Mr. Colby to protect you then. This is completely different and you know it. You took off without anyone knowing. Anything could have happened to you.” Alex knew the conversation she wanted to have with her pa would turn into a fight quicker than she expected now. He was upset she’d ventured into Missoula alone. She’d hoped he’d never find out until it was too late but as always, her every move was observed by someone. It was one of the hazards of having such a large family and

living in a town full of people who made sure to make everyone's business their own.

She followed Laurel without a word to the kitchen, then beyond to the new bathing room, pausing at the door.

The new addition to the back of the house was a thing of beauty. It was every bit as fancy as the one her uncle Morgan had in his home. When Laurel started filling the tub, Alex laid her things on the small table butted up against the right-hand wall. She glanced into the mirror above it and cringed. She looked a mess. And Jesse saw you like this.

The words whispered themselves across her mind and she tried to find a reason not to care but failed.

Laurel pulled the door shut behind her as she left and within minutes, she was soaking in soap bubbles and washing away the stench lingering on her skin. Her thoughts kept veering toward Jesse and the fact his presence upset her irritated her more than anything else had in months. Why was he even back in town?

She still remembered the look on his face when he stepped up to board the stagecoach to Boston all those years ago. He'd stopped and turned, scanning the crowd of people there to see him off. When his gaze fell on her, he'd smiled. It wasn't the same as the hundred of other smiles he'd given her. That one had seemed...special somehow. As much as she loved to hate him, that tiny smile had meant something. It was a truce of sorts. For all their fighting, him acknowledging her as he left made her feel special.

She took longer than needed to bathe, just to avoid facing her father, but eventually dressed and braided her wet hair and sucked in a steadying breath before walking back into the kitchen. Her grandfather sitting at the table was the highlight of her week. “Hey, Grandpa.”

It took him a moment of looking at her to recognize who she was. He was getting on in age and his health was failing but he still knew her. He always did.

“Where’s that little girl I’ve been missing?” His voice sounded shaky and soft. His hair was still a wild mass of white strands about his head. The smile on his face widened when she sat down beside of him. “It’s been too quiet with you gone.”

Alex laughed. “With Holt and Landon running around? I find that hard to believe.”

He nodded and reached out for her hand. “They make their share of noise but it’s not the same as when you were growing up. I’ve missed you, girl.”

“I miss you too, grandpa.” They talked until he grew tired, then she helped him back to his room. Her father would come looking for her if she stalled too long and putting this little talk off didn’t make facing him any easier a task. Pulling her grandfather’s door shut, she sighed heavily and went in search of her pa.

She found him in the barn, working as if he didn’t have a ranch full of hired hands to do all the dirty work. He was mucking out stalls, sweat darkening the back of his shirt. He was still the same strong man she’d

always known, even though his hair was starting to gray and small lines were appearing on his face.

Alex glanced around the barn, inhaling the scent of fresh hay and horseflesh. She'd missed this. Nothing she'd seen in Missoula gave her as much pleasure as this ranch did.

Holden spotted her and put the pitchfork aside, then removed his gloves. She sucked in a breath and waited for the yelling to start. He surprised her by smiling instead.

"You're never going to mind me, are you?" He crossed the barn and grabbed her, pulled her into a hug so tight she found it hard to breathe. When he let her go, the smile was gone. "If I knew you wouldn't fight me like a wild cat, I'd take you out behind the woodshed and blister your hide."

She snorted a laugh. "I'm twenty-three. I'm a little old for spankings, don't you think?"

"No. You're my daughter. You'll never be too old." The corner of his mouth twitched and she could tell he was fighting hard not to smile. His amusement didn't last long, though. He straightened to his full height and gave her that disapproving look she'd tried her entire life not to bring to his face. The last time she'd seen it was the night the school burned down.

"I just needed to get away for a spell, pa. That's all." She fidgeted. The speech she'd rehearsed was only a vague whisper in her mind now. What was it she'd wanted to say to him?

“You couldn’t do that with someone else going along?”

She met his gaze and tried to steel her nerves. “Yes, but I didn’t want company. Have you not ever just wanted to get away for a bit without having to worry about anyone but yourself?”

“Yes, but I have a family, so every decision I make includes them.”

Alex opened her mouth to bring up the real reason she’d gone to Missoula but the words stuck in her throat. The moment she spoke it aloud, everything would be different.

“You traveled half way across the territory alone, Alex. Anything could have happened to you.” The mishap with the stranger in Missoula came to mind. If it hadn’t been for the Derringer she kept tucked into her boot, it was hard telling what would have become of her. She didn’t mention it to her father and never would. It would only prove his point.

He sighed long and loud, then shook his head. “It doesn’t matter what I say, does it? You’re never going to mind me, are you?”

She grinned. “When I can.”

He laughed and leaned in to kiss her on the forehead. “Well, what did you want to talk to me about?”

Her gut clenched instantly. The reason she’d traveled to Missoula alone, and came to the ranch instead of going to her little room behind the school, had been such a good idea when she’d planned it, but now that she had to explain herself to her father, it seemed impossible.

Maybe now wasn’t the time. He was already upset she snuck off by herself. He’d probably tell her, no, just to teach her a lesson.

She smiled and shook her head. This discussion would be better left until another day. He needed time to forgive her for running off first. “What I wanted to talk to you about can wait. To be honest, I’m tired and after having to walk to town, hide from Edna, and my run-in with Jesse, all I want to do is go home and crawl into bed.”

“Walk to town?”

She shook her head and waved her hand, dismissing the concern suddenly in his eyes. “Stagecoach threw a wheel. Nothing serious but we had to walk the last mile or so back into town.”

“And the state of your dress when you got here?”

Alex rolled her eyes. “Jesse came barreling out of the saloon and knocked me off the sidewalk and into a pile of manure.”

His lips twitched.

“Don’t you dare laugh,” she said, her voice raising moments before he started doing just that. She grinned as he laughed and crossed her arms under her breasts. When he quieted down, she narrowed her eyes at him. “You’re not even going to be mad that he ruined a perfectly good dress that you paid for?”

Holden grinned and readjusted his hat. “No. I’ve enough money to replace that dress a thousand times over. I just wish I would have been there to see the look on your face when you realized Jesse was back in town.”

“Why?” Her pulse leaped for reasons she didn’t want to examine. “Him being in town again doesn’t matter to me.”

“Really?” He was still grinning. “Do I have to remind you that you two being caught kissing in the school house was the reason it burned down?”

Her face heated at the memory. She’d never live that event down. No one in town would let her forget it either. The one moment she lost her mind and let Jesse Samuels kiss her, they’d been caught. Her trying to run away and knocking the oil lamp over in her haste had caused a fire big enough the blaze had been seen for miles. And her shame was now Willow Creek history.

She shrugged her shoulders and looked at anything but him. “Hopefully I won’t have to deal with him much.”

“Well, he’s back in town to stay from what I hear. It’ll be hard to avoid him.”

“Wonderful,” she muttered under her breath. “Where’s the horse I rode in on? I want to get back to town.”

“Why not stay the night? You can have a bit of supper with us and tell us about your trip to Missoula.”

She considered the offer and finally nodded her head. Maybe after a good nights sleep, she’d be ready to broach the subject of her job. Her father may be more receptive, too. She smiled, leaned up to kiss him on the cheek and turned back to the house. “I’ll see you inside.”

\* \* \*

“You could probably see better if you actually crossed the creek.”

Jesse straightened and shoved his hands deeper into his pockets, casting a sideways glance at his brother. “I’m not trying to see anything in particular.”

Rafe laughed. “You always were a lousy liar.”

The Avery ranch was a hazy blur on the horizon. Jesse could just make out a few lights in the windows of the main house. Activity around the place was a constant flow of movement and those fuzzy shapes were hard to make out. None of them was the person he was looking for, though.

“I thought you were supposed to be in town with Ben and Aaron causing trouble and drinking the saloon dry.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t much feel like it tonight.”

“You saw her didn’t you?”

He didn’t have to ask who Rafe was talking about.

“She’s only at the ranch on weekends now.”

“I heard.” He chuckled and shook his head. “I’m still not sure I believe she’s the school teacher in town.”

Visions of Alex standing in the school, her hair pulled up neatly at the back of her head while she read from some book to a room full of kids amused him enough he laughed. He remembered the last time he’d been inside the school with her, the memory causing the smile on his face to grow until he knew he looked stupid but found little reason to

care. “How did she end up the school teacher? Was it some form of punishment?”

Rafe grinned and shrugged his shoulder. “I wouldn’t know but to hear her tell it, it is.”

Jesse pictured her in his mind’s eye as she stood again in front of those same imaginary kids, reading from her book through clenched teeth. “To her, I’m sure it is punishment. She never liked school. She’d rather be out there on the range somewhere herding horses or mucking out stalls.”

“And that’s exactly what she does every Friday before heading back to town on Sunday. She lives in the room behind the school like every other teacher has since the day it was built.”

Jesse turned and leaned against the tree to his right and gazed across the creek to the Avery pasture, trying to take his mind off Alexandra Avery. Lord knew thoughts of her tormented him enough as it was. He focused his attention on the cattle moving in a rolling tide of blacks and browns. “I can’t imagine you handling a herd that size yourself.”

Rafe crossed his arms across his chest. “Me handling them would be a bit of a stretch.” His brother smiled, small age lines forming on his face. “If Holden hadn’t sent his men over every evening most of the herd would have died or just wandered off. I had no idea Ben Crowley had taken so many of them from us. The judge awarded me nearly every head the man had, even some that weren’t ours to begin with.”

“That why you sold them to the Avery’s?”

Rafe nodded. “For the most part.” He glanced his way. “Grace didn’t want me out on the range all day either. She’s not the same person she was ten years ago.”

Jesse looked away, guilt causing a painful tug in his gut. So much had changed since he’d been gone. He barely even recognized Willow Creek now. The town had grown. Newcomers crowded the streets and the friends he’d grown up with had lives of their own. He wasn’t even sure he could call half of them friends anymore.

He pushed the front of his hat up and smiled even though he knew it wouldn’t reach his eyes. “Think Grace would be up to making me one of those apple pies she used to bake for us?”

Rafe grinned. “If you asked her just right she would. You know she loved to mother you.”

The word mother erased their smiles. He looked at Rafe, saw the sadness etched into every line on his face and wasn’t sure how to ease his brother’s pain. “Has she seen a doctor?”

Rafe nodded his head. “Yes. Evan has tried everything he knows of. Says sometimes it takes a while. Her stressing over not being able to conceive isn’t helping much either.” He sighed, his mouth pinched into a straight line. “Hell, for all I know, it could be my fault.”

Jesse smiled to try and lighten the mood. “If I had to guess I’d say it was your fault. You always were messing things up for no other reason than you could.”

Rafe grinned, the sadness still clouding his eyes. “Keep that up and you’ll be bunking out here in that old line shack like you always wanted to do.”

Jesse glanced to where Rafe pointed. The old line shack wasn’t more than four walls, all of them tilting a bit to the left. He’d had dreams of fixing it up and living in it when he was a kid but like most dreams, they never make it past the thinking stage.

They talked a few more minutes about nothing in particular before Rafe walked away. Jesse watched him until he was a blur on the horizon. When he could no longer see him, he raised a hand, running it over his face to try and erase his fatigue.

He’d been home for a week now and the happy homecoming he’d been looking for hadn’t happened. Instead, he entered a house filled with sadness, a town he didn’t recognize anymore and the one girl he’d been desperately trying to see still couldn’t stand the sight of him.

\* \* \*

As she’d done a thousand nights before, Alex sat on the window sill and brushed out her hair. Supper was a horrifying mix of scoldings for venturing into Missoula alone and teasing because Jesse was back in town and everyone knew how much she loved to hate him. If they only knew the half of it.

She lowered the brush and stared across the pasture in the direction of his house. If the wind blew just right, the tree limbs shifted enough she could see a light from the windows. She used to imagine that light was in his room and he did nothing but sit there and pine away for her. She grinned.

Once upon a time, she would have been disgusted by the thought. Had spent years trying to beat the snot out of him in hopes he'd just go away and she'd never have to look at him again but the aggravating boy was always there. Always getting under her skin one way or another and always making her wonder what it was about him that made him so impossible to ignore.

The years hadn't made that task any easier. The fact Jesse left town didn't seem to matter to some. They still insisted on reminding her of how often they fought. Or asked her if she missed him. She hadn't. Well, not at first. It wasn't until he'd been gone for several months that she realized how boring life in Willow Creek was. School was more torturous than normal and every day was exactly the same.

Six months after he'd left she'd spotted a red mop of hair sticking above a shelf in the mercantile. Her heart had leaped into her throat. She snuck around the shelves, ducking so he wouldn't see her and jumped out from behind a barrel and scared the living daylights out of some strange red head boy she'd never seen before. He'd ran from the store with her fast on his heels all the way to the stagecoach station. She'd spent long minutes staring at him, convincing herself it wasn't Jesse.

That was when she knew she was in trouble. As much as she loved to hate Jesse Samuels, she missed him. She missed fighting with him. Seeing him every day and knowing no matter what happened, he'd get her blood pumping enough to remind her she was still alive.

She stepped away from the window and stared at her reflection the mirror. Her skin was scrubbed clean, her hair shining from where she'd brushed it free of knots and tangles and she smelled of the rose oil Laurel kept in the bathing room. She tried to hide the girl staring back at her for longer than she could remember but knew it wouldn't be possible forever. Hugh had already noticed. She may be a bit naive on occasion but she wasn't stupid enough to not know what he wanted out of their friendship. But was it what she wanted? And if so, what would people say? The town tomboy who pretended to be a lady marrying the blacksmith.

A voice in the back of her head whispered, what would Jesse think? Would he care if she married Hugh? Somehow she didn't think so. If anything, he'd probably thank Hugh for making her settle down and stop acting as if she could do what ever she wanted to.

“What are you thinking about so hard?”

She jumped, startled at the voice and turned to the door. Her father was there, arms crossed over his chest while he leaned one shoulder against the doorjamb.

“I didn't mean to intrude,” he said. “The door was open.”

She laid her brush on top of the dresser and crossed to where he was. He folded her in his arms like he used to and for a brief moment, she was ten years old again.

“What’s on your mind?”

“What makes you think something is on my mind?”

“The look on your face when I walked in here for one.” He pulled back enough to see her. “The fact you’re letting me hold you like this is another.”

She sighed and held on tighter. “I spent every day of my childhood counting the days until I was a grown up and could do what I wanted and now that I can, all I want to do most days is hide out here at the ranch where my only responsibility is feeding the animals and mucking out the stalls.”

“We all have to grow up eventually.”

“I know, I just wish there weren’t so many decisions to make.” She pulled away and met his gaze. “How do you know if you’ve made the right one?”

“You don’t. You just have to trust your gut and hope for the best.”

She curled her lip. “Well, that’s a stupid way to choose something that will impact the rest of your life.”

“And what are you contemplating that will affect the rest of your life?”

She didn't answer. She wasn't ready to voice her thoughts yet especially when she didn't even know what choice it was she needed to make. "I'm tired," she said, "and you know I tend to overthink things."

"Yes, you do." He placed a kiss on top of her head. "Go crawl into bed. Whatever it is you have to think about will work itself out without your interference. If its meant to be, it will happen without any help from you."

"Goodnight, pa."

He smiled and started pulling the door shut. "Goodnight, Alex."

### Chapter Three

Spending the entire weekend on the ranch didn't provide a single answer. Alex sipped her coffee as she stared out across the yard toward the barn. There were still too many questions and she knew the solutions weren't going to come unless she swallowed her fear and did something to move things along.

The sun was climbing over the mountains, illuminating the ranch in that shimmering haze she loved to see. It would be a shame to ruin such a nice day but continuing to put this off was going to drive her crazy.

Ranch hands were walking in and out of the barn and she inhaled a steadying breath and whispered, "Let's get this over with," before setting her mug on the back porch rail and stepped down into the yard. She could count the number times she'd been scared on one hand and today was one of them.

She entered the barn and stood silently by the door as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the dim lighting inside. When she could see and spotted her father near the stalls, she whispered, "please don't say no, pa," to herself.

She crossed the space between them and cleared her throat, pushed a stray strand of hair from her face and lifted her chin another notch to try and look more confident than she felt. When he turned to face her, the words she'd been practicing for the past week stuck in her throat.

Her pa still stood above most men in height, his dark hair, along with the stubble on his chin, were starting to show signs of gray but his eyes were still a clear sky blue. There was intelligence and a cunning most Avery men had shining back at her and the reason she'd sought him out fled with that small glance.

He smiled, the tiny lines forming around his mouth when he did made the look in his eyes seem less harsh. She glanced away to collect her thoughts and tried to relax. The speech she'd rehearsed came back to her in seconds and she reminded herself that the worst he would do was yell.

She cleared her throat again and smiled back. "I wanted to talk to you about something, pa."

"I figured as much. You've been following me around the ranch for two days now." He laid the horse brush he'd been holding down and took off his gloves. "What is it?"

Those irritating jitters in her stomach were back. She licked her lips, clenched her fists and took a deep breath. "Well, it's about the cattle drive. I wa—"

"No."

Alex stared, her words cut off by his quick reply. "No?" She blinked. "You don't even know what I was going to say."

He smiled again, this time those lines by his mouth were joined with more than a few around his eyes. He was amused. "Yes, I do. You want to go and my answer is no."

“But—“

“No buts.” He started across the barn in her direction. “If this is why you’ve been stalking me and sneaking around the ranch as if no one has seen you, then you’ve wasted a lot of time for nothing. You’re not going on the cattle drive, Alex, and that’s final.”

He paused when he reached her side and laid a soft kiss on her forehead before continuing on to the house. She sighed, crossed her arms under her breasts and stared after him.

“Told ya he wouldn’t let you go.”

The childish giggles echoing inside the barn irritated her more than the words did. Alex looked to the loft and saw Holt peering down at her. “I don’t need your advice, little brother.” She glared at him. “And what are you doing spying on me?”

He laughed again, then sprang to his feet. At eleven years old, he was full of mischief. He reminded her of herself at his age and hardly faulted him for it. He came down the ladder faster than he should have, missing a few steps on the way, and landed at the bottom with a hard thump. He pushed the brim of his hat up a few inches, a gesture she’d seen her pa do a thousand times over, and grinned in her direction. “He’s letting me go with him.”

Alex’s mouth gaped, her eyes widened and her blood heated and raced through her veins. “What!”

Holt laughed again, the look in his eyes filled with glee. “Ma said this morning it was okay if I skipped out on school for it. Her and pa both think it’ll be a good learning experience for me.”

“A learning....” Alex screamed and marched from the barn, her fist clenched along with her teeth. She didn’t stop seething until she’d reached the house. She jerked open the back door and stomped into the kitchen, nearly knocking her younger brother, Landon, down in the process. Her pa and Laurel turned to look at her. “Holt gets to go?”

Her father’s eyes widened a fraction, the small action enough for her to realize she’d yelled at him. She inhaled a quick breath, let it out and allowed her shoulders relax. “Sorry for raising my voice, pa, but why can Holt go and I can’t? He’s only eleven years old.” She glanced toward Landon where he stood by the door. “Is Landon going?”

Laurel shook her head. “Landon is staying here with me.” She told the boys to go outside and play then gave her father a comforting pat on the arm and left the room. Figures. Laurel always left when a fight was brewing with her father.

Her father spoke before she had a chance to open her mouth again. “For one thing Holt is a boy.”

“And that matters why?” she asked. “He can barely lift his own saddle. What good will he be on a cattle drive?” Her voice was rising again. She took a calming breath and grabbed onto the back of a chair, gripping the wood to try and gain control over her emotions. “Come on

pa, you know as well as I do that I'm as good if not a better cowboy than half the cowpokes on this ranch. I can do this with my eyes closed."

"I know you can, Alex."

He smiled and took a sip from the mug he was holding before setting it in the sink and turning back to face her. "You being better at wrangling has nothing to do with it."

"Is it because I'm a girl?"

His smile widened. "Yes, but not for the reason you're thinking." He walked to the table and pulled out a chair and sat. "Sit down, Alex, before your fingernails leave permanent marks in that chair."

Alex sat as instructed. She blew out a frustrated breath and shook her head. "Give me one good reason, pa, and don't use the whole 'you're a girl' excuse. You know as well as I do that has nothing to do with my ability to herd cattle. I've been doing that with horses my whole life."

Holden leaned forward and propped his elbows on the table. "First, you being a girl has everything to do with it." When she went to speak, he raised an eyebrow, the look in his eyes telling her not to say a word. "I just mean that I don't want you around a bunch of cowboys I barely know. Half the men who signed up for this are complete strangers, Alex. I don't know them and I don't trust them around my only daughter. Especially one who happens to be the prettiest girl in all of Willow Creek."

She brushed the praise aside and leaned closer. "Pa, I can handle myself with some dumb cowpoke, you know that."

“Yes and for the men’s safety, I’m not letting you go.” He laughed, the humor of his jest shining in his eyes, although deep down she knew he meant it. She could handle herself in any situation. She always had.

“Pa—“

“Have you forgotten about school? It starts in less than a month. It’ll take longer than that for us to even get to Kansas and another month to get back. You can’t just up and leave your job. We worked too hard to get it for you.”

The school house in town flashed in her mind’s eye the instant he mentioned it. The building was twice the size it had been when she attended. It doubled as a church when the occasion called for it and the men in town made sure everything looked as if it had just been placed there. The desks had been sanded and stained again not long ago, along with the teacher’s desk—her desk. It still shined, the wood pristine without a blemish anywhere.

Her shoulders slumped. Guilt chased away what little joy she felt at the prospect of joining the cattle drive. Her father was right. He’d worked hard to get her the job as school teacher even though she was sure to Edna, it was penance since she was the one who burned the old school down.

She sighed and looked her father in the eye. “I know you and Laurel wanted me to teach, pa, but it’s not what I want. Not really. I only went along with it because of what I did.”

“I know that but you accepted the job, Alex, and you need to do the best at it that you can.”

“And I have been but surely I’ve paid that debt off by now.”

“Probably but it takes a long time to convince someone to move way out here to teach. You’ve saved them a lot of headache by keeping that job.” He stood, placed a kiss on the top of her head and straightened. “I love you, Alex, I always will. I’ve spoiled you every day of your life and you’re as willful as anyone I know but I’m not going to budge on this. You can’t go and that’s final.”

He left without another word. Alex slumped back in her chair, his words running on repeat through her head. She hated the fact he was right about most of what he said. She did have a responsibility to the people of Willow Creek. She took the teaching job to atone for what she’d done. She just hadn’t thought she’d hate doing it so much.

It wasn’t even the job really. It was the fact it took her away from what she really loved and that was ranching. She didn’t want to pretend to be someone she wasn’t. Someone who wore dresses in public to keep the townsfolk from looking down their noses at her. Someone who smiled and pretended to enjoy what she did for a living because it was expected of her. Someone who did what others thought she should just to keep from having to argue about it. She was twenty-three years old and stuck in a life she didn’t want.

She scrubbed at her face in frustration and stood. She needed time to think. Time to figure out a way to convince him to let her have the life she wanted.

Heading back to the barn, she saddled her horse and climbed into the saddle. The split riding skirt she crafted over the past two nights caught on the pommel. She untangled the material, adjusted the fabric so her legs weren't showing and took off across the prairie. If she wanted to take her life back and live it the way she saw fit, then her plan needed a solution her father would have a hard time refusing.

\* \* \*

Jesse stood on the sidewalk outside the mercantile and looked at the variety of businesses that had popped up in his absence. The livery stable was still there although it had grown in size. Not only did Percy rent out horses, but he now had an assortment of carriages and buggies.

The telegraph office was busy as usual, a new dress shop had opened and a blacksmith's hammer beat out a steady drum that echoed through the streets.

Scratching at the stubble on his chin he hadn't bothered to shave off that morning, he contemplated his options. Although he knew Rafe and Grace would never throw him out he couldn't live there and not contribute something. The cattle had been sold to the Avery's so there wasn't a lot to do other than work the vegetable garden.

The most obvious choice was to talk to Holden and see if he needed another ranch hand but Alex's reaction to seeing him again didn't make that option the first choice. She'd need time to warm up to him and being at her family's home every day wasn't the way to do that so he needed some other means of support. He'd go to Holden as a last resort.

A talk with Mrs. Jenkins in the mercantile proved pointless so he worked his way around town, passing by the dress shop. He knew nothing about ladies fashions and couldn't imagine any sort of job they'd have for him anyway.

When Percy gave him an apologetic shake of his head, Jesse thanked him and headed back to the sidewalk. The blacksmith's shop and the saloon were the last on his list. He didn't know who the blacksmith was and working in the saloon would have Grace in fits but he was left with little options.

He stepped into the covered shelter of the blacksmith's shop just as Aaron grabbed him by the arm and pulled him back out into the sun.

"Are you avoiding us?"

Ben grinned at him from where he leaned against the side of the building. "I think he is. You scared of those ladies Vern has in the saloon?"

Jesse raised an eyebrow. "Calling them ladies is a stretch, don't ya think?"

"Depends on how long its been since you've been without one."

Jesse laughed. "I'm not that desperate yet."

“Well I am,” Aaron said. “Let’s go.”

“I can’t. I’ve got things to do today.”

“You said that yesterday and the day before that.” Ben pushed off the side of the building. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Jesse said. Ben threw him a look that said he was lying. “I’ve got to find a job and I can’t do that if I’m laid up drunk in the saloon.”

“Well waiting one more day ain’t gonna kill ya, now come on.”

His job search was put on hold as they steered him toward the Diamond Back Saloon. He could count the number of times he’d been inside on one hand and neither of those times had he wanted to leave the moment he stepped inside the doors.

The welcome back get together was as loud and rambunctious as Ben claimed it would be. The crowd inside the saloon was large for early evening. Ben and Aaron flanked him on both sides, his best friends since they were kids treating him as if he’d never left.

The atmosphere bordered on chaos. The gaming tables were packed with cowboys looking to double the cash they walked in with. The girls Vernon hired to liven up the crowd were working the room, their colorful dresses and short skirts grabbing the attention of everyone they passed, himself included. It was hard not to look when a woman flashed her thighs at you. Any red-blooded man would find it damn near impossible to look away.

The plain-looking brunette sitting on top of the piano was singing a bit off key, the noise rising above the din of voices and laughter, but no one seemed to notice but him.

He turned and faced the bar, downed the whiskey in his glass and waited until his eyes stopped watering before motioning to Vern, the barkeeper, for another. He'd tasted a variety of spirits while in Boston but nothing hit your stomach as hard and fast as the rot-gut whiskey Vern served.

"So, I take it you didn't have much luck finding any work here in town."

Jesse shook his head. "None." He propped his elbows on top of the bar. "Rafe sold all the cattle to the Avery's so there isn't much for me to do around the house anymore."

"Holden's been hiring on for that cattle drive he's sending east," Aaron said. "You could always check with him and see if he's looking for another man to ride along."

He'd had the same thought himself when Rafe mentioned it but he'd spent three years herding cattle and it wasn't an easy job. He needed work, but taking off on a cattle drive after getting back into town wasn't anything he wanted to do. He'd been away too long as it is. Besides, he'd come home with dreams bigger than the Montana sky and most of them involved Alexandra Avery. None of them would happen if he weren't even here to see them through.

As if they could read his thoughts, Ben said, “What happened when you went after Alex the other day?”

Jesse nodded in thanks to Vern when he slid his filled glass back toward him. “Not a whole lot. She was determined to ignore me.” He grinned and gave Ben a sideways look. “Although, she does still hate me. She was pretty clear on that.”

They shared a laugh. “What did you do to make her dislike you so much anyway?” Aaron asked. “You two have been fighting as long as I’ve known ya.”

Jesse shrugged his shoulder. “I don’t know.” He lied and took another swig of his drink. “We’ve just always clashed for some reason.”

“She clashes with everyone,” Ben put in. “I don’t think there’s one person in town she hasn’t had words with at least once in her life.”

Aaron nodded in agreement. “I wonder how Hugh puts up with her?”

Ben laughed and said, “I’ll never know.”

“Who is Hugh?” Jesse asked, looking at each of them in turn.

Aaron was the first to answer. “Hugh Jacobs. He’s the new blacksmith in town. He’s her beau.”

The reply was like snow chilled water down his back. Jesse stiffened, the words replaying in his head on repeat until it sounded as if someone were screaming them.

Alex had a beau?

A man he didn't know was courting the girl he couldn't stop thinking about.

There had been countless letters written to Alex. He'd burned them all before doing something stupid like mailing them, though. They held endless streams of words telling her how sorry he was for all the things he'd ever done to her. Pages of apologies and even more trying to say what he really thought of her. How he'd only picked on her because it was the only way he could get her to talk to him. As pathetic as it was, he'd deliberately riled her to get a reaction.

And he was no better off now than he had been all those years ago. Alex still didn't see him. Now that she had a steady suitor, she never would. Not in a way he wanted her to.

He gritted his teeth and slid his glass back. "Vern, I need a refill." The constant chatter of Ben and Aaron drew him from his thoughts when one of them said, "Speak of the devil." Jesse looked toward the door, a man he'd never seen before taking up most of the space.

"That's Hugh," Ben said before picking his glass back up. "Nice enough fellow, I suppose. He keeps to himself most of the time."

Jesse didn't like him the instant he laid eyes on him. He was too tall, his hair too dark, his tanned complexion so different from his own.

He looked away. There was nothing wrong with Hugh Jacobs other than the fact he was courting the girl he'd always thought would be his when she got over being stubborn. Hating him on principle sounded like a good idea but he'd have to explain himself eventually and if Alex had

a steady beau, he'd be damned if anyone ever found out he'd been pining for her.

He swallowed the rest of his whiskey, motioned for another and downed it just as fast. His throat and stomach burned by the time Vernon filled the glass again.

“Take it easy there, boss.” Ben laughed and reached over to push his glass away. “You keep putting those shots away like that, you won't be good for nothing.”

“I thought that was the idea when we came in here.”

They shared another round before Ben turned and put his back to the bar. Aaron followed suit, and Jesse did the same, scanning the crowd for Hugh Jacobs. He spotted him near the stairs talking with a man in a suit. The longer he watched him, the more thoughts of him with Alex filled his mind. Thoughts that caused blood to rush through his veins and pound inside his head.

Hugh and the man he was talking to laughed. The smile on Hugh's face said he was pleased about something. They headed toward the bar and stopped beside Aaron. The man with Hugh leaned toward Vernon and said, “We'll take a shot of whatever these three are drinking.” He smiled and patted Hugh on the shoulder. “Hell, I'll buy another round for everyone at the bar, too. We're celebrating!”

Vern raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Yes, sir.” He poured the drinks, the noise from the men lingering around the bar raising in volume as their glasses were refilled. “What's the occasion?”

“Hugh is getting hitched!”

The man in question downed his drink and motioned for another. “I talked with Alexandra’s pa an hour ago,” Hugh said. “All I gotta do now is get the girl alone for five minutes and ask her to marry me.”

The congratulatory cheers were deafening. The noise grew until Jesse’s ears were ringing. When Hugh said, “Alexandra Jacobs does have a nice ring to it, don’t you think?” the words echoed inside his head until it became unbearable.

He’d heard people talk about doing things they didn’t remember after the fact but most of the time, they were hitting the bottle pretty hard. He’d had a fair share of whiskey tonight—and he was far from drunk—but he’d be damned if he knew how he ended up rolling across the floor with Hugh Jacobs, both of them throwing punches hard enough to bruise.

By the time he was pulled to his feet, every inch of him hurt, blood was pouring from his nose and he was having a hard time seeing out of his right eye. Hugh looked much the same.

He jerked against the hold they had him in. Ben and Aaron each held an arm, Ben’s voice loud in his ear as he told him to calm down. He stared across the broken chairs and overturned tables to Hugh. The man’s face was red, his lip busted, the buttons on his shirt ripped from the fabric. He was heaving for breath, his hair disheveled, and confusion and anger clouded his eyes.

“What’s going on?”

Jesse didn't look away from Hugh but he could see Morgan Avery out of the corner of his eye. The marshal in Willow Creek looked the same as he had last time he'd seen him.

"Who started this?" Morgan asked, looking between them.

"He did," Hugh spat. "Crazy some-bitch just attacked me."

Morgan turned to look his way before hooking his thumbs in the front of his belt. "That right?"

Jesse didn't reply.

Hugh jerked away from the men holding him and tried unsuccessfully to tidy his appearance. "I don't know what his problem is, marshal. I've never even seen the feller before tonight."

"Well, that's because he just got back into town," Morgan said. He nodded toward Aaron and Ben and they let him go. Jesse glanced at Morgan before returning his gaze to Hugh.

"What's the problem, Jesse?"

He didn't answer. What was there to say? I hit the bastard cause he took my girl? The fact Alex hated him made little difference. In his mind, she'd always been his. She always would be.

He straightened and tore his gaze from Hugh. "Just a misunderstanding, marshal. Won't happen again."

"You damn right it won't," Hugh said.

What started out as a celebration among friends ended with him spending a night in the jail and a hefty bill for the damage to the saloon. Morgan lingered after locking the cell door. "Anything I can get you?"

“No.” Jesse sat on the single cot in the small space and leaned back against the wall. “Just don’t tell Rafe and Grace this is where I spent the night.”

Morgan laughed. “News travels pretty fast around here nowadays. I’m sure they’ll find out but you’ve got my word they won’t hear it from me.”

He was left to his thoughts and Jesse replayed the night’s events over again in his mind’s eye. He should have regretted most of it but he didn’t. He knew nothing of Hugh Jacobs other than he was a blacksmith and he was going to ask Alex to marry him and that fact alone was reason enough to hate the man. He’d taken the one thing Jesse wanted more than anything else.

He’d agreed to go to Boston, to the fancy boy’s school Grace got him in to because she’d told him no woman wanted an ignorant man. That having an education like the one he could get in Boston would make a more desirable prospect. Being good with one’s hands and enduring the heat and snow in Montana meant little if you didn’t have brains enough to manage a ranch, even one as small as what he and Rafe owned. So he’d gone, willingly, with every intention of coming back with enough knowledge to impress the girl who loved to hate him.

He sighed. Seemed pointless now. He didn’t know much about women but he was pretty sure one would pick a man with his own business, a blacksmith everyone seemed to like, over a man who owned nothing but half of an empty cattle ranch.

He had nothing to offer Alexandra Avery. Nothing but himself and her reaction to him told him her feelings hadn't changed one bit.

## Chapter Four

Alex's hands were trembling as she unfolded the letter she'd been waiting on. She scanned the single sheet of paper, her heart racing by the time she saw the name Emily Harper appear. Elation was not a word strong enough to describe her glee. Her old teacher, Mr. Colby, had come through just as she hoped he would.

Alex refolded the note and tucked it inside the small wooden box sitting on the table in her little room behind the school. She gave the space a glance, smiling when she realized the four walls she'd felt so trapped in just ten minutes before were about to be Emily Harper's new home.

Just as soon as she gathered the courage to tell her pa.

She grabbed the books sitting on the table by the door and carried them into the school room. For once, she didn't feel a sense of loathing when she entered. She'd taught school there willingly but would never enjoy it. She wanted to be on the ranch, doing what she loved.

Placing the books in her hand on the desk, she moved through the room to the main door and exited the building. If Emily Harper was on her way, there were things to get in order.

She made it half way to the mercantile before she spotted Hugh. He was carrying a bundle of flowers in one hand, the smile on his face bright enough everyone who passed him stopped to stare. The conversation she'd had with her father about Hugh courting her came to

mind. If she had to guess, she'd say he was on his way to see her and she realized they needed to have a serious conversation. She couldn't let him keep on thinking they were actually courting. Could she?

As he approached, she took in his handsome face, his strong arms and gentle smile. He wasn't a bad choice for a suitor. She could certainly do worse. But she wasn't ready for marriage. Was she?

"No," she said out loud. "I'm not ready."

Hugh stopped when he reached her and held out his arm.

"Alexandra," he said in way of greeting. "These are for you."

Alex took the flowers, her gaze roaming his bruised face. "Thanks." She looked him over and shook her head. "What happened to you? Looks like you got kicked by a mule."

Hugh rubbed a hand over his jaw. "Feels a bit like I did, too." He smiled, his face turning a dark shade of red. "I got into a tussle over at the saloon last night."

Her eyes widened in shock. She wasn't aware he spent time in the saloon.

"I don't frequent the place often but Walter Simmons insisted I come have a drink with him and I walked face first into a fist fight."

"Over what?"

He smiled again and the look in his eye said he wasn't going to tell her why. "I didn't come to talk about all that." He pulled on the vest he was wearing and straightened to his full height. "Are you free?"

He was avoiding the reason for the bar fight. She flashed him a grin. She'd find out one way or another. "What did you have in mind?"

"Lunch."

She glanced toward the mercantile. Her shopping could wait. Getting things sorted with Hugh was more important than trying to impress Emily Harper. "As a matter of fact, I am. Lead the way."

He hooked her arm in his and turned, leading her toward the hotel and its restaurant. "I haven't seen you around this past week," he said. "Have you been at the ranch?"

Her impromptu trip to Missoula to see Mr. Colby flashed across her mind's eye. "I've been around. School starts soon so I've been trying to get everything ready."

They passed in front of her uncle Morgan's house. Alex looked to see if she saw any movement from her aunt or her cousins but nothing moved beyond the windows. Hugh continued to talk, the words lost as her thoughts shifted to what she was going to say when they reached the restaurant. She wasn't ready to marry and have babies. She was barely twenty-three. She had time before the old maid taunts started coming her way.

Reaching the businesses that lined the road in town, their path was blocked when several men in the jail house doorway stepped out onto the sidewalk. Hugh stiffened by her side when Jesse turned their way. His grip on her arm tightened and it didn't take long for Alex to figure out why. One look at Jesse's face said it all. She glanced between the

two of them and cocked her head to one side. “You two get into the middle of the same brawl last night?”

Hugh pulled her closer to his side. “You could say that.”

Her uncle Morgan stepped between the two. “I’ll throw you both in jail if you go at it again.” He gave them a look before glancing her way. “You’re trouble when you’re not even in the room.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

He smiled and kissed her on the cheek. “Ask Hugh. He’ll fill you in.” He stepped back and glanced between Hugh and Jesse. “You two behave or you’ll be sharing a jail cell next time.”

She watched him head toward his house before turning her attention back to Jesse and Hugh. Rafe was there, the look on his face filled with amusement and anticipation.

“What am I missing?”

Rafe chuckled. “A whole lot of nothing.” He stepped up beside Jesse and tipped his hat at her. “We’ll just be on our way,” he said before gesturing for Jesse to move.

Alex met Jesse’s gaze and held it for as long as she dared. She was pretty good at reading people and as much as she hated to admit it, reading Jesse had always been difficult. Time hadn’t changed that fact. The hard look in his eyes only grew darker when he flicked a glance in Hugh’s direction before straightening his shoulders and looking back at her.

“Congratulations, Alex,” Jesse said, the words sounding wooden and hollow. “I wouldn’t have believed it had I heard it from anyone else.”

“Congratulations? What are you talking—”

He walked away before she could finish speaking. She spun on her heel to stare after him, shaking her head in disbelief. “He’s still as rude as ever.”

“That he is.”

Alex watched Jesse and Rafe disappear into the crowd walking along the sidewalk before turning back around. She glanced up at Hugh and noticed a peculiar look on his face. “Am I missing something?”

He smiled sheepishly. “Sort of.” He motioned to the hotel’s restaurant with his head. “Let’s go have lunch and I’ll explain everything.”

She let him lead her the rest of the way, thoughts of Jesse and his bruised face filling her head. The fight in the saloon involved the two of them somehow. Had Jesse spent the night in jail? She was about to ask when Hugh pulled open the door to the hotel. They were seated right away at a table in the back of the room, secluded from the rest of the diners by an ornate, three-panel screen hand painted with cheery blossoms and some sort of foreign writing.

They ordered and settled in, Alex’s mind racing again. She needed to discuss this whole courtship business but the fight in the saloon was

too interesting a topic to give up on just yet. “So,” she said, getting Hugh’s attention. “What happened at the saloon?”

He laughed. “You just don’t give up do you?”

“No.” She grinned. “I’m used to getting my way so you might as well tell me. What happened.”

Hugh shook his head and let out a deep breath. “Hell if I know. I was at the bar having a drink with Walter and that guy just put a fist upside my head.”

“Who, Jesse?”

Hugh nodded. “Yes. I’m still not even sure why.”

Alex stared at him and tried to puzzle out why Jesse would just attack him. It made no sense. Of course, she knew very little about the man Jesse had grown into. Ten years was a long time. Even she’d changed to some degree. “You didn’t say anything to provoke him?”

“No. I wasn’t even looking his way.” Hugh’s face turned red again. He was blushing. “Walter and I were celebrating. He’d ordered drinks for everyone at the bar. Someone asked what we were celebrating and when I said, he jumped me.”

She was almost scared to ask. “And what was it you were celebrating?”

He reached across the table and took her hands in his, the smile on his face widening. “My impending marriage.” He placed a kiss on her knuckles and let go of her long enough to reach into the pocket of his

vest. Alex's heart was lodged in her throat by the time she saw the ring. The world shifted and the room grew fuzzy, then righted itself.

Hugh reached for her hand again. "Alex, I'm not a rich man but I can protect you and give you a nice life. If you'd do me the honor of being my wife, you'll never want for anything."

The ring he held was silver with a small blue stone on top. The noise in the room grew loud, then stopped completely. She looked from the ring to Hugh's bruised face.

"I know it's not as fashionable as the new diamond rings they're coming out with now but I promise to get you one as soon as I can." He inhaled a breath and smiled. "Alexandra Avery, will you marry me?"

\* \* \*

As he expected her to do, Grace scolded him the moment he walked through the doorway. Then she set about mothering him as if he were fourteen years old again and got into a scuffle at school. If only it were as simple as that.

Jesse endured her poking and prodding and kept shooting glances at Rafe in hopes his brother would intervene. The smile on his face said he would do nothing of the sort so he spent the next hour letting Grace do as she wished.

She was quiet while cleaning the small cut above his eye and dabbing some awful smelling liniment on his bruises. She gently wiped

away dried blood from his knuckles, her silence near deafening. When she straightened and gave him a disapproving look, he knew a lecture was coming.

He grinned and stood, placing a kiss on her cheek. "I already know what you're going to say, Grace, so save your breath."

She scowled and placed her hands on her hips. "Really?" she said. "And what am I about to say?"

"That I'm too old to be picking fights."

"You're not as smart as you think you are Jesse Samuels." She shook her head and started packing up her things. "Fighting with Hugh Jacobs is pointless." She picked up her bag. "I've heard the rumors. I know everyone in town thinks Hugh will get Alex to the altar but I know for a fact Alexandra Avery doesn't want to marry him."

Jesse raised one eyebrow. "And how would you know that?"

She shrugged. "Women's intuition."

"There's no such thing, Grace."

"Sure there is." She looked him in the eye. "It's common knowledge to everyone who lived in Willow Creek before you went off to school that you and Alex have always been sweet on each other."

"I think you're the one who got punched in the head." He laughed again. "There has never been a time Alex was sweet on me."

"But you are sweet on her."

He didn't answer. There was little reason to. The look on her face said she knew she was right. Hell, everyone would know once they

heard about that saloon fight. Why else would he jump Hugh Jacobs? He'd never laid eyes on the man before last night. It wouldn't take people long to figure out what triggered the fight either. Once they learned Hugh was asking Alex to marry him, they'd figure it out pretty damn quick. He smiled and said, "You'll never hear those words out of my mouth, Grace."

Her eyes lit up. "You don't have to say it, Jesse. It's all over your face every time someone mentions her name. It always has been." She laid a hand on his arm. "And don't worry about Hugh. If anyone ever manages to get Alex to the altar, it will be you."

He snorted a laugh. "And she'll be kicking and screaming like a wild thing the whole way." He gave Grace a smile and another kiss on the cheek before heading upstairs. The steps creaked and popped as he made his way to his old room with Grace's words ringing inside his head.

Thoughts of marrying Alex filled his mind most days but he never really held out much hope it would ever happen—but always hoped it would. Now that Hugh was an issue, the possibility was reduced to zero.

His room looked the same as it had when he left ten years earlier. He kicked off his boots, stripped down and washed, then put on clean clothes. A glance into the mirror showed his face in various shades of blue, black and red. He'd looked better, that's for sure.

He rubbed a hand over his chin. He needed a shave in the worst sort of way. His eyes were still bloodshot and a small voice in the back of his

head whispered that Alex had seen him looking like this. He shook his head. He'd seen saddle bums who looked more presentable than he did at the moment.

Movement outside caught his attention. He peered out the window to the far pasture. Dark shapes came in and out of focus. He walked to the window for a better look.

The fuzzy shapes slowly cleared enough he could see those slow moving objects were cows. Quite a few of them, too. They must have crossed the creek from the Avery place.

Dusting off his hat, he put it on and headed back downstairs, giving Rafe a brief retelling of what he'd seen and told him to stay with Grace, that he'd take care of it.

He saddled his horse and was racing across the east pasture long minutes later. He counted eleven head of cattle when he reached them. They were grazing and looked in no hurry to stop anytime soon. Searching the horizon he realized they'd crossed the creek on their own. Not one of Holden's ranch hands were to be found.

He made quick work of rounding them up and had them heading back toward the creek in no time. He kept them moving, recalling Aaron telling him Holden had been looking for men to go along with his cattle drive. The idea hadn't interested him when he'd first heard it. Funny how quickly things change.

Hearing Hugh Jacobs say he was asking Alex to marry him altered every plan he'd every dreamed of. Most of those dreams included her,

after all. Living in Willow Creek and watching her saunter around town on Hugh's arm, seeing her belly swell with his child—it was too much to ask. Being home again had felt like a blessing until last night. Now it felt like punishment.

He crossed the creek, herding the cattle up the opposite bank and saw the Avery ranch hands in the distance. They were herding the other cattle in, trying to move them from the looks of it and doing a piss poor job of it. He rode back behind the small group he'd found and pushed them toward the others. When he reached the cowboys, he was greeted with grateful thanks. Holden Avery joined them a few moments later, his horse winded. The creature stomped to a stop and blew several deep breaths before calming.

“Jesse,” Holden said in way of greeting. He stared for long moments at his battered and bruised skin then smiled. “Please tell me Alex didn't do that to your face.”

Jesse laughed. “No, sir. I'm a lot better at ducking her swings than I used to be. It wasn't her.” He knocked up the front of his hat with one knuckle. “But things did take an unusual turn at the saloon last night.”

“They usually do,” Holden joked. “Anything serious?”

The words, “nothing other than some strange man marrying your daughter,” were on the tip of his tongue but he held them and shook his head instead. “Just a little misunderstanding.”

The other ranch hands pushed the herd further up the pasture. Holden stayed behind, content to watch the bawling wave of black, brown and white progress without him.

Neither said a word for long minutes. The ranch hands trying to guide the herd to the right looked lost. Jesse repositioned his hat. “What is it exactly they’re trying to do?”

Holden chuckled. “They’re trying to move that herd and keep them going in the direction they want but they’re all a bit green for the task. I’ll probably regret the entire trip.”

“It won’t be so bad,” Jesse said. “Sleeping on the ground for two months won’t be fun, especially if it rains, but as long as you have your hat, a good horse, and just enough whiskey to keep you from losing your mind, everything will be fine. Those who don’t know what they’re doing will catch on pretty quick.”

Holden gave him a questioning look. “Is that from experience or hear-say?”

“Experience.” Jesse shifted in the saddle. “I rode with an outfit down in Texas for three years.”

“Herding cattle?”

He nodded. “We moved a thousand head every year.” Jesse kept watching those trying to round up Holden’s herd. “Those cowboys new to Willow Creek?”

“Yes,” Holden said. “Most of them rode in a few weeks ago. It’s been hard getting anyone to sign up for the cattle drive. No one wants to

be away from home for two months. It made it a bit easier since they have no connections here.”

“Aaron said you were needing men to go along with you.” He shifted in his saddle again when images of Alex and Hugh, walking arm in arm down the sidewalk filled his mind’s eye. He glanced at Holden. “You still looking?”

“Depends,” Holden said. “You offering?”

A voice in the back of his head screamed, “no,” but common sense told him he couldn’t watch Alex and her new beau live the life he’d come back to town for. He nodded, slow and long, his lips pursed. “Yeah, I think I may be.”

Holden smiled. “You have no idea how relieved I am.” He laughed, his horse side-stepping as the noise startled him. “It’ll be a long two months trying to keep an eye on that bunch by myself. It’ll be nice having another man I can trust on the trail with us.”

He’d gone from no job to signing up for a two-month cattle drive in a matter of moments. Jesse listened as Holden told him everything about the drive he could. He heard most of it but that little voice in his head was still whispering. He’d waited ten years before coming home and showing Alex they were meant to be together. Now he’d never get the chance.

## Chapter Five

*Will you marry me?*

Alex blinked, the words echoing through her head but all she could focus on were the bruises marring Hugh's face. Those on Jesse's face came to mind, too. They had been fighting. But why? They didn't know each other. Hugh and Walter had been celebrating. Was this the reason? And if so, why would Jesse hit him for it? Surely he couldn't have been upset by it. He hated her, didn't he?

Hugh waved a hand in front of her face. "Do you hear me, Alex?"

His whispered words held a hint of fear. She cleared her mind of all the questions she had and tried to smile. "Yes, I do."

Someone on the other side of the screen yelled, then laughed before saying, "She said, yes!"

Alex's heart slammed against her ribcage at the announcement, her eyes widening at the same moment Hugh's did. He leaped to his feet before she could say another word and rounded the table and lifted her from her chair, pulling her into a tight hug.

The entire room burst into happy applause, excited voices ringing out in deafening levels until all Alex could hear was a dull ringing inside her head.

What the hell just happened?

Hugh lowered his head and kissed her on the mouth. In the entire time she'd known him, he'd never been so bold. Shock caused her pulse to leap. She placed both hands on his shoulders and pulled back, giving him a wide-eyed stare.

"I'll make you happy, Alexandra." His words sounded sincere and she didn't doubt for a minute he meant them.

The noise inside the hotel restaurant was still echoing off the walls. The celebration must have been one everyone was anticipating. The screen was moved and Alex could see the faces of the revelers. The glee they felt shined on every face she saw.

She just wished she felt an ounce of their joy.

Hugh let go of her and accepted hearty slaps on his back and more handshakes than she could count. People she'd only seen on the street but never spoke to congratulated her from across the room, every new face she saw driving home the knowledge that everyone assumed her answer to Hugh's question, Do you hear me? was her acceptance of his proposal.

To everyone in the restaurant, she was now engaged. A glance at Hugh and she felt sick. He looked so happy. As prospects went, he would make a fine husband for someone. But not her. She wasn't ready.

So how did she get out of this without breaking his heart?

\* \* \*

It was near dark by the time Jesse made it back home. He'd stayed at the Avery ranch and met the rest of the men going along with Holden on the cattle drive and made arrangements with Holden to come do a bit of work for him up until they were ready to go.

Grace had supper on the table when he came in. He took off his hat and hung it on one of the pegs by the door and headed to the sink. "Smells good in here," he said, turning on the water and grabbing the soap.

"Chicken pie and those pan fried potatoes with onions you like."

He finished washing his hands, then dried them on the towel on the counter. "You're going to spoil me, Grace. Between all this good cooking and having my clothes washed and folded up and put away, you're going to make getting my own place someday hard to do."

"It's not my fault you chose to stay away so long. I have a few years to make up for."

He smiled and filled his plate, taking an extra helping of potatoes. "I thought me getting out in the world and learning everything I could was what you wanted."

"Well, it was," Grace said. "But I didn't mean for you to be gone ten years!"

He laughed and tucked into his food, eating half of what was on the plate before stopping again. He wiped his mouth and glanced at Rafe and Grace. "I hadn't meant to be gone so long either but I didn't want to come back to Willow Creek and be a burden to either of you."

“You’ll never be a burden,” Rafe said. “This is your home as much as it is mine.”

“I know but you don’t need me underfoot. If I had more time, I’d fix up that old line shack down by the creek and live there.”

“You always said you were going to.” Rafe sat up straighter in his chair. “Why don’t you have time?”

Jesse took another bite and washed it down before saying, “I’m heading out with Holden on his cattle drive.”

Grace made a strange noise in the back of her throat. “But you just got back.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you leaving?”

He didn’t tell her it was because of Alex but it wouldn’t take long for anyone to figure it out, especially when the knowledge of Hugh and Alex’s engagement was common knowledge.

“He needs help,” Jesse lied, lowering his gaze. “Those cowboys he hired are so green they’ll be lucky to make it to market with half the herd so I asked Holden if he needed another man to go with them.”

“Are you coming back?”

Something in Grace’s voice said she knew he wasn’t. Jesse looked up at her and could see the same sadness he’d seen in her eyes the day he showed up at their door two weeks ago.

She’d lost a lot since he’d been gone, according to Rafe. The years of unsuccessfully trying to have a baby had taken its toll on their

marriage and the one time she finally did conceive, they'd lost it a short time later.

Grace had been beautiful when she arrived in Willow Creek, all those years ago. She still was, but lines of worry bracketed her eyes now and creased her forehead. Her once luminous skin was dulled by despair. The one thing she wanted most, to become a mother, wasn't meant to be and it showed. A perpetual sense of melancholy surrounded her. She smiled and laughed but the shadows in her eyes were haunting.

He smiled and locked eyes with her, reaching out to take her hand. "I never said I wasn't coming back, Grace."

"You didn't have to say it. I can see it on your face." She squeezed his hand then pulled away, glancing over at Rafe before pushing the food around on her plate. She sighed and shook her head. "You certainly have changed since you left for school."

"That was the point, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but you didn't change the right way."

He grinned in hopes to lighten the mood. "And what was the right way?"

She dropped her fork and met his gaze with steely determination. "You were supposed to become the sort of man Alexandra Avery would want for a husband. That's why you agreed to go to Boston, isn't it? It's why you stayed away so long, right?" Her face was red, her voice rising with every word. "But here you are, tucking tail and running away like a scared little boy at the first sign of complication."

He opened his mouth to set her straight but held his tongue. She wasn't wrong. He'd found work after his schooling was finished in order to learn everything he could about the ranching business and had enough cash tucked away in the bank to buy a spread the size of the Avery's ranch with money to spare. Everything was exactly as he imaged it would be except Alex wasn't sitting around daydreaming about him like he did so often of her. She'd moved on with her life. Had he really thought she'd just be sitting around waiting for him to return?

Foolishly, he had.

He blew out a breath and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "If she's agreed to marry Hugh, there's not much I can do about that, now is there?"

Grace rolled her eyes. "For one thing, she'll never agree to marry Hugh. She doesn't love him."

"What does love have to do with marriage? People get married all the time without love. Hell, you came all the way from Boston to marry me and love was the furthest thing from my mind."

Rafe laughed. "No, you wanted to marry for clean clothes and a hot cooked meal."

Jesse grinned and looked his way. "Shut up."

"That's beside the point," Grace said. "My agreeing to marry sight-unseen was a completely different circumstance than this is. Everyone knows you and Alex are meant to be together. You just have to get her to realize the same."

“Easier said than done. You do know you’re talking about the most bull-headed woman this side of the Mississippi, right?”

“She’s no more bull-headed than you are.”

“Maybe, but its a bit too late now to do anything about it. I’ve already told Holden I’d ride with his crew and I’m not going back on my word.”

Grace stared at him for long moments before shaking her head. “Then you may have just missed your chance. If you’re not here, you’ll have no way to change her mind if she decides to marry the only man who’s asked for her hand.”

\* \* \*

Alex paced the length of the school, her laps quick, the steady click of her boot heels a constant echo in her head.

Hiding inside her little sanctuary for the past few days hadn’t changed anything. In the eyes of Hugh Jacobs—and those inside the hotel restaurant—she was an engaged woman. She groaned and stopped pacing, ran her hands over her face, and sighed when the answer out of her dilemmas still didn’t present itself.

Emily Harper would be there in a matter of days to take over her teaching position and she’d yet to tell her father she’d gone behind his back—behind the towns back—to hire a replacement teacher. Once her pa found out Hugh proposed, he’d insist she kept the teaching job. And a

man like Hugh wouldn't want his wife stomping through horse manure on a daily basis. He'd want a wife in dresses, with her hair pulled up in pretty curls while smiling and raising his babies.

She flopped down at one of the desks. "What am I going to do?"

A soft knock on the door tore her from her thoughts. She looked at the door as it opened, sunlight flooding the room. Betsy Atwater, one of her oldest friends stared at her for long moments before she shook her head and walked inside, shutting the door behind her. "So it's true," she said, crossing the room. "I can tell by the look on your face the rumors I've been hearing aren't just idle gossip."

Alex sighed. "Please tell me it isn't all over town."

Betsy shrugged. "I overheard it in the mercantile. Edna Pierce was whispering to Mrs. Jenkins about it and Miranda Talbert overheard and had Edna retell the whole story again. By the time I left there was a small group of women there listening. If I had to guess, I'd say it'll be all over town by weeks end."

"So much for keeping the news from my pa."

"From what I heard, he already knows."

Alex's heart skipped a beat. "What do you mean he knows?"

"According to Edna, Hugh asked your pa for permission to marry you a few days ago and got his blessing." Betsy shrugged. "You haven't talked to your father yet?"

"No. I've been hiding out here hoping the whole mess will just go away." She stood, pushed her hair away from her face and groaned in

frustration. “Nothing is going as I planned. If pa would have just said yes to me going on that cattle drive, none of this would have happened. I already have a new teacher coming to replace me here and once I tell him that bit of news I’ll be lucky if he doesn’t blister my hide like he’s been threatening to do. “ She turned to face Betsy. “When he hears the town gossips going on about me saying yes, I’ll be stuck in this job forever.”

“Did you really say yes?”

“No. Yes.” She growled in frustration and told Betsy what really happened. “Everyone just misunderstood and assumed my answer was to the original question. I never meant to say I’d marry Hugh.”

“Hmmm.” Betsy pursed her lips. “Have you told your pa you want to work at the ranch?”

“Yes, but he didn’t want to hear it.”

Betsy gave her an apologetic smile. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” She sat down on the bench closest to the door. “If I don’t do something fast, I’m going to find myself married and getting fat while my hair turns gray from teaching.”

“You could always just quit your job and marry someone else before Hugh or your pa had a chance to stop you.”

Alex raised an eyebrow at the suggestion.

Betsy grinned. “Don’t look at me like that. Just hear me out.”

“I’m listening but so far you’ve said nothing the least bit interesting.”

“Well, Jesse Samuels was pretty upset when he heard Hugh was going to ask for your hand. You could always see if the reason was because he wanted you for himself.”

Alex choked. “Are you out of your mind?”

Betsy laughed. “No, I’m perfectly sane and I’m serious.” She crossed the room and leaned against one of the desks. “The other rumor floating around town is that Jesse didn’t just jump Hugh in the saloon when he heard Hugh was proposing, he went crazy and nearly beat him unconscious. Ben was there and said it looked as if Jesse meant to kill him before him and Aaron pulled him away. If I had to guess, I’d say he was still sweet on you.”

Alex’s pulse leaped at the thought but snorted a laugh in hopes Betsy couldn’t tell her heart raced with that one small remark. “Jesse has never been sweet on me.”

“Don’t play dumb. Everyone in town knows he was sweet on ya. It’s why he picked on ya so much.”

Alex could still recall all the taunts and teasing from the other school kids saying Jesse was sweet on her but she’d never believed them. Not even that hot summer day when he leaned over and kissed her.

The memory flooded her senses and her pulse leaped again. She shook her head and started pacing the floor. “He was not sweet on me,” she said, denying it even now. “He was mean natured and enjoyed tormenting me.”

Betsy laughed. “He did not. There wasn’t a mean bone in his body.”

Alex spun on her heel. “Are we talking about the same person?”

“Yes. In all the fights you two every had he never once hit you. He just laid there and let you beat the snot out of him.”

Alex thought about what she said and hated to admit her friend was right. She never recalled Jesse hitting her. So why did he pick so many fights? Was Betsy right? Had Jesse been sweet on her all that time?

“If I had to guess I’d say some of those old feelings are still present and that’s why he jumped Hugh in the saloon.”

Alex stopped near the window and looked out. She could see the saloon from there, the girls who worked the upstairs lingering by the door. “I asked Hugh about the fight but he never answered me.”

“I don’t imagine he would. From what Ben said, Jesse jumped Hugh without a word being said between them so what else would have provoked him?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you seen him since he got back into town?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And what?”

Betsy rolled her eyes. “Don’t you think he looks—different?” When Alex didn’t reply she said, “Come on. You can’t deny he grew into a handsome man.”

Alex snorted. “I can deny it and I will.” She kept her back to Betsy when she felt her cheeks heat. She’d eat rusty nails before she admitted to anyone she found Jesse Samuels attractive.

She’d noticed the same things Betsy had the day Jesse ran her over outside the saloon. As mad as she’d been at him she couldn’t help but notice how different he looked. His red hair had darkened, his square jaw covered in a light dusting of whiskers made him look rugged and his shoulders were wide and strong. His voice was deep and the sound of it had rolled over her flesh like silk.

“Not to complicate your life more,” Betsey said, “But Ben told Jesse your pa was looking for more ranch hands, so if you do end up working the ranch like you want, you may have to deal with Jesse on a daily basis.”

Something twisted in her stomach. “Great.” Her plan to stop teaching and help run the ranch kept hitting snags at every turn. Having to put up with Jesse would be near to torture. Add in the mess with Hugh and life felt out to get her for some past crime.

She rubbed her hands over her face and let out a groan. “How did everything get so messed up?”

“What do you mean?”

Alex blew out a breath. “I mean, my plan was simple. Get a new teacher to replace me here and go to work at the ranch. Now I have Hugh to worry about and if what Ben said is true, I’ll have to deal with

Jesse every day at the ranch.” She turned from the window and starting pacing again. “Why does nothing ever go right?”

Betsy laughed. “Well, you could always sneak off with the cattle drive and avoid Jesse, Hugh and the new teacher showing up.”

Alex’s heart slammed against her ribcage as Betsy’s words repeated themselves inside her head. Sneak off with the cattle drive? She turned to look at her friend and smiled.

Betsy’s eyes widened. “I wasn’t serious, Alex. Your pa will have a fit if you did something so crazy!”

“Maybe, but what can he do about it when we’re a hundred miles from home?”

Betsy laughed. “I’d hate to even think.”

“It’s the perfect plan, Betsy. My pa will be fighting mad but at least I’d get a chance to talk him into letting me come work the ranch. I’ll prove to him I can be just as good a cowboy as those no good saddle bums he keeps hiring.”

“You’re crazy. He’ll tan your hide for sure.”

“I’m not crazy yet, but if I keep this teaching job much longer I will be.”

Betsy shook her head. “You must love to live life on the dangerous side.”

Alex grinned. “What other way is there?”

*End of Excerpt*

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