

Lily Graison

The Rancher



A Willow Creek Book

Prologue



Missoula, Montana Territory

As visions went, she was by far the most alluring one he'd seen in years.

Holden turned up his glass, swallowed what remained inside, and kept his gaze locked on the woman making her way to the bar. The hem of her brown sateen skirt swept the sawdust floor, the light from the lanterns catching in the shiny material of her dress and drawing his eye to places no decent man should look, but the soft curve of her breasts was too tempting to glance away from.

He'd seen many beautiful women in his thirty-two years but something about this woman left him dazed. It was probably the amount of whiskey he'd drank, or the fact the light was so dim inside the saloon, but she looked ethereal, like some other-world being straight from one of those fairytale books his daughter Alex had stacked in her room.

His gaze swept over her again. Her dark hair was left loose, long curls bouncing free over her shoulders and when she put her back to him, he traced the line of her spine to her narrow waist, the gentle flair of her hips to her rounded behind and he felt his throat go dry despite the amount of alcohol he'd consumed.

He sat up straight in his seat and tore his gaze from her to sweep over the room again.

His brother, Tristan, had told him this was the best gaming house in all of Missoula and from what he'd seen, Tristan had been right. It was clean, the whiskey was good and the whores were pretty and smelled like a woman should, but picking one to spend the evening with wasn't easy. The blondes reminded him of his late wife, God rest her soul, and the brunettes weren't as buxom as he liked. Of course, they all paled in comparison to the beauty who caught the attention of those not too drunk to notice.

He turned his gaze back to the bar. She was still there, her face reflected in the mirror on the wall. She wasn't a whore, that much he knew. She was too refined looking, not to mention she'd entered from the street and was now ordering a drink from the looks of it. A lady who drank in public. That was new.

Picking up his empty glass, he stood, waded through the crowd and approached the bar with one goal in mind. He had to get a closer look at this woman to see if it was the alcohol making her so breathtaking.

He stopped beside her, ordered another drink, and glanced up at her in the mirror, then turned to where she stood. She was staring down into her glass, the amber liquid untouched. "As whiskey goes, it's not bad," he said.

She turned her head to him and he'd be damned if his heart didn't give a little kick in his chest. Her eyes were the oddest shade of brown he'd ever seen. They reminded him of the whiskey in her glass, a light, swirling amber. The rest of her face was remarkable too. Her complexion was smooth, her lips plump and pink. Small curls framed her face making her look soft and feminine. Beautiful.

He blinked and nodded to her glass. "Do you always order whiskey then just stare at it?"

She tilted her head a little to one side. "Why are you talking to me?"

Holden opened his mouth to answer but closed it with a snap. Beautiful and rude. He smiled and leaned one arm on the bar. "To be honest, now that you ask, I've no idea."

She stared at him for long moments before smiling and looking back at her glass. "Honesty. That's a rare attribute for a man."

He raised an eyebrow. "Depends on the man, I suppose."

Her head turned, those whiskey colored eyes giving him a look from head to toe. "Really? I didn't think any man was capable of it."

Holden laughed. "Beautiful, rude and bitter. A strange combination."

Amusement filled her eyes and she turned her body to face him. "I'm also surly, mean-spirited and suspicious."

"And you apparently don't care what others think."

"What makes you say that?"

Holden thumbed up the front of his hat. "I don't know of any lady who would walk into a saloon and order a whiskey at the bar, then stick around to drink it." He glanced down at her glass. "Or stare at it."

She shrugged one delicate shoulder. "Who says I'm a lady?" She lifted her glass, slung back her whiskey as if she'd been doing it for years and grinned at him while setting the glass back down.

Holden swallowed his own liquor, nodded to the bartender to refill their glasses and never took his eyes off of her. "I'm Hol..."

"Don't!"

Holden shut his mouth, one eyebrow raised as she yelled at him, her right arm raised as if to ward off the words. Her cheeks pinkened before she straightened her spine.

"No names, please."

He grinned. "Okay."

She sighed, her shoulders relaxing. "I find it much easier to just talk to someone without really knowing who they are."

"Mysterious, rude, bitter and beautiful. Now I'm intrigued."

She flashed him a tiny smile. "Stop trying to flatter me."

"Who says I am?"

She laughed, the sound a tinkling vibration that coursed through his body and ended near his toes. Her eyes sparkled as she laughed, and he knew before the night was out he'd be so smitten with this woman he'd never get her out of his head.

They talked for close to an hour about nothing specific, consumed more whiskey than he'd drunk in months, and when the crowd inside the saloon grew rowdy, their voices raised to the point he couldn't hear what she was saying, she raised up on her toes, her mouth next to his ear, and asked if he'd like to take a walk with her. All thought of buying companionship for the evening was forgotten.

Out on the wooden sidewalk, she turned and stumbled, her laughter like music as he reached out his arm to steady her. "I think you may have had too much to drink."

"Are you saying I'm drunk?" She leaned against him and grinned, taking hold of his arm and looping hers through his before turning them and starting down the sidewalk.

Holden inhaled a breath, her rose scented skin infusing the air around him. "I'd never insult a lady in such a way."

She laughed again, proving she had more to drink than she was used to and looked up at him with those alluring eyes. "I'm far from drunk, sir, I can assure you. I would have never left the saloon with you had I been."

He smiled. "So you would have passed out on the floor instead?"

"Probably." She inhaled a deep breath, raising her head. "Do you live here?"

"I thought you didn't want to know anything about me?"

She gave him a sideways look. "I don't. The less I know about you the better off I'll be, but it's so warm for fall. I'm just trying to find out if it's always this way in Montana."

It took an effort to mask his disappointment in her not wanting to know who he really was but he shrugged it off. "No. It'll start cooling down soon and once winter sets in, you'll wish you were somewhere else."

"I doubt that."

She stopped in front of one of the many hotels in town and turned to face him. Her eyes were drowsy looking, her lips glistening with moisture from where she'd licked them and he'd never wanted to kiss anyone the way he did her. "Is this where you're staying?"

"Yes."

He should have picked this hotel, too. He'd chosen the more expensive one down the road and almost wished he could check in here and go grab his things so he could spend his last evening in town with her close by.

The past week had been hard, a physical and mental drain on his body. Selling off his horses, paying the wranglers and then watching them as they all grabbed a woman in the saloon and headed upstairs planted a seed of longing in him that he hadn't felt in ages. Being so far from home, he could indulge in any manner of debauchery and once the idea was there, he couldn't seem to let it go.

Alex, his ten-year-old daughter, was too impressionable to go traipsing off to town to find his comfort with one of the whores at the Diamond Back Saloon in Willow Creek and the dull ache from years of denying his body the pleasure of a woman was felt in every muscle and every nerve. He'd spent an extra night in town just to see those aches eased. No one at home would know, least of all Alex, and the moment he decided to pick one of those pretty ladies at the saloon, in walks a woman who put the others to shame.

She was still looking up at him, her whiskey colored eyes sparkling in the moonlight and his entire body jolted while looking at her. He wanted her. Wanted her unlike anything he'd wanted in a long time but saying so would ruin the entire evening.

They stood staring at one another for long minutes, the crowd on the street and sidewalks disappearing and when she smiled at him, the look in her eyes telling him she was thinking the same thing he was, his heart started racing.

"If I wasn't a lady, I'd be tempted to ask you up to my room."

Holden's fingers clenched into fists at his side. "If you weren't a lady, I'd take you up on it."

She licked her lips and Holden's gaze was drawn to her mouth while every nerve in his body jumped, screamed, and demanded he forget his manners. To take advantage of the situation, damn his conscience and take her to bed. Spend the rest of the night between her thighs and make his way home come morning with a memory he'd have a hard time forgetting.

The wind blew a strand of her hair into her eyes and he pushed it away, tucking it behind her ear. The moment he touched her, caught the faintest

scent of roses on her skin, his heart pounded so hard, he had trouble breathing around it.

She stared up at him, an invitation in her eyes. "I'm in room twelve. Give me ten minutes."

Turning, she left him standing on the sidewalk and entered the hotel, glancing back over her shoulder to smile at him. He had one night in Missoula and even though he'd never see this woman again, he'd carry the memory of her with him always. The way she'd looked at him said she would too. The invitation to her room was there and he wasn't stupid enough to pass on it.

Chapter One



Good Lord above, the man was all but naked!

Laurel blinked and nearly ran the wagon into the fence as she stared at him. She managed to stop the horses and even remembered to set the brake on the wagon, reminding herself that she was a lady and averted her gaze.

Alexandra Avery fidgeted in the seat beside her and Laurel gave her a nod of her head, watching as the girl stood and jumped from the wagon, running to whom she assumed was her father. The man leaned down as the girl rushed out an explanation and when he turned his head to look her way, and she got a good look at his face, Laurel's heart skipped a beat as it slammed against her ribcage. "Oh, sweet heavens, no." It couldn't be!

He stood to his full height, his eyes widening a fraction as he looked at her, before he grinned so devilishly, her breath caught. She knew in an instant she was in trouble.

How in the world did she end up in the same town as him? The odds were too fantastic to even imagine.

Memories of them together screamed through her head as she stared at him. She'd spent every day since that night in Missoula trying to forget about him. So far, she'd managed to only think of him once or twice a day but seeing him again, standing right in front of her with nothing but his trousers, hat, and a smile on, she cursed her luck.

Squaring her shoulders, Laurel climbed from the borrowed wagon and tried to keep her focus on his face as she crossed the space to where he stood. It wasn't easy. Not with the way the sun glinted off the sweat on his chest, the small beads of perspiration shimmering like small jewels and drawing her gaze to the hard lines of his naked torso. She'd felt those muscles against her hands, kissed them with lips that still tingled just thinking about it and she was near dizzy by the time she reached him.

She lifted her chin, determined to keep her gaze on his face, and hoped he couldn't hear her stammering heart beat. "Mr. Avery?" His gaze bore into her and Laurel's heart screeched to a stop before it pounded so hard she fought for breath. She cleared her throat and blinked, trying to regain her composure.

When she knew her voice wouldn't squeak, she said, "I'm Laurel Montgomery, the new school teacher."

The grin on his face grew as if he knew some wicked secret he wasn't about to share with her. But Laurel knew his secrets. Well, the ones he'd displayed for her one warm fall night in Missoula four weeks ago.

Laurel glanced at Alexandra, his daughter, apparently, her little arms crossed over her chest and an identical smirk was on her face. She stared at her, trying to come to grips with the fact she'd more than likely slept with a married man. The guilt that followed caused the butterflies swimming in her stomach to die and her stomach ached to the point she felt ill.

She lifted her head, cleared her throat and met his smiling eyes with bitter resentment growing in her heart. "I've been meaning to meet all the parents of my students and you were first on my list."

"I'm flattered." The look in his eyes changed and Laurel knew he was remembering that night too. Damn his hide. Why did he have to live here?

His voice was just as deep as she remembered and the sound of it caressed her flesh as if he'd physically touched her. Goose bumps prickled her arms and she ignored the feeling, trying to remember all she planned to say to him. "Don't be flattered, Mr. Avery. What I have to tell you is far from becoming." Laurel turned her gaze on Alexandra, throwing her a disapproving look before facing him again. "I'm sorry to say your daughter is a menace and has disrupted my class on a daily basis."

That got his attention. The smile vanished and when he looked down at Alexandra, the girl's puffed-up pose, deflated. "What did you do?"

Alexandra huffed out a breath, her hands curled into fists. "Jesse started it. He said I was the ugliest boy he'd ever seen so, I popped him one." She grinned. "He cried like a little girl."

Laurel exhaled, exasperated. "He most certainly did not, Alexandra. You're telling stories again."

The girl whirled on her, her arm flung to point at her. "And she won't stop calling me Alexandra. I've told her a hundred times, pa, my name is Alex, but she just won't say it."

Laying his hand on Alexandra's shoulder, the girl quieted instantly. When he looked up, amusement shined in his eyes. "She doesn't like to be called Alexandra."

"I've noticed but that isn't reason enough to disrupt my classroom everyday without fail."

"No, it's not."

Laurel glanced at Alexandra before straightening her spine and looking back up. "Can we speak alone, please?"

Something in his eyes said she'd made a mistake in making that small request. The smile that followed said as much too. He told Alex to wait on the front porch for him and when he turned to face her again, Laurel felt instantly exposed. His gaze never left her face but she knew he was picturing her naked. It was in the smile he gave her, the way his eyelids lowered just a fraction, as if he too was remembering that night. A night, she knew now, spelled trouble. Trouble she didn't want or need, regardless of the fact he was the most tempting thing she'd ever clapped eyes on.

She swallowed the sudden lump forming in her throat and pulled at the high collar of her dress. The sun was unbearably hot today for early fall. Much too hot.

Turning her head to avoid looking at him, she watched Alexandra run to the house, her boy trousers and chambray shirt causing a sigh to escape her. "She looks nothing like a girl."

"No, and she prefers it that way."

Realizing she'd spoken out loud, Laurel's face heated. "I meant no offense. It's just... well, I've never seen a girl act so boyish in all my life."

He laughed and leaned against the fence rail, the whiteness of those boards making the tanned hue of his skin even darker. His arm, propped on the top rail, was well muscled and Laurel's stomach clenched tight at the sight of it. She'd held on to those arms, felt them around her body and a tremor rushed through her limbs at the remembrance.

Laurel blinked and tried to remember why she'd made the trip out to his home. She had to clear her throat and swallow twice just to moisten her mouth enough to speak. "She's started three fights this week." Her voice cracked but she found it easier to talk keeping her focus on his chin instead of his eyes. "She also spits, has nothing to do with the other girls in class and her attire is inappropriate for her gender." She paused, bitterness closing her throat as her next words ate at her conscience. "I can't believe your wife would allow her daughter to grow up to be so... boyish."

He smiled again. "You're going to act as if we don't know each other, aren't you?"

Her heart skipped another beat. "I think, under the circumstances, that would be wise."

"Why?"

She laughed and looked up to meet his gaze. "Because I'm the new school teacher here, that's why. I have a certain reputation to uphold and if the town council knew..."

"That you frequented saloons and invited strange men into your bed, they'd put you on the first stagecoach out of town?"

Her face blazed hot. "Don't you dare judge me."

"I'm not." His gaze lowered to her breasts for a second before lifting again. "I just don't expect you to treat me as if we're strangers."

"As far as the people who live in this town are concerned, Mr. Avery, we are strangers."

He laughed that wonderful laugh again and Laurel had to look away. She gazed into the pasture, noticed a few horses grazing beyond the fence and tried to will her pulse to calm. Why did this have to happen? Why now?

"I've been thinking about you."

"Don't." She looked back at him and for the first time since meeting him, wished she never had. "I don't want to be reminded of it."

He lifted an eyebrow at her. "I was under the impression you enjoyed it as much as I did."

She bit her tongue to keep from blurting out she had. That she couldn't stop thinking about him, too, and as much as she'd enjoyed their one night together, it was a mistake. She glanced back at the house, saw Alexandra on the porch steps and tried to steer the conversation back to the girl. "Where is your wife?"

"She died after giving birth to Alex."

Remorse washed through her system, a knot of sorrow filling her stomach. "I'm sorry."

He nodded his head at her. "It was a long time ago." He sighed and lifted his hat, running his fingers through his hair before resettling it again. "We've not had a woman's influence at home until two years ago and honestly, I don't know a thing about girls." His gaze lowered from her face, sweeping down across her breasts and lower. "Well, I know nothing about little girls."

Her face heated again. The sun was indeed unbearable. Laurel pulled at her high collar and tried to convince herself it wasn't him causing her blood to heat and her skin to blaze as if she was cooking under the Montana sun.

A simple glance at his face caused her thoughts to run rampant. How she ended up in the town he lived in the most prevalent. She knew nothing about him other than he had a daughter and his wife had passed. Before today, she hadn't even known that much and she preferred it that way. Seeing him now though, his skin glistening with moisture, her fingers itched to touch him one last time. Her lips tingled with remembrance of his kisses and a tiny voice in the back of her head whispered she could have it all again.

She blinked, tried to quiet her body's demands and remembered why she was here. "Be that as it may, your daughter is a hellion. I'd think a man would want his daughter to be taught manners. She'll not catch a husband acting the way she does."

He laughed. "She's ten. I think I have a while until I have to worry about marrying her off."

"Maybe so, but if you continue to let her behave the way she does, you'll have a young lady who prefers to spit, curse and wear men's trousers. How hard do you think it will be to get her to change her ways then?"

The look on his face turned thoughtful, small lines bracketing his mouth. When he turned to look at the house, Laurel breathed a sigh of relief. It was much easier to talk to him when she didn't have to look at him. "Baby steps is what I suggest. One small change followed by another until she at least resembles a girl in looks and nature."

He turned back to face her, the lines still framing his wonderful mouth, and Laurel focused on his eyes so she wouldn't become distracted.

"I'll have a talk with her. She'll not cause you anymore trouble."

"I hope you're right." Laurel knew their conversation about Alexandra was over but stood like a deaf mute while staring at him. Something about this man was just too mesmerizing. His eyes were so perfectly blue, his teeth white and straight. The hard lines of muscle bisecting his abdomen, the definition of his chest...

She blinked and took a deep breath. "Well then, I'll just be on my way." She forced herself to turn and all but ran back to the wagon. Lifting her skirts to climb up, he grabbed her arm and she shrieked, jumped back and could only stare as he stood there grinning at her.

"This conversation isn't over."

"It is." Laurel inhaled several deep breaths, willing her heart to stop pounding. "I didn't want to know anything about you for a reason. I didn't want any attachments, then, now or ever. What we had is all there will ever be so there's no use discussing it. Now, if you'll excuse me, Mr. Avery, I have three more families to visit this evening."

He offered her his hand again. Common sense told her to ignore him but something inside of her caused butterflies to dance in erratic patterns every time she looked at him. That part of her screamed to accept. To touch him one last time. She lifted her hand and placed it in his while that same voice screamed what a fool she was.

The smile he gave her when his fingers closed around her hand all but took her breath. It hitched in her throat when he lifted her hand, placed a small kiss on her palm, desire shining bright in his eyes. "Since you refused to hear it in Missoula, my name is Holden and I'll definitely be seeing you again, Laurel."

She ignored him best she could, climbed into the wagon seat with his help and settled her skirts, grabbed the reins in hands much too sweaty for a

proper lady to admit and flicked a glance back at him. "Seeing as you live here and avoiding you will be impossible, I would appreciate it if you would keep our future meetings on a professional level. I'm your daughter's teacher. Nothing more."

"That's not going to happen," he said. "I cursed myself for a fool the morning I left Missoula and was halfway home before I turned around and went back. You'd already checked out of the hotel." He tipped his hat to her, took two steps back and gave her a look that sent tingles racing down her spine. "I'll remind you every chance I get of what we shared, Laurel, and you can count on that."

Laurel clenched her teeth and flicked the reins, willed the horses to run, and was headed back to the road before her heart stopped racing. She was tempted to look over her shoulder but refused to do so.

Spending the night in Missoula instead of traveling on was a mistake. She knew that now but at the time, she'd wanted one last night. One night to just be herself. To walk into the saloon and not care what people thought. To order a drink, let all her troubles wash away with strong whiskey and not have a care in the world come morning.

That hadn't happened though. Not exactly. She'd met him, Holden Avery, moments after walking inside the saloon and that little voice in the back of her mind had whispered seductively to her that it was her last chance. The last chance to throw her inhibitions to the wind and just grab onto life one more time. And she had. She'd invited Holden to her room and spent hours having the most life altering sex of her life. She'd never had a man so attentive in her bed. Her body had burned, her lungs ached with need of air as he took her to heights she never knew existed again and again until she lay exhausted in his arms, his fingers and lips playing over her skin until she'd fallen asleep.

Her body still tingled in remembrance of his touch and that little voice in her head was whispering she could have it again. That her desire for him could be sated night after night. She refused to listen. She couldn't get involved with him. Ever. Regardless of how much she wanted to.

She rode under the curved arch leaving Avery Ranch and she couldn't stop from turning her head, peering over her shoulder to where she'd left Holden standing.

He was still watching her.

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Laurel was clean out of sight before Holden turned toward the house. He could see Alex sitting on the steps, her elbows propped on her knees and knew, regardless of what he said, she would fight him until she was blue in the face.

He walked back to the fence, grabbed his shirt and slipped it on, smiling to himself as he buttoned it. After four weeks of wondering, in one afternoon he'd not only found the temptress he couldn't seem to forget but he also learned her name was Laurel and where she lived. Right here in Willow Creek of all places. His heart gave a powerful thump with the newfound knowledge.

Many a night he'd lain awake thinking of her. Wondering if he'd ever see her again. Wishing he'd done things a bit different all those weeks ago. He would have taken his time, for one, forgoing sleep entirely to spend one more hour looking at her. Touching her. Tasting her kisses and savoring those little noises she made as they lay skin to skin. He hadn't even minded she didn't want to know his name and refused to tell him hers. At the time, he'd been without a woman for so long, he hadn't cared. Not until later, when he was halfway home and couldn't stop thinking about her. It's why he'd turned around and went back. He hadn't wanted to let her go. He'd wanted her to the point his body ached with it. A shiver raced up his spine again as he remembered their night together.

He started for the house, his gaze locked on Alex and wondered what she'd done at school. He knew she was rowdy but he'd never had any of her previous teachers tell him she was unruly and the fact Laurel did, left him feeling uncomfortable.

He hadn't told her he had a daughter, she hadn't wanted to know anything about him, and now that she knew, he wondered what she thought about it.

His mind drifted further and further toward Laurel as he approached the house and he mentally berated himself for not taking the time to meet the town's new teacher when she arrived. Four wasted weeks had gone by with Laurel in town and by the time he made it into the yard he knew, half the men in the surrounding area had probably seen Laurel. He'd have to fight them off with a stick to keep them from trying to court her.

She was the finest looking woman he'd seen in ages and with women being a scarce thing in this area, she'd have suitors lined up the length of town asking for her hand in marriage. The whole idea left a bad taste in his mouth. He couldn't imagine her with someone else. He wouldn't. As far as he was concerned, Laurel Montgomery was his. He'd make her want him like he wanted her, even if he had to tame his hellion of a daughter to do so.

Alex glared at him when he stopped at the steps. The frown on her face said it all. She wasn't going to be cowed by him or anyone. He sighed and readjusted his hat. "Have you been giving the new school teacher a hard time?"

She rolled her eyes. "She's too uppity, pa. Makes us say please and thank you for everything."

"That's just good manners, Alex, not being uppity."

"Same difference." She stood up, stared him in the eye, and braced her hands on her hips. "She said we can't spit, we can't say anything mean to anyone or tease them and we have to act like perfect ladies and gentlemen at all times."

"There's nothing wrong with that."

Her eyes widened. "I'm ten. Why I got to act like a lady?"

Holden laughed and walked up the steps to where she was and sat, pulling her down beside of him and looked out toward the road Laurel had left on. "Thing is, Alex, as much as I'd like to keep you with me until I'm old and gray, there will be a time when you have to make a life for yourself. You'll want a family of your own."

She gasped. "I ain't gettin' married!"

"So you say." Holden grinned and ignored her outrage. "You'll find a man who will love you, even with you spitting and cussing and beating him up once a week, but finding him will be easier if you look and act like a lady."

Alex sighed. "You're gonna make me dress like a girl, ain't ya?"

Holden wrapped his arm around her shoulder and squeezed her to him. "You knew it would happen someday, Alex." He placed a kiss to the top of her head. "With Miss Montgomery new to town, I have to do what I can to make sure she doesn't run off like the last teacher did. They're too hard to come by way out here." Not that he'd ever let Laurel leave now that he'd found her again. He intended to keep her whether she liked the idea or not. He smiled at the thought. "Besides," he said, "she seemed pretty nice to me. I think if you start behaving, you'll see she isn't as bad as you think she is. You might even like her given enough time."

His daughter turned her head and looked up at him, her eyes narrowed a fraction. "What I got to like her for?"

"I didn't say you had to." Holden raised a hand and scratched his jaw. Alex was still staring up at him and he smiled before giving her a wink. "Just don't dislike her because she makes you do things you don't want to do."

"Did you like her?"

Holden's face heated and he hoped it didn't show. "Well, she can be a bit rude and comes off brash but I think she was just being that way because she

was working. I figure she's quite nice when she don't have her teacher's hat on."

Alex squinted at him, her mouth forming a straight, hard line. "Don't you go getting sweet on her, pa. I can tell by the look in your eyes you liked her."

The heat on his face increased, traveled to his neck and landed around his heart. "What if she was sweet on me, instead?"

A horrified expression covered her face, her eyes widening. "Having her for my teacher is bad enough. I don't ever want to see her at my house again. Don't you dare get any ideas of courtin' her, pa. I won't have it."

Ideas of doing that very thing flitted through his mind but he didn't say as much. He left Alex there on the porch after giving her extra chores for misbehaving at school and walked back to the pasture, his thoughts on Laurel and what the other men in town would do once they got a look at her. He saw them lining up at her door, flowers in hand and slobbery smiles on their faces. His heart thumped harder the more the scene materialized in his mind's eye. One would have to be a complete fool to pass up a chance to court her and every man in town would be fighting for her hand once they got a good look at her.

Stopping by the fence he was repairing, he turned to look toward the road. Laurel was a sight for sore eyes and heaven knew he hadn't seen anything so pleasing since his brothers all showed up with their new wives on their arms. It was his turn. He wasn't the superstitious sort but having Laurel show up in Willow Creek couldn't be anything but fate. He was meant to have her and he would. He'd waited too damn long as it was and Alex might be against the idea but he couldn't stop thinking about it. One way or another, Laurel Montgomery would be his wife and he didn't have time to waste making it happen. He'd have to act fast and wondered how long he should wait before letting his intentions to court her be known.

Chapter Two



He wouldn't court that woman if she was the last available one in all of Montana.

Holden barely refrained from yelling, biting his tongue instead as Laurel gave him a disapproving look and talked down to him as if he was one of her unruly pupils.

He'd thought showing up early to pick up Alex, and have a chance to talk with Laurel was a good idea until she began berating him for disturbing her class, giving Alex ample excuse to act up and get away with it. Having to agree to allow Alex to be detained after school for her behavior was nearly too much, especially when his daughter glared at him nonstop.

"She can't hit people the way she does, regardless of what is said."

He blinked when he realized she was still talking. "What?"

She sighed and crossed her arms under her breasts. "Have you not heard a word I've said?"

In truth, he hadn't. Well, not much, anyway. He was too busy admiring her small waist and the way the yellow fabric of her dress made her whiskey colored eyes shine more brightly. The way her dark hair curled around her face, drawing his attention to lips so plump they just begged to be kissed.

And how much she apparently loathed the sight of him regardless of the way she'd acted back in Missoula. The look in her eyes told him that much. She wasn't happy to see him at all. "I heard most of it," he lied. He glanced over her shoulder, peering into the schoolhouse and watched Alex wash the blackboard, fury evident on her face. He locked eyes with Laurel again, saw the disregard she had for him, and the anger he felt chased all thoughts of wanting her away and told him to just leave. To let her be and his desire for her would diminish. "I've got a few things to take care of in town. I'll be back for Alex in a little bit."

He turned and left Laurel standing there, gape-mouthed. She wasn't through berating him, apparently. He ignored her exasperated gasp and the repeated use of his name and walked down the steps, exited the schoolyard and was headed toward the saloon at a fast clip. He needed a drink.

The Diamond Back Saloon was fairly active for a Monday. The noise inside was filled with men cussing and the occasional hoot of laughter. Holden

wondered why there were so many people milling about so early in the day. He didn't have to guess long. The words, Laurel and pretty little thing, reached him before he'd made it to the bar.

"Afternoon, Holden. What's it going to be?"

He nodded his head at Vern, the bartender, and ordered whiskey. The glass was sat in front of him and he stood there staring at the amber liquid debating on drinking it. The stuff Vern sold was bad on the worst of days and downing the stuff was done with courage and puffed up pride. None of which he had today. Laurel had taken that from him the moment she set eyes on him.

"She got to you too, didn't she?"

Turning to look down the bar, Holden watched the men as they laughed. "She who?"

"The new schoolmarm. Laurel Montgomery."

He tried not to react but something on his face must have given him away. The men laughed again, raised their glasses before hooting and hollering and swilled their liquor before asking for another.

"She's a piece of work, I hear," Vern said as he refilled their glasses.

"Mean and spiteful." He turned to look at him once he'd finished. "One would think a woman that fetching would have a sweet sort of disposition but I'm not sure she has it in her. She's just plain mean."

He smiled. "So it wasn't just me?"

The laughter returned. "No. She's a right ornery woman from what I've heard. Doesn't take too kindly to men, either." Vern grinned and nodded toward Ben Atwater. "What was it she said to you, Ben?"

Ben belched and tossed back his drink before turning to look down the bar. "She said I was a foul smelling sot and I should go drink off my stupor." He scowled and banged his glass on the top of the bar. "Wouldn't even take the flowers I found on the side of the road." He snorted. "As if I'd want to court a woman who was offended I drink. Why, she's too opinionated to ever get a husband, let alone keep one. It's probably why she's here! She's just a bitter old spinster no one wanted."

The gaggle of men inside the bar comforted Ben, telling him how wrong the schoolmarm was and Holden smiled as he listened to them. He wasn't about to agree. For all Laurel's faults, she was at least honest. Ben Atwater was the biggest drunk from here to Missoula.

His confrontation with Laurel was still fresh on his mind. He wasn't sure where he'd gone wrong, or what caused her to be so cross with him. He'd waited until the children were dismissed and were gathering their things before approaching her and the flower he'd picked up by the fence hadn't made her eyes sparkle like he thought it would. It had infuriated her. She'd

torn into him immediately, giving the kids ample time to start misbehaving, Alex being the one to instigate it all, and within minutes, he'd been scolded and put in his place, all his hopes of courting, and then making Laurel his wife, dashed in an instant.

She apparently hated him.

It took him near half an hour to finish his drink, the laughter and the rude comments about Laurel remained the topic of conversation. Holden checked the time and said his goodbyes, laughing as the men continued to debate Laurel's less than appealing attributes and he almost wished he didn't have to face her again. As much as she heated his blood and made him think things he shouldn't about her, the venom she spouted was disheartening.

As badly as he wanted a wife, and a mother for Alex, he wasn't about to be saddled with a hateful woman, regardless of how pretty she was. There was only so much a man could put up with and even though bedding Laurel had been the single most exciting night he could remember in years, the moment she opened her mouth to berate him for something, what little desire he had for her would be gone.

He readjusted his hat, looked toward the school and felt a bit of hope stir in his chest when he saw Alex. He wouldn't have to face Laurel after all.

Alex ran across the street and was near breathless when she stopped in front of him. "Pa, I swear, I'll run away from home if I have to go back to class tomorrow."

Holden laughed and laid his hand on her shoulder as they walked down the street. "It wasn't that bad, was it?"

Her face twisted into a grimace. "She made us all switch seats and she sat me right in front of Jesse Samuels! That boy is a pest from the other side of the room. Now, he's right behind me."

"That doesn't sound too bad. Just don't turn around and you'll never even know he's there."

"That's what you think." Alex huffed out a breath and shook her head. "She also told everyone in class my name was Alexandra and from this day on, they had to call me that. Jesse spent the rest of the day pulling my hair and saying Alexandra every other sentence."

Holden bit his lip to keep from grinning. They walked all the way to the brand new hotel before he stopped and looked down at his daughter. "Well, it is the name your mamma gave ya."

The fury shining in her eyes dimmed a bit. "I didn't ever say I hated the name. I just prefer Alex better."

He smiled and tossed her pigtails over her shoulders. "Well, why don't we just let Miss Montgomery have her way at school and we'll keep calling you Alex when you're not there. How's that?"

She sighed, tilted her head a bit as if thinking and finally nodded. "As long as everyone knows that outside of school, I'm Alex."

They entered the newly built hotel, greeted Joseph Brighton, the owner, as he said hello before they turned, heading to the restaurant. They'd made it a regular Monday ritual of having an early supper when the new hotel was built and so far, Alex had enjoyed her time alone with him.

They were seated, handed menus with the day's special and had ordered before Alex sighed. Holden looked up, noticed the look on her face and knew, there was something she wasn't telling him. He crossed his arms on the top of the table and just waited.

"Nobody likes her."

Holden didn't comment. It was pointless to debate the issue when he knew his daughter was probably right, especially after hearing what the men at the saloon had to say about Laurel.

She looked up at him before lowering her gaze. "Benjamin Atwater called her a shrew today. He said that's what his pa said she was. A hateful, dried out old shrew with no heart and she heard him. And you know what she did, pa?"

He shook his head. "No."

Alex looked almost remorseful as she sat back in her seat. "She looked like he'd thrown a rock at her head. Her eyes got all glassy like she was about to cry and then she just smiled and pretended he'd never said it, even though everyone was laughing at her."

Holden stared at his daughter as heat crawled up his neck. The conversation he'd heard earlier in the saloon came back to mind and he wondered how many others would be so bold as to tell Laurel what they thought of her. His own anger at her diminished, remorse filling him as he thought of her and how she'd feel knowing she was disliked. Knowing that he'd had ill thoughts about her, too.

If what Alex said was true, then it just proved Laurel did have a heart. It might have been black and shriveled to the size of a prune for some unknown reason but she did get her feelings hurt.

He sat back and thought of the conversations he'd had with her. She'd been very straight forward at the ranch and here in town, hadn't cracked a smile and had looked very stern, but he didn't miss the pink tint her cheeks took on when she first saw him. Or the way she avoided looking at him if she

could. How straight her spine was, as if facing him was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do.

No one really knew her. Hell, he didn't for that matter. Their night together was about pleasure. They hadn't talked much once he entered her hotel room and he had no inkling of what circumstance brought her to Willow Creek. She may act like a spiteful woman who wanted nothing to do with him, but was she really?

Their food arrived and he watched Alex dig into her fried chicken while he sat there wondering what it was exactly that made Laurel act so bitter. It had to be something. Women didn't snap like she did without cause and he'd done nothing to offend her which made him think that someone, somewhere, knew why she had such a sour disposition. He knew just who to ask about it, too. His brother, Morgan, would be able to find out. There wasn't a person alive who could escape his scrutiny.

Making a mental note to talk to Morgan, he looked down at his plate, the meatloaf still slightly sizzling while his thoughts whirled. Laurel Montgomery was an enigma to everyone in town but one way or another, he'd find out what caused her to be so surly.

* * * *

She'd survived another day of class but still felt the cold rush of fear skating down her spine. The kids, and the people in town, seemed to dislike her more than she'd hoped they would. She bolted the front door of the school house and walked back across the space, entering the small room behind it that was now her new home. It was sparsely furnished. A bed, a table with two chairs, a stove for cooking and a wardrobe for her belongings.

As rooms went, it was better than most boarding houses she'd found herself in. It was private, it didn't smell and the colorful rag-rug on the wood floor gave it a cheery feel.

So why did she feel so much misery while in it?

Filling the teapot with water, she checked the stove, adding more wood to the burning embers and waited for the fire to grow enough to boil her water. She looked at the foodstuff she had, debated on going to the hotel for supper and felt her stomach clench just thinking about it. She wasn't prepared to suffer through that humiliation again. Not yet. Being served by people who obviously didn't like her was embarrassing, especially when the other diners

stared at her. No, she'd make due with what she had and not step back into that restaurant until she had no choice.

When her water had boiled, she poured it into her teapot, added the tea leaves and waited for it to steep while grabbing one of the three china cups she owned. Sitting at the small table, her thoughts a jumble of what ifs, she waited until the tea had turned dark and rich and the aroma filled her a bit with tranquility. Tea didn't cure all the troubles she had but at the moment, it chased away the most depressing.

Being in a town where no one liked her was soul crushing but she'd made her choice. She'd have to see it through. She just wished Holden Avery hadn't graced her door. For the first time in over a year she had thoughts she never dreamed of having about a man again. Thoughts that caused her face to heat, her stomach to clench delightfully and made her pulse beat so fast, she could hear the blood racing in her ears.

She sighed, added a bit of sugar to her tea and took a sip while trying to clear her head. Regardless of her feelings where Holden Avery was concerned, she'd stick to the plan. No man was worth the pain they brought, especially one as handsome as Holden Avery. If being hateful to every person she came into contact with, even him, was what it took to protect her heart, then so be it. Living out her life alone was a lonely proposition but it was one she could live with. She hoped.

Chapter Three



Greeting her students as they ran up the steps of the schoolhouse was done with as stern a look as possible. It almost killed her not to smile at them and say how happy she was for them to be back. Truth was, she adored kids and teaching was probably as close as she'd ever get to having children of her own.

She sighed, the noise from the school bell ringing inside her head incessantly as Jesse continued to ring it without fail. Seeing no one else running toward the school, she was just about to turn when she saw the horse, and the small rider seated in front of her father. Laurel's pulse leaped when she recognized Holden and Alexandra coming down the road.

Of all the people she hadn't wanted to see, it was him. Her heart nearly beat out of control whenever she looked at the man and she hated the effect he had on her.

She'd sworn off men after being lied to and played for a fool, and knew the only way to be happy in life was to make her own decisions. And she had. Life would have worked out fine had she not made the grave mistake of falling for a handsome face back in Missoula. Now, she was stuck in a town with that same man. A man who heated her blood beyond reason and brought to mind images of them together she couldn't seem to forget.

Sighing, she waited for Alexandra to dismount and prayed Holden wouldn't follow his daughter to the building. Her prayers weren't usually answered and today was no different. She tried to ignore him as he walked toward her. Tried to be indifferent to his chiseled features, the whiskers on his chin where he'd not bothered to shave or the sparkling blue eyes that were firmly latched on her.

She lowered her arms when he climbed the steps, looked only at Alexandra and hoped he'd just go away.

He didn't.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot, Miss Montgomery." He smiled, and lifted his hand, the largest red apple she'd ever seen resting on his palm.

Her pulse leaped and she cursed her traitorous heart for even noticing the man. "An apple for the teacher." She looked up, gave him a blank look and sighed. "How very... typical."

She turned, walked into the classroom and shut the door behind her, leaving Holden on the front stoop while her heart stammered away in her chest. She crossed the room, stepped behind her desk and inhaled deeply, telling herself it was okay to be so rude to Holden, that if she wasn't, he'd never leave her alone.

Picking up her lesson book, she flipped to today's lessons, scanning what she'd written for each age group and lifted her head to look at her class just as the door to the classroom opened. Her heart skipped a beat as she saw Holden framed in the doorway, looking as handsome and strong as he always did, that blasted smirk on his face. This man would be the death of her.

He crossed the room, his gaze locked on her, and stopped in front of her desk. "Your fancy words and hateful attitude won't make me go away, Laurel." He leaned toward her, his words a bare whisper. "If nothing else, they amuse me." He sat the apple in front of her, grinning up at her as he leaned back. "Have a good day. I'll see you this afternoon."

The sound of his boots hitting the floor as he walked away echoed in her head. The light from the open door dimmed as he shut it behind him.

The man obviously wasn't about to give up. Apparently she wasn't rude enough. She had to dissuade him from pursuing her but how? He was obviously stubborn to the core but so was she. She'd chased off more men than her father could parade in front of her and a cowboy in the middle of nowhere wouldn't get the best of her. She wouldn't allow it.

It was several minutes before she was able to focus on her class. When she looked up, everyone was staring at her, one face in particular catching her attention. Alexandra Avery looked madder than a wet hen and if Laurel had to guess, she'd say it was because of her father. He was obviously trying to court her and his daughter knew it. And didn't like it one bit.

Ignoring them all, she turned her attention back to her lesson plan and tried to overlook the flutter in her chest every time she looked at that apple.

* * * *

Holden walked into the jailhouse. Morgan dropped the papers in his hand and looked up as Holden shut the front door. His brother shook his head

and leaned back in his chair. "If you're here to complain about the new school teacher, I've heard it all already."

"Steady complaints about her then?"

"You wouldn't believe it." Morgan grinned and crossed his arms over his chest. "Ben wanted me to arrest her for calling him a drunk."

Holden laughed and grabbed the chair across from Morgan's desk, turning it backwards and straddled the seat. "Can't arrest people for speaking the truth."

"No, you can't." Leaning forward, Morgan laid his arms across his desk. "So, what brings you by?"

"Laurel Montgomery."

Morgan laughed. "Why am I not surprised?"

"She's hiding something." When his brother lifted one eyebrow, Holden knew he was intrigued. "Don't you find it peculiar she's so... ornery?"

"Not really. A lot of people are. Take Edna Pierce for example."

They shared a laugh before sobering. "She doesn't look old enough to be as bitter as she is. What do you know about her?"

"Nothing much." Morgan stood, picked up the papers on his desk and tossed them into the stove. "Comes from somewhere in Arizona, I think."

"You think?" Holden shifted in his seat. "Can you find out for sure?"

Morgan gave him a curious look. "Why?"

Holden shrugged his shoulder. "No reason."

His brother laughed as he picked up his hat, placing it on his head.

"You're a terrible liar, Holden. I can see it in your eyes." He walked around the desk and motioned to the door. "Come walk the town with me and you can tell me all about Laurel Montgomery. I'm sure you know more than any other man in town does."

"What makes you think that?"

Morgan stopped, turned his head to Holden and stared at him for long moments before grinning. "I actually didn't but the look on your face tells me you do. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"No." Holden wondered if Morgan could see the lie on his face. He stared him in the eye and kept on talking, ignoring the accusation. "I just know she's mean spirited, loathes the sight of me and makes me think things no decent man should think about a woman."

"You and half the men in town." Morgan shut the door on the jail and readjusted his gun belt. "Seems to me the man who can withstand that waspish tongue of hers will be the one who impresses the lady first and something tells me you're just the man to do it. Lord knows you're used to rejection."

Holden smirked at his brother. "Not my fault all the available women who come through here always find out I'm here after they made the grave mistake of taking up with the wrong characters. Speaking of, how's Abigail and the baby?"

They talked about nonsensical things as Morgan made his rounds through town. Their last stop was the Diamond Back Saloon and once inside the talk was the same as it usually was now. Laurel Montgomery.

* * * *

She just couldn't escape the man. Laurel hid her face behind the restaurant menu and hoped they hadn't seen her. Alexandra was talking a mile a minute and her voice carried as if the child were screaming and so far, Holden only had eyes for his daughter.

Hearing the sound of chairs scraping across the wooden floor, Laurel peeked over the top of her menu. Her exhaled breath caused the menu in her hand to sway when she saw them taking a seat near the front of the restaurant. They hadn't seen her after all.

Pushing her embarrassment aside, she'd had no choice but come to the restaurant. If she had to eat one more meal alone, she'd hurt someone. Coming to the hotel was still disconcerting. No one bothered to speak to her, which was fine by her, but the looks they gave her as they ate, their whispered words a hushed murmur in the background, was just too much most days.

She was used to crowds of people. Had spent her life being the center of attention but look at her now. Reduced to sitting alone in a restaurant while the other patrons whispered about her and made no secret she was the topic of their conversations.

The server came back to her table and Laurel smiled at her. The dire faced woman didn't return the gesture. She stared at her unmoving and Laurel placed her order, reluctantly gave the menu back and sighed.

This town had to be home to the most unfriendly group of people she'd ever met. Not that she'd helped matters any with the way she acted toward everyone, but still. She wondered if acting so off-putting was as smart as she'd thought. It drew attention to her like nothing else did, apparently, and the last thing she needed was more attention.

Draping her napkin across her lap, Laurel made the mistake of lifting her head and looking across the restaurant again. Holden was staring at her, that

irritating smirk on his face. She felt heat burn her face as she blushed before looking away.

A shadowy form appeared in the corner of her eye. Glancing up she saw Holden, standing now and crossing the room toward her. "Oh Lord," she whimpered, and busied herself looking into her reticule in order to ignore him.

"Laurel," he said, tipping his head toward her.

He'd removed his hat, his dark hair longer than most men she knew wore it. It hung nearly to his collar and framed his face perfectly. A face the man rarely shaved, she noticed. The whiskers of a growing beard shadowed his jaw line and accentuated his lips. His plain shirt was a bit snug and hugged his chest, hiding those dips and curves she remembered touching.

She blinked, reminded herself she wasn't getting involved with anyone in this town, and that included friendship, and lifted her chin, throwing him a disdainful look. "Holden. Are you lost?"

He grinned. "No. I just came to ask if you'd like to join us." He motioned to the table Alexandra was sitting at, the look on the child's face clearly saying she didn't share her father's good-natured sentiment.

Laurel threw him an aloof look, said, "No, thank you," and continued to rummage around in her bag.

He stood motionless for long moments before he leaned down, bracing one hand on the table, the other on the back of her chair and lowered his face next to her ear. "Ignore me all you want, woman, but I'm not leaving. I have every intention to make you my wife so you might as well face the fact and stop being so ornery toward me. I want you, Laurel, and I aim to have you."

He straightened, smiled down at her and turned and walked away.

Laurel gaped at his retreating back, his words whispering through her head like a sweet kiss on a hot, sultry night. Make her his wife? A shiver raced down her spine as images flooded her brain. Thoughts of being in that man's bed caused her breath to catch. Listening to his seductive voice every night as he took her body to heights she could only imagine and seeing his smiling face every morning when she woke.

A fine sheen of sweat broke out on her skin as he sat back down and looked her way. The desire in his eyes caused her pulse to leap.

She forced herself to look away. If she'd be true to her body's demands, she'd be tempted to just throw her reservations to the wind and see what sort of trouble she could make with him, wife or not. Lord knew they had no problem getting along in bed. That night they spent together came back to her on a daily basis and she was a woman who'd experienced more than most. Her shameful past would haunt her forever but there was nothing to be done

about that now. She just had to accept her life as it was and make the best of what she had, stay hidden and try not to draw too much attention to herself in order to protect her whereabouts.

The server returned with her meal and it took everything in her to concentrate enough to eat. She was half tempted to have it packaged to go but wasn't about to run to her little room in the back of the school house with her tail tucked. Especially not from a man. She didn't care how good-looking he was or how much her heart fluttered just looking at him.

Taking her time eating had been the plan, just so she'd have something to do besides stare at the same four walls of her room but those nervous butterflies in her stomach screamed disaster. She ate quickly, trying to not seem as if she was shoveling it in and was ready to go in record time. She stood, not waiting for the server to come back with her ticket and kept her eyes on the floor as she passed Holden Avery and his daughter. Holden's soft, "See you soon, Miss Montgomery," was ignored and it wasn't until she'd paid for her food and was outside on the wooden sidewalk that she realized what a hypocrite she was.

She made the children in her classroom behave in a certain manner. They were to say thank you when appropriate, greet others with courtesy and treat everyone they met as they too would like to be treated. As of yet, she hadn't lived by her words. She acted in the complete opposite manner. She was rude, met everyone who spoke with her in a brash manner and stuck her nose up at those who dared look upon her. All because the men in her short twenty-six years of life were controlling to the point of suffocation.

Slipping her straw hat on her head, she tied the ribbon under her chin, exhaling a deep breath before glancing back inside the restaurant window. Holden was staring at her and somehow she knew he would be. The man just didn't give up. His arrogant assumption that he'd marry her came to mind as she looked at him and she smiled before she could stop herself. She knew it was a mistake the moment his eyes lit up in reaction.

If only her circumstances were different. On one level, being married to a man like Holden Avery would be a dream come true for her, but she knew men to be lying and untrustworthy. He was probably no different. So what if a single glance made her heart race. Or remembering him in the altogether was enough to make her mouth water and want to beg for more. He was certainly a man any sane woman would want to know more about. Unfortunately, she wasn't just any woman. She didn't need or want a man in her life and that was a plan she intended to stick with.

Trying to forget her past, she gave Holden one last look before starting for the school. She'd only made it as far as the stagecoach station when Edna Pierce yelled her name.

"Miss Montgomery! I'd like a word with you."

Laurel sighed and stopped walking. She'd seen Edna on the other side of the road and had kept her head down, hoping the woman wouldn't see her.

Of all the people Laurel had met in Willow Creek, Edna was the one she avoided the most. The woman was just too irritating to carry on a civil conversation with. She gossiped too much and gave Laurel disapproving looks when the whispered secrets she loved sharing were met with silence.

Laurel folded her hands in front of her and waited for Edna to cross the street. She forced a smile onto her face as she reached her. As much as it pained her to be nice to the woman, having her as an enemy would be disastrous.

"Miss Montgomery," Edna said, breathless, "I wanted to formally invite you to the town festival that will be taking place a month from Saturday." Edna smiled and lifted her chin, a haughty look crossing her face. "We'll be raising funds for the new doctor we hope to attract and everyone will be participating. There will be picnics and dancing, games and auctions. It looks to be the event of the year."

"Oh. I'll help anyway I can, Mrs. Pierce, but a teacher's salary is very meager."

"Yes, I'm well aware of that, which is why I signed you up for the auction."

Laurel raised one eyebrow at her. "Excuse me?"

Edna smiled again, her chest puffed up arrogantly. "It was my idea, really. As a woman of standing in our community, and a member of the town council, I've been asked to oversee the entire affair and it wasn't hard to come up with an idea I knew would raise the most money. With so few women in Willow Creek, the men here in town, and the surrounding area, don't have the pleasure of sweet treats very often." Edna heaved a breath, her eyes twinkling as if she'd accomplished some great feat. "You'll need to prepare a confection for the auction. A cake or pie. Cookies if you prefer but the more appealing the treat, the more men will bid on it."

"Bid?"

"Yes, bid." Edna straightened her spine and gave her a disapproving look. "Goodness, Miss Montgomery, do you not listen?"

Laurel opened her mouth to respond but thought better of it. She'd been listening, and wasn't at all happy this woman had signed her up for something

she wished to take no part in. "I don't do much baking, Mrs. Pierce. And actually, I'm sure I'll be too busy with lesson plans to attend this town festival."

Thoughts of mingling with the townsfolk set Laurel's teeth on edge. She avoided people most of the time but being forced to socialize with them... that would never do.

She smiled to lessen the blow. "I appreciate you including me but it wasn't necessary. I'll donate what funds I can for this new doctor but baking in order for someone to bid on my pie? I can't see how that will help you."

"Oh, pish-posh!" Edna said. "I've heard the rumors about your displeasing personality, dear, but trust me, once the gentlemen in the area get a chance to talk with you, they'll change their minds. Now, shall I put you down for a pie or for a cake?"

Laurel blinked. Was Edna Pierce daft or did she just not care about anyone's thoughts and feelings but her own? When the woman just stood there looking at her, Laurel realized it was the latter. What Edna wanted is what Edna got. She sighed. "I can bake a pie for you. Where shall I drop it off?"

Edna's smile lit her face. "Oh, just bring it to the clearing behind the mercantile on the first Saturday in September." She turned in a whirl of skirts, mumbling to herself and Laurel's eyes widened.

"Edna, I'll not be attending the festival!"

The woman raised her hand to wave, looked over her shoulder and smiled. "Of course you will, dear. Now, have a good evening!"

And with that, she was gone. Laurel stared after her for long minutes before she finally exhaled a deep breath.

As hard as she tried to not get involved with the people of this town, it was getting harder by the day. And now Edna had practically forced her to do so. Signing her up for something she had no intention of even attending.

She turned and resumed her walk back to the school house, her thoughts on how to get out of participating in the festival. The sound of a child talking caught her attention and she turned her head toward the street, her pulse leaping as she saw Holden and Alexandra on a black stallion headed out of town. As always, Holden smiled and tipped his hat to her. And just as she did every time she saw him, she tried to ignore those fluttering butterflies swimming in her stomach as she turned her head to look away from him.

Chapter Four



As luck would have it, the first Saturday in September was as bright and cheery as they came. Laurel looked out the small window of her room and heaved a sigh. Why couldn't it have rained?

She turned to check her appearance in the small mirror hanging on the wall, tucked in a few errant strands of hair that refused to stay put and straightened the front of her dress. Dread settled in her stomach and the aroma of that apple pie she'd labored over all morning was making her queasy. She was going to have to take the thing across town regardless of her desire not to.

Just looking at the thing caused her stomach to quiver. Holden Avery had given her enough apples over the past month to fill several crusts but she'd purposely given every one of them away to one of her students just so she wouldn't be reminded of him. When she'd ventured to the mercantile for more, Mrs. Jenkins had informed her all the apples in her store had come from the Avery ranch.

She just couldn't escape the man.

Grabbing her pie, she slipped out the back door, securing it behind her and walked in a hurried pace to the clearing behind the mercantile. Her intentions were to leave the pie, let Edna know she was there, and slip away unseen.

Reaching the clearing, Laurel smiled. Her plan to slip away would be easy with so many people in the area. She stopped behind the store to get her bearings.

She hadn't realized there were so many people in and around the Willow Creek area and noticed a lot of the children from her classroom in attendance as she looked at those gathered.

The clearing had been raked free of the first leaves falling from the trees, garlands of late summer flowers and early fall blooms strung from the trees and tables, chairs, benches and long wooden tables covered in bright cloths made the entire area warm and inviting. Too bad she wasn't staying. It was sure to be fun.

Spotting a table on the left filled with cakes and pies, she headed in that direction, avoiding eye contact with everyone she passed.

One person in particular caught her attention as she neared the table. Alexandra Avery was screeching like a hellion and running around the table as if it weren't filled with food, but that wasn't what made Laurel stop. It was the pretty blue dress the girl was wearing. Her hair was flowing loose too, her blond locks curling at the ends and made her appear much older than she actually was.

The girl looked up at her and crossed her arms over her chest. "What are you doing here?"

Laurel squinted at her. "Don't worry, Alexandra, I won't be staying." The girl looked so happy, Laurel had half a mind to stay just to irritate her but seeing Alexandra meant her father was there somewhere and she'd been dutifully avoiding him for the last month. He was the last person she wished to see.

Setting her pie down on the table, Laurel took another glance at Alexandra. "You look very nice, Alexandra."

"Pft..." Alexandra made a face at her. "Pa bought me this frock and said I had to wear it. I'm guessing you're the reason why."

Laurel hid a smile. "I suggested you should look and behave like a lady, yes."

"I knew it." Alexandra huffed out a breath and shook her head. "Don't be thinking he'll do everything you say now. Only reason I didn't cause a fuss over it was because he said I looked like my momma all dressed up and he loves my momma." The girl eyed her with a calculating expression. "Pa said my momma was the prettiest woman in all of Willow Creek and they'll never be another like her."

"I'm sure there won't be."

Alexandra nodded her head. "So even if he goes out of his way to be nice to you, it don't mean nothing. He don't like ya. He probably just feels sorry for you, is all."

Laurel doubted that. Holden had made it perfectly clear what his intentions were and regardless of what Alexandra said, Laurel knew her father wouldn't stop trying to court her. She didn't know much about the man but stubborn stuck to some people like a bad haircut and Holden Avery was stubborn to his core.

Finished with their brief conversation, Alexandra left with a stiff nod of her head. Watching the girl walk away, Laurel knew Holden had to be in the clearing, somewhere, and she needed to find Edna, make her presence known, and leave before he spotted her.

She turned to look for Edna and saw her immediately, rushing about the clearing and issuing orders like a heavysset general to those following close behind her. Laurel sighed and headed toward her, intent on making her appearance known and then sneaking away.

"Laurel! I was just looking for you." Edna beamed as she came to a stop in front of her. "Did you remember to bring a confection for the auction?"

"Yes. I left it on the table." She forced a smile on her face and tried to remember to be polite. "You've done a nice job organizing everything, Edna. I'm sure the town is grateful."

Edna laughed, her eyes shining with delight. "Of course they are." She took Laurel's arm and turned, the women behind Edna's large frame all looking a bit haggard. "Ladies, I'm sure you all know Miss Montgomery, our new school teacher." When Edna turned her head to look at her again, Laurel knew getting away wouldn't be as easy as she'd hoped.

Introductions were made and after long minutes of greeting the other ladies responsible for making the festival run like clockwork, Laurel was ready to just be rude and excuse herself. She was saved from the embarrassing episode by a woman Laurel had seen around town, a petite woman with blond hair and an easy-going smile.

"Thank you, Edna, for introducing the ladies to Miss Montgomery, but I'm afraid I have to steal her away. I have things to discuss with her about teaching Elizabeth when she's old enough to start reading."

Edna's mouth opened and closed like a fish before the woman grabbed Laurel's arm and whisked them both away. When they stopped on the other side of the clearing, Laurel could only stare.

"Well, that was easier than I thought it would be." The woman laughed, holding out her hand. "I'm Abigail Avery, by the way. I don't think we've been formally introduced."

Avery? Laurel's stomach clenched tight. "Any relation to Holden and Alexandra?"

Abigail's beaming smile lit her entire face. "I'm married to Holden's brother, Morgan, the marshal here in Willow Creek."

"I see." Laurel wondered if Holden had sent his sister-in-law over to her in hopes she could persuade her into seeing his finer qualities. She'd already seen most of them, she was sure, but that didn't mean she wanted to hear more. The less she thought of Holden, the better off she was.

Glancing across the clearing to where Edna still stood, Laurel watched her before saying, "Do you think she'll notice if I'm not here?"

Abigail laughed. "Oh, she'll know, trust me, so don't get any ideas of sneaking away. If I have to suffer and be made to stay, so do you."

They made their way back to the dessert table where Laurel had sat her pie and just seeing it there made her cringe. Baking wasn't something she'd spent much time doing but thankfully her pie looked edible. She noticed the name cards beside each dessert, the name of the lady who'd baked it proudly displayed and her eyes widened. "I wasn't aware everyone would know who baked what."

Abigail nodded. "It's Edna's way of showing her superiority. Everyone knows her cakes are the best in town and the price she'll get from hers will cause her ego to grow three sizes." She laughed and fingered a few of the name tags, looking to see who had made what, Laurel supposed. "Which one is yours?"

Laurel wanted to refuse to answer but saw no reason to do so. Edna would be sure to make a fuss because it wasn't tagged and Abigail would find out anyway. "This one," she said, pointing it out.

"Oh, that looks fabulous." Abigail looked around the dish before saying, "You didn't tag it as yours?"

"No."

"Well, let's just fix that, shall we?"

Laurel sighed as Abigail took one of the small slips of paper, wrote Laurel Montgomery on it and propped it against the side of her pie. She glanced around the clearing again, noticed the men looking at that dessert table with hungry eyes and knew Edna had been right. The money they'd raise from the baking auction would help them raise the funds they needed to attract a new doctor but as she looked back at her pie, Laurel couldn't help feeling embarrassed by it. When the men in town heard she'd made that pie, the silence that followed the bidding for it would be eerie.

* * * *

Holden saw her standing near the baked goods table with Abigail and wasn't sure who to thank for that small blessing, his sister-in-law or Laurel for even showing up.

When he'd heard of the festival, he knew he'd have the perfect opportunity to talk to Laurel without her shooing him out of her classroom or walking past him in the street as if he didn't exist. He wasn't even sure why he bothered anymore. The woman obviously didn't like him, regardless of the time they spent together in Missoula.

Her disdain where he was concerned didn't make him want to stop trying though.

If it hadn't been for Alex, he would have already been at Laurel's door trying to woo her but his daughter's adamant refusal to like the woman had halted those plans. He couldn't make Alex like her and courting the woman would only cause problems in the future. Which left him staring at her from afar and watching to see if anyone else in town could break through her icy exterior and actually get her to talk.

"I don't care how much you stare at her, Holden, she won't walk over here and start a conversation with you."

Holden grinned and turned to look at his twin brother, Colt. "She wouldn't come over to talk to me even if you paid her."

"Well, she's smart." Colt laughed and crossed his arms over his chest. "Any woman willing to talk to you would make me think they were daft."

"Oh, she's smart all right. And hiding something."

Colt raised one eyebrow at him. "You're getting as suspicious as Morgan now. Everyone he meets, he thinks they're hiding something."

"Most people are."

"Really?" Colt grinned. "And what are you hiding?"

Holden gave him a sideways glance, one corner of his mouth slanting up. "None of your business."

Edna interrupted their conversation when she gave an unladylike whistle and gained everyone's attention. She made a boring speech, gloated about how wonderful the festival was turning out, thanks to her efforts, and mentioned the number of activities that would be taking place throughout the day. The dance planned for later that night had everyone in good spirits, himself included, as long as one spiteful little schoolmarm was planning on being in attendance.

The auctions started and everyone seemed to congregate in one general area. Directly in front of him. He lost sight of Laurel in the rush and craned his neck to try and find her. It was hopeless. There were too many people gathered to spot her.

The cake auction went about as fast as he thought it would and he waited, listening to every lady's name called as her cake or pie was offered and it wasn't until that last plate was lifted that he smiled. An apple pie, baked by the new school teacher herself. The fact she'd baked apple pie amused him. He'd given her enough over the last month to bake a half a dozen pies.

Edna started the bidding and the silence that followed was astounding. Holden watched the faces of the men around him and they all seemed to be

looking at their feet. That's when he realized why Laurel had looked so forlorn when she'd looked at that table of desserts. She'd known this would happen.

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. The summer yellow of Laurel's dress drawing notice. She was walking between the mercantile and the telegraph office at a fast clip. He watched her disappear around the corner before looking back at Edna. The disapproving look on the woman's face said it all. She wasn't any more pleased with the silence than he was.

He lifted his hand, drawing her attention and she smiled, raising the bid price. No one spoke but several people turned to look at him. Then someone from the front of the crowd matched the bid until it was raised again.

The bidding war began and Holden couldn't have been happier.

* * * *

Laurel looked up from the book she was reading when someone knocked on her door. Dread settled like a weight in her stomach. It was probably Edna, come to berate her for sneaking off from the festival.

She sighed and debated on just not answering but she knew the woman wouldn't go away. Standing, she laid her book down and crossed the room and opened the door.

Seeing Holden Avery standing there didn't surprise her much either. He'd never knocked on her door but she knew it was only a matter of time.

He smiled and Laurel had to force herself not to return the gesture. "Are you lost?"

"No, ma'am." He thumbed up the front of his hat and gave her a look that said he knew he wasn't welcome at her door and was choosing to ignore it. "Abigail and Sarah packed a picnic lunch enough to feed half the town. We'll be taking it out by the creek. Just wanted to know if you'd like to join us."

Her pulse leaped. He was asking her to a picnic? The sincere look in his eyes and that handsome smile on his face caused that small voice in the back of her mind to scream, yes. It begged her to accept. To not worry about her stupid reservations for once. To just go spend the day with this man, who obviously went out of his way to try and talk to her, but the thought of doing it sent fear coursing through her body. She couldn't get attached to this man, no matter how much she wanted to. "Thank you for the offer, but I must decline."

He gave her a slight nod of his head, the smile that had been on his face dimming just a fraction. "Somehow I knew you were going to say that."

"Yet you still found your way to my door to ask. Why?"

The smile remained and filled his blue eyes, the mingled greens and purple catching her attention. "Can't blame a man for trying."

"I don't suppose you can but it really is pointless, I can assure you."

He blinked up at her, bid her a good day, and it wasn't until he left her standing there on the back porch steps of the school house, alone, that she realized how utterly miserable her life was.

And she only had one person to thank for that.

Thinking of him, she sighed and walked back into her little room, looking at the bleak walls.

Why had her life turned out to be so dire? She'd had such high hopes for her future a year ago. Now she was reduced to being rude to people who, in other circumstances, she would have enjoyed talking to, and living out her days in silence while trapped within four walls of a schoolhouse in order to protect her heart.

This wasn't living. It was existing and somehow it didn't seem to be the answer to all her prayers like she thought it would be. Instead, it was the very worst of hell.

Add in the fact that Holden Avery was the most tempting thing she'd seen in ages. Thoughts of him plagued her every moment of the day and the misery piled on until she felt as if she was drowning.

Something had to change. She'd tried, honestly tried to set a course for her life but one reckless night in Missoula had changed all her carefully laid out plans. She couldn't ignore Holden regardless of how much she tried so why was she still trying? She liked the man, aggravating as he was at times, and memories of him caused her to lay awake more than one night with her body aching for his touch.

But was that reason enough to lay all her plans aside? To spend her life as a spinster and die at a ripe old age, pleased with herself because she'd done exactly what she wanted to do, not something a man told her she had to do?

She sighed. It was too confusing to think about. Her heart and head needed to act as one but her heart was screaming the loudest at the moment. She needed to make a decision and stick with it but what if she chose the wrong path?

Chapter Five



Holden saw her when he turned the wagon and started for the other end of the street. She was standing in front of the schoolhouse, a straw hat in one hand while she draped a shawl over her shoulders. She was staring at him, the look on her face telling him she was trying to decide if turning around would be the better option.

He smiled and pulled the reins when he neared her, the horses stopping and giving Alexandra time to start protesting. "Why does she have to come along, pa? I don't want to spend the day with her."

When they came to a complete stop, he ignored Alex, set the brake with his foot and jumped to the ground before crossing the road. "I hope this means you've changed your mind." Laurel's cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink and he felt his pulse leap at the sight of it.

"Don't read more into this than there is." She glanced up at him, her cheeks darkening. "I'm just bored is all."

Holden grinned. He didn't care what her excuse was, as long as he got to spend the day with her, he'd let her make up any ole' lie she felt like telling.

He offered her his arm and walked her back across the street, lifted her into the wagon and gave Alex a look that spoke volumes. His daughter's mouth tightened into a thin white line, her eyes narrowing to show her displeasure and he ignored it, climbed up into the seat and had the horses moving again before his pulse stopped racing.

They rode in silence until they reached the prairie and ventured off the main road. He followed behind Morgan and Abigail's wagon as they jostled across the yellowing autumn grass. His father's shock of white hair glinted in the sun as he sat in the back of Morgan's wagon and when he turned his head to look back at them, Laurel asked, "Who is that?"

"My father." He saw her look at him out of the corner of his eye and smiled. "His name is James but don't worry about trying to talk to him. Chances are he wouldn't hear you."

"Is he deaf?"

"No." Holden shook his head and gave the reins another small tug to get the horses to turn toward the creek. "He's sick. We're not really sure what's

wrong with him but he keeps to himself most of the time. Talks to people no one can see and pretty much tunes the rest of us out."

She turned to look at the wagon in front of them, back at his father, and Holden glanced over at her. The sun made those whiskey colored eyes shine, her complexion, flawless. Small tendrils of hair had escaped the confines of the bun she'd pulled it all into and those stray curls kissed her cheek, sweeping low to tease her lips.

They reached the creek and Alex wasted no time jumping from the back of the wagon and running toward the thin ribbon of water winding its way through the trees. She was shucking her boots as Holden jumped to the ground and turned to help Laurel down.

He reached up, placing his hands about her small waist and she stared up at him when her feet touched the ground. Just being this close to her again sent waves of need through him. The tantalizing scent of roses filled the air and he remembered their one night together, of burying his face into the curve of her neck and finding that tantalizing aroma there. How he'd wanted to drown in it and couldn't pass by his mother's rose garden without being reminded of Laurel. He stared down at her. His gaze traveled her face and if they hadn't been surrounded by his family, he would have kissed those raspberry lips until she begged him to stop.

He tightened his hold on her briefly before reluctantly letting go of her. Glancing over at Morgan and Abigail, he saw them both grinning at him. Inviting Laurel to the picnic had been their idea. He'd agreed with them until he found himself walking to the schoolhouse. Laurel refusing him hadn't come as a surprise and he'd be lying if he said her initial refusal hadn't torn at his heart a bit. The pain didn't last long though. Not once he saw her by the road, nervously looking his way.

She turned away from him and walked toward the creek and Holden watched her until Morgan walked over to him and laughed.

"I never thought I'd see the day you'd go all moon-eyed over a woman."

"You forget I was married once."

"No, I haven't." Morgan reached around him and lifted the blankets from the back of the wagon. "I know you loved Maggie but trust me when I say, you never looked at her like you do that little schoolmarm."

Holden watched Morgan walk back to Abigail, his words whispering inside his head. His brother was right. He had loved Maggie, had the first time he saw her, but it felt different from what he felt for Laurel. He wasn't sure why but as he turned his head to look over at her, his body tightened, his pulse leaped and he knew he'd do anything to win her heart.

* * * *

"You are such a fool." Laurel sighed at her own whispered words. She'd walked away from Holden with her heart in her throat. The way he'd looked at her when he lifted her down from the wagon sent chills racing up and down her spine and if they'd been alone, she was positive he would have kissed her.

And she would have let him.

She still wasn't sure why she'd even stepped out of the schoolhouse and accompanied him on the picnic. Common sense told her to leave him be, to ignore him and he'd eventually leave her alone. But that secret place in her heart, the one that craved the sight of him, wouldn't let her.

As much as she hated to admit it, she looked forward to seeing him everyday. Just looking into those so-blue eyes caused her pulse to race. To see him smile at her like he had secrets he wanted to share sent her heart soaring and her thoughts racing.

And she was powerless to do anything about it.

She stopped by the bank of the creek, turning to look at Alexandra. She was in the water to her knees, the hem of her dress swaying in the current. The need to tell her to get out of the water, that it was too late in the year to be wading in the creek was strong but she ignored it. The child despised her and wouldn't appreciate being told what to do outside of school. The fact her father had asked her along for the picnic was upsetting to the girl enough as it was. She'd seen the look on Alexandra's face when she reached the wagon. She hadn't been the least bit happy. Laurel couldn't really blame her. She probably wouldn't have wanted her teacher along for a family outing either, especially one her father seemed to spend his time trying to talk to.

Alexandra turned to look at her as if she could hear Laurel's thoughts. Laurel stared at her, her facial expression passive. Alexandra's blond curls swayed in the breeze and Laurel knew with just a glance, the girl took her looks after her mother. She shared none of the dark looks her father had, except for the blue of her eyes. When Alexandra didn't move, or blink, but continued to stare at her, Laurel sighed. "It's rude to stare, Alexandra."

"I know. My pa told me that years ago." She turned and started out of the water, climbing onto the bank, the hem of her dress dragging on the ground and collecting bits of grass and dirt. When she stood on solid ground, she lifted her chin, her eyes narrowed. "You like my pa, don't ya?"

Laurel wasn't sure how to answer. "Define like."

Alexandra lifted one eyebrow. "You want him to court you?"

"No." There, the first question she'd been asked where she could give an honest answer. "Why do you ask?"

"Cause I think he wants to court you."

He wants more than that, Laurel thought to herself. Thinking of him saying he intended on marrying her caused her heart to slam against her ribcage and those butterflies in her stomach danced in erratic patterns until she felt dizzy. That little voice in her head she'd been trying to ignore, yelled at her to let Holden know it was okay to come calling on her and that she'd be waiting with bated breath until he did.

Laurel blinked instead and chased the thoughts away, choosing to ignore his whispered admission. "What makes you think that?"

"Cause he's always looking at ya. He goes all funny too. He don't listen to me when I talk and when he does answer, he makes no sense."

"That doesn't mean he wants to court me, Alexandra. Maybe he's just preoccupied."

She shook her head, her curls bouncing across her shoulders. "No, he likes you. I can tell. He's never courted a woman and as far as I know, he don't go near the saloon and those women who live there and I know from what my uncle Tristan told me that every man wants a wife. So my pa likes you all right but what I want to know is, if he tried to court you, would you let him."

Laurel stared at Alexandra and the first answer to pop into her head was, yes. She shook her head and said, "No," instead. "I have no desire to court anyone so rest assured, you'll not have to worry about me being any part of your life other than the few hours you spend in my classroom."

Alexandra stared at her for long minutes, nodding her head after finding Laurel's answer sufficient. "Good, 'cause you're all wrong for my pa. He needs a woman who isn't mean. My ma was as sweet as a flower and my pa loved her with all his heart. Why, I think that's why he ain't never remarried. He can't find another woman as pretty and sweet as she was."

"You're probably right."

Alexandra gave her one last look and took off running toward the wagons. Another was coming across the prairie and Laurel watched the man and woman in the seat while Alexandra's words rattled around in her head.

The girl didn't like her, which was obvious, but knowing Holden had never courted since his wife's death was intriguing. She couldn't help but wonder why. Had he without Alexandra's knowledge?

She thought back to the night they shared in Missoula, to the attention he showed her. How... devoted he'd seemed to the task of making love to her. Now that she thought about it, it did seem as if he'd been determined to make

it last. Had she been the first woman he'd bedded in a while? The thought caused a shiver to race up her spine.

The wagon she'd been watching came to a stop, the man at the reins hopping to the ground before turning to help the woman and child down. He turned to face her and Laurel's breath caught. She blinked twice, widening her eyes to make sure she was seeing what she thought she was.

The man looked exactly like Holden.

She turned and found Holden near the creek, smiling at something the man in the first wagon said and she looked back and forth between the two men for long minutes before the woman she'd met at the festival, Abigail, joined her. Laurel opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out.

"They're twins." Abigail's light laughter caught on the breeze and Laurel exhaled the breath she'd been holding. "It's a bit shocking the first time you see them but it's easy to tell them apart once they're side by side." She grabbed Laurel's arm, turning her attention to where Holden and the other man stood. "That's Morgan, Holden's oldest brother and my husband." She turned them back to Holden's twin and the woman. "And that's Colton, but everyone calls him Colt. His wife is Sarah and that's their daughter, Emma. She's one and Sarah is expecting another come spring."

Laurel turned to face Abigail and wondered what Holden had told his family about her. Meeting Abigail at the festival and having her rescue her from Edna seemed a bit preplanned now that she thought about it. She narrowed her eyes and asked. "Holden's told you about me?"

Abigail looked surprised. "Nothing other than you're the new school teacher." She laughed suddenly. "The look on his face when he talked about you makes it obvious to us all that he liked you. Which is why we insisted he invite you to our picnic. I've never seen the man blush but he did today."

Her giggles were constant and Laurel wondered why Holden's reaction was so comical. She had an uneasy feeling, wondering if she was the butt of their jokes and mortification burned in her chest.

When Abigail turned to look at her, her smile vanished. "I've upset you. What did I say?"

"Nothing."

"I did, I can tell by the look on your face." Abigail turned to look back at the men where they were spreading blankets and placing the baskets she assumed contained the food. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. It's just that I've known Holden for nearly two years and this is the first time I've ever seen him the slightest bit interested in a woman. According to his brothers, he's lived like a hermit since his wife Maggie died.

Laurel's face burned from embarrassment but hearing Abigail say she wasn't making fun of her caused the ache to subside. "That's what Alexandra told me, too, but I wasn't sure if she was correct or not."

Abigail smiled at her and looped her arm through Laurel's. "I'm sorry if I upset you but please, come join us. I know Sarah is dying to meet you and when Tristan and Emmaline get back from Idaho, they'll have questions we can't answer." She paused and grinned. "Tristan is Holden's baby brother and Emmaline is his wife. You'll get a chance to meet them soon, I'm sure."

"Are there any more family members I should know about?"

Abigail shook her head. "No. No one other than their father, James, but he doesn't talk much. Well, he talks to Sarah but we think that's because she favors their mother. There's just the four brothers and all their wives." She quirked an eyebrow up at Laurel. "And adding one more to the family wouldn't be frowned upon."

Laurel's heart kicked in her chest. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but that isn't going to happen. Well, not with me."

"So sure already? But you don't even know Holden."

I know enough, Laurel thought, but kept the knowledge to herself.

Abigail escorted her to where the others had gathered and Laurel tried, and failed, to not look at Holden. Just seeing him there in the shade of the trees, with shafts of sunlight breaking through the branches caused her pulse to race. He was so handsome and the way he looked at her caused very unladylike notions to fill her head. If things weren't as they were, she'd happily let that man court her and hope for the best but the happily ever after she'd read about in dime novels wasn't in her future. She'd already tried and had failed miserably.

The men wandered off, leaving the women to set out all the food and when Sarah pulled a familiar looking pie plate from her basket, Laurel's heart skipped a beat.

"Do you want to know what Holden gave for your pie?"

Heat crawled up Laurel's neck and settled on her cheeks. "He bought my pie?"

"Just barely." Sarah laughed as she set it on the blanket. "For a minute there, I thought Joseph, the hotel owner, would win but Holden wasn't leaving without that pie. It fetched more money than any other dessert on the entire table!"

"Edna wasn't pleased by that bit of knowledge either," Abigail said, laughing.

Their laughter was mingled with good-natured ribbing and they talked quietly as they removed the food from the baskets. Laurel had a hard time

keeping her attention on the conversation, and away from Holden, and was glad of the distraction the women's daughters made. Her heart broke when Elizabeth, Abigail's daughter had climbed into her lap and started babbling, telling her in her own special language about the doll she held. She smiled, listened to Elizabeth chatter and hoped her face didn't show her despair.

Looking up after long minutes of holding Elizabeth, she knew it did. The look on Holden's face told her so. She looked away and hoped the day would end quickly. The faster she got away from Holden and his family, the better off she'd be.

* * * *

Laurel had been sitting on the creek bank avoiding most everyone for the past hour and Holden wondered what she was thinking about so intently as he crossed the space to where she sat. She'd looked uncomfortable since coming to join the others, especially when she held Elizabeth. He wasn't sure why, though, and he wanted to know.

He stopped when he reached her, sat down and lifted his hat, combing a hand through his hair before laying the hat beside him. "You don't look as if you're enjoying yourself."

"And what gives you that impression?"

Holden smiled and picked up a blade of grass before tucking it between his lips. "If you want to go back to town, I'll take you. There's no reason for you to be miserable."

"I'm not miserable." She sighed, her shoulders slumping before she turned her head to look at him. "I'm sorry. I've not been very good company."

He shrugged one shoulder. "I didn't expect you to even come so I can't complain. Just having you here is enough."

She sighed again and he turned to look at her. Her hair was falling around her face and he lifted his hand, pushing the strands back behind her ear. "Why are you being so ornery towards me? Towards everyone in town?"

"What makes you think I'm not always like this?"

He grinned. "Because despite you not wanting to admit it, I spent nearly twelve hours with you and I know better."

"Maybe me being nice was all an act."

Her face held no hint of amusement but her eyes did. Holden leaned back on one arm, straightened his legs, crossing them at the ankle and turned

his body slightly toward her. "It wasn't an act. You're just too stubborn to admit that you actually like me."

She snorted, unladylike and shook her head. "You think too highly of yourself, Holden Avery. The truth is, I drank too much and let my lowered inhibitions get the better of me. Had I been sober, I would have never allowed you into my room."

When she glanced at him, he grinned. "I recall you inviting me to your room then promised me things no 'lady' would dare mention once I got there." Her cheeks turned a becoming shade of pink and when she tried to look away, he reached out and took hold of her chin. "I'm not asking for much, Laurel, just a chance to get to know you better. That's all."

"I distinctly remember you mentioning marriage."

His smile widened. Marriage was what he wanted. "What's so wrong with that?"

"I could name half a dozen things but I'll spare you. I can't give you what you want, Holden. I can be your friend if you wish but that's all."

Disappointment settled like a rock in his gut. "Why?"

She opened her mouth as if to answer but shut it and turned her head.

"Laurel..."

"I don't need a man in my life nor do I want one. Ever." She turned back to face him, her eyes taking on a slight glassy look. "I'm sorry, Holden, but I can't give you anything other than what you already have."

She stood and left him sitting there under the shade trees with more questions than he had answers. His thoughts of courting her all proper like, shriveled in an instant. He blew out a frustrated breath, bent one leg and propped his arm on his knee, and stared at the water trickling by. Something wasn't right where Laurel was concerned and her refusal to be civil to people made that more apparent.

The distant sound of thunder made him look up. Clouds were rolling in over the mountain and the promise of rain was hard to ignore. He'd had plans to woo Laurel under a Montana sky but it looked as if nature itself was conspiring against him. Maybe it was a sign. Laurel apparently didn't want anything to do with him so why did he even bother trying?

He turned to look over at her where she sat with Abigail and Sarah. His pulse leaped again when she turned those smoky eyes on him and he knew. He wanted her more now than he did the night he first met her and he wouldn't stop trying to win her over. Even if the approaching storm called off the dance, and put an end to all his plans, he'd find a way to get through to her. He'd waited too long to find her to let her go now.

End of Excerpt

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